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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE

UNBOUND

The Performing Arts and the Social - Emotional Development of Black Youth

THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

In Acting

By

Chantrell M. Lewis

Thesis committee:

Assistant Professor of Doctoral Studies Zachary Price, Chair

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2022

DEDICATION

This research is lovingly dedicated to the memory of Daisy L. (Hill) Lewis - Simmons and Calvin Leo Lewis.

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Fine Arts Association

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Dance Arts Academy OC

King - Kennedy Center

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Disney Musicals in Schools

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Unbound: The Performing Arts and the Social- Emotional Development of Black Youth

By Chantrell M. Lewis

University of California, Irvine 2022

Assistant Professor Zachary Price, Chair

The performing arts such as dance, music, acting, and public speaking are essential to the social-emotional development of youth. These performing arts modalities support and encourage the primary competencies of what researchers in the fields of sociology and psychology refer to as Social-Emotional Learning or SEL. Also referred to as the CASEL Five, SEL consists of Self- Management, Self-Awareness, Responsible Decision-Making, Relationship Skills, and Social Awareness. This paper addresses how performing arts influences and supports SEL specifically for Black youth who tend to have less access to performing arts programming, as the arts are underfunded and oftentimes rendered non-essential to growth and childhood development. In turn, Black youth are often bound to class structures that hinder and prevent social economic mobility and are not provided with the same opportunities as their white and/or non-Black peers. Furthermore, Black youth are bound by racialized and gendered barriers and borders that stigmatize Black youth and further restrict their potential for life outcomes as expressed as both economic and political power. This thesis develops a concept of the unbound and is concerned with the way that the performing arts in fact supports and develops SEL competencies through artistic processes that necessitate peer to peer interaction, personal exploration, creativity, understanding of the world, and communication skills that serve as fundamental structures in a child's development. While not a panacea, this thesis attempts to offer a template (or model) for how Black community parents, leaders and educators can utilize the performing arts to mobilize resources in order to shape and enhance the social-emotional wellness of Black youth, in turn rendering them unbound from the racialized, gendered, and classed violence that permeates throughout Black working-class communities in the greater Cuyahoga County region of Ohio.

Preface

When I think about being *unbound*, I think about personal and structural relaxation from tension at both a corporeal and social level. Specifically, I am referring to the relaxed state such that a dancer or actor seeks to achieve when they attempt to engage in the creative process, in which they endeavor to form a sense of unbounded imagination and creativity. However, I also think about the ease in opposition to the stress of hardship of that Black youth in communities such as those who reside in the public housing of the Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority where I taught as a teaching artist from 2019 to 2021. This thesis, “Unbound: The Performing Arts and the Social- Emotional Development of Black Youth,” is based on my two-year experience working as a teaching artist through the Cleveland Public Theatre Education Program in which I taught and lead acting, voice, and movement classes for children who ranged in age from seven to fourteen years-old. These youth were Black and came from neighborhoods in the greater Cleveland area that I would classify as working-class to impoverished.¹

I am a Black woman and a first-generation college graduate from Euclid, Ohio. Euclid is a city about thirteen miles Northeast of the city of Cleveland, Ohio. My family moved to NE Ohio from Forkland, Alabama, in an attempt to create what my Grandfather, Calvin, believed to be a better life. My roots run deep in the South, having spent years during childhood back and forth from our Alabama family home, I am no stranger to red dirt roads and life outside of Ohio. When I was two years old, I lived in a two-family house in East Cleveland, Ohio with my Mother, Stepfather, and a few of my many siblings. The remainder of my siblings lived with

grandparents, aunts, and uncles, in different neighborhoods or with other family members. We siblings each grew up with different class and privileges. This gave our relationships a complex dynamic. Although, this meant I did not have, what may be viewed, as typical sibling relationships, I was able to experience the plethora of diversity in culture, language, class, and gender as I was merged into many different ways of life growing up as result.

My proximity to the communities I work in is close in some ways and still very distant in others. I can relate to being a Black woman who is marginalized by society and as I work in disadvantaged communities, I see young girls who remind me of myself. They are experiencing similar marginalization for the same reasons: race and gender. Although, I primarily work as a teacher in impoverished communities I am also a member by way of being a sister, aunt, and daughter of those who reside in such communities. I acknowledge my privilege as I write this research as an emerging researcher, living in Irvine, California and attending graduate school at the University of California, Irvine. I am a creative artist interested in issues of power, equity, race, gender, and class. This paper is a reflection of my experience as a Black woman working in marginalized communities that reveals inequities and the ways the performing arts allows release from them.

Intro

By the age of fourteen I had been studying voice and theatre for eight years. I would describe myself as a well-seasoned theatre and opera performer and a leader within performing arts communities. This was the year I began teaching. I was assisting my uncle Darryl Lewis, a

known actor and musician and the owner of Euclid, Ohio based DML School of Music, who hosted a theatre camp for neighborhood kids. Each day of the Summer 2011, I packed a lunch and walked the 15-minute trail to the Shore Cultural Centre in the center of downtown Euclid. As the years passed and I continued to collaborate with my uncle, I felt my attachment to the performing arts change. The work, teaching and creating, became as much about my students as it was my own pedagogical and performing interests. I had discovered that this is what made this path fruitful for me. I realized that what I was doing was more than just giving back. I was sustainably creating, increasing, and encouraging the social- emotional wellness in the lives of every student I introduced to performing by giving them the opportunities to utilize song, dance, and public speaking to freely explore themselves.

One of the main objectives of my Black centric research has been re-molding the ideas of what social, emotional, and mental wellness can be, therefore making them more accessible by constructing a multitude of pathways in which wellness can be reached by each class and gender within the Black community. In *Unbound*, I would like to notate that in my description of Black youth, I am not generalizing, as Black youth will never exist as a monolith. This is exploratory research on Black youth, in the working class and below the poverty line who reside in the Cleveland Metropolitan Housing Authority.

Performing arts such as music, dance and public speaking are more than a hobby. Performing arts education is at the intersection of creativity, hands-on learning, innovation, and social - emotional wellness. Unfortunately, it exists on this plane without always receiving

acknowledgement of how substantial the work is to the advancement of social - emotional wellness. As this research is specifically based on observations from the world of educational theatre programming, I would like to specify what exactly that entails. Educational theatre programming is in reference to the integration of theatre-based practices and the acquisition of knowledge. The reason for Social - Emotional Learning being the critical framework, is the depth and sustainability that comes from those practices as proven by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, a team of researchers and psychologists.

What is Social - Emotional Learning?

Social and Emotional Learning, according to CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning) *SEL* is the “process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (CASEL 1). SEL bridges the gap between academic and social skill. With SEL intertwined in youth educational programming, youth are given the necessary opportunity to explore themselves and to maintain a foundation of social-emotional wellness. With SEL there is opportunity for youth to ask questions and evaluate their behavior and interactions with themselves, their peers, and the adults in their lives.

The five competencies that are the foundation of Social and Emotional Learning, The CASEL 5 are: “self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and

responsible decision-making” (CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL, 2021). Through community, district, staff, and student level implementation, SEL has been shown by years of researcher lead, fundamental and exploratory socio-psychological study, to be effective. In my observation of classroom atmosphere SEL implementation can lead to consistent positive behavior adjustments as it prioritizes holistic well-being in caring for one’s mind, heart, and body. In my own life experience, I have discovered that being able to healthily express emotions, manage myself and problem solve have served as valuable tools at every age and every phase of my life. For me, SEL has supported sustaining healthy life and learning habits.

In taking a look at the entirety of the performance process and sharing space with peers, we may witness a number of challenges. I would place self-awareness and self-efficacy as points of importance because when performing with a group of peers, an elevated level of self and social awareness is needed as you are learning how to share attention with others. Through learning spatial awareness, while singing in a choir for instance, the willingness to witness another receive focus increases because of the necessity to adapt and therefore leading to an increase of integrity and self-awareness. Through continued participation in different art forms, youth develop the social skills needed for healthy social interaction in adulthood.

Why are many activities considered extraordinary and often inaccessible to Black youth? Lack of funding for positive interaction programs has a significant impact on the desire for them in communities. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2020) Black youth make up 14%

of the United States child population, this percentage alone brings about the question of educational and extracurricular resources available for Black youth.

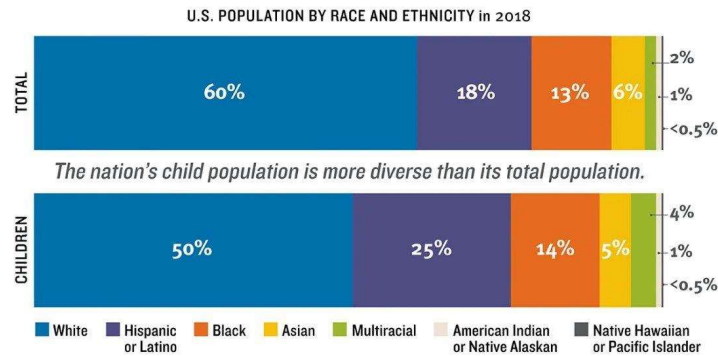


FIGURE I: The Annie E. Casey Foundation. “Race, Ethnicity and American Youth Data.” *The Annie E. Casey Foundation*, 17 June 2018.

In addition, the lack of proper funding, evolves into a decrease of programming available to the youth and as result decreases the interest in participation. Because we, Black people, historically have had to decide between the things that give us freedom and things that give us funding, it is common to see necessity take the place of preference. Because of this, positive youth development programs, which are typically viewed by community leaders, as integral to a child’s social-emotional development, are set aside and rarely revisited. A special education teacher at a NE school states, “When we don’t have the money for the after-school programs and arts, we just can’t have the programs and the students have to miss out.”² We want our youth, Black youth, to grow up with all of the necessities in life. Because these necessities are different

for every demographic. Such necessities in life play a key role in the social-economic outcomes of developing youth. Yet, when we control for race, economic recourses are skewed and unevenly vastly unevenly distributed. “The US Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection has documented Black students, who make up approximately 40 percent of suspensions nationally, are more likely to be punished and punished more harshly than White students for similar behavior” (Gordon 1). Such data points speak to the misperceptions of Black youth in learning spaces. According to research done by Harvard and University of Southern California education researchers, education, ability, and anger biases can lead to Black youth being treated by educators, as impatient, rough, and difficult to teach. “This anger bias can have huge consequences by increasing Black children's experience of not being ‘seen’ or understood by their teachers and then feeling like school is not for them” (Halberstadt). Implicit education bias towards Black youth is based on stereotypes and a lack of cultural competency. In an interview with an individual who is a CEO of a nonprofit that works with Black youth in partnership with Cleveland Municipal School District, they suggested that, “For four hundred years, Black boys have been a target of oppression, why shouldn’t we be a target of success?”³ These biases cause damaging disparities in education and the overall social-emotional well-being of Black youth. Beginning as young as preschool, Black youth fall victim to these biases and are unable to fully develop as they are not held to the same expectation of communication and self-awareness as their peers. Because of the commonality of this, it is distinctly important for Black youth to have access to performing arts educational programming that upholds an emphasis on

anti-bias practice in self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, social awareness and relationship skills.

As a local Cleveland based rapper, artist, activist, educator suggested to me, “I’m a product of the power, love and positivity of hip-hop.”⁴ He shared insight on his discovery of civil rights leaders Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Assata Shakur and Fred Hampton, through music from artists like the late Tupac Shakur. These artistic archives continually inspire him to work within Black communities for the betterment of their minds and to continue to produce healthy behavior and social interaction. This is a direct result of his involvement in the performing arts and exploration through music. He continues, “So, what happens if you don’t stop these Black kids from learning about Shakespeare? What happens if you don’t give them that boundary? What happens if you give these Black kids the opportunity to be free and to be in their joy?” The freedom and joy align seamlessly with the SEL competency of self-awareness as result a willingness to learn and explore is activated. This is truly when the process of being unbound begins to bloom.

Self-Awareness

Self-Awareness: “the abilities to understand one’s own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts” (CASEL 1). Self-awareness, like each of the other SEL competencies, is a valuable life skill, because it influences how we view our thoughts, emotions, beliefs, and well-being. Externally, self-awareness is through the lens of those outside of ourselves. The weaving of both of those aspects together, is how we view self-awareness

through Social - Emotional Learning. Practiced self-awareness can be outwardly evident in the way someone brings themselves into a space, or in the way that they freely explore their abilities without limitation, for example having a solo in a dance or being center stage at the talent show. Self-awareness is also the ability to look into the mirror, see one's reflection and analyze it. Those analytics reveal the way one exists in space and the impact they have on those around. An example of enhanced self-awareness through acting an Actor, CEO and Educator shares his experience in a high school play, "Growing up an only child, I really felt like I got my way all the time. When I didn't get my way, I didn't really know how to respond, I would quit. So, when it came to acting, I didn't know how to react when my character didn't get their way and it would be hard for me to play that character. I had to have enough self-awareness, in acting and in my character to realize that everyone is not going to respond in a way that's only favorable to me. I had to justify the way my character and others responded to things. If I chose to only live within my bubble, I wouldn't be able to transition into the level of empathy that a person needs to take on a character and to bring it into their own self-awareness in day-to-day life."⁵ This is an example of how character work enables one to actively become self-aware within a play, while simultaneously growing in self-awareness outside of a script and within day-to-day life.

Social Awareness

Social Awareness: "The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and contexts" (CASEL 1). In developing the skill and ability to understand the perspectives of diverse others, human concern

and empathy can be kindled. As an example of the connections between social awareness and the performing arts, let us think about the preparation of an elementary school choir concert. In the weeks before the performance, students must practice social awareness as they begin to learn and memorize new music. They also become more aware that they play one role within the larger group, as a team. Youth begin to develop a sense of collaboration and joined positive efforts to reach a common goal. Oftentimes in choir, dance, and theatre performance, different languages and dances are integrated into the music. This requires varying levels of social awareness because curiosities around language and culture are in circulation as the material is introduced. In this curiosity, there can be an acknowledgement of diversity and an increase in respect for those outside of ourselves. In a conversation with Actor, Singer, and Kindergarten Teacher of Cleveland, Ohio they imparted that,

The performing arts give me the chance to be able to come out of myself. When you can mask yourself and not have to deal with yourself personally, you have the freedom to explore and reach out and examine things that aren't naturally a part of you. There are things I say as a performer that I would never say as my *real* self, but by experiencing that even in play and performance, it still informs the real *me*.⁶

During a conversation with Project Manager, Artist, Producer from Cleveland, Ohio they shared that a part of the magic of performing in a multicultural arts environment is that it can temporarily remove racism. "You get to know each other intimately and dispel myths from

everyone. You get the opportunity to see each other as people, building community and confidence.”⁷

Lessons in SEL last a lifetime. SEL research is supported by years of practical classroom use. Varying from the 1960’s to Ancient Greece, it has been shown that “holistic curriculum,” sets an appropriate tone for in-class climate as well as students' social and behavioral displays. Notably, SEL assesses social biases, those that have an impact on diversity, equity, and inclusion. It requires self-awareness, reflection, and challenges past ways of doing things. *Culturally Competent* SEL is transforming the ways youth address themselves and their peers, holistically. Social awareness creates space for the entirety of thoughts, feelings, and responses by requiring those participating in SEL practice to have to examine themselves and those in their proximity. SEL encourages a “growth mindset - the idea that with effort, it’s possible to increase intelligence levels, talent, and abilities” (Smith 2020).

Responsible Decision Making

You have to choose to make responsible decisions but what exactly is responsible decision making? As defined by CASEL, Responsible Decision-Making is “the ability to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations.” We make choices every single day and because the choices we make impact us and those around us, decision making comes with great responsibility. Is it difficult for Black youth to make responsible decisions? I would investigate that question by first magnifying the various aspects that play a role in Black youth making responsible decisions. Every decision you make is

based on who you are, who surrounds you and your environment. In communities like the Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authorities in Cuyahoga County, Ohio responsible decision options are limited due to socio-economical constraints. For privileged individuals, a responsible decision can look like waking up in the morning, getting dressed and getting to school on time. Because these individuals are privileged, they are afforded daily advantages that others are not. As a result of this there isn't too much thought that goes into their ability to make responsible decisions, their circumstances tend to allow space for very few irresponsible or undesirable decisions.

Being active in the performing arts, whether as an actor, a dancer, a singer, etc., puts one in the position of being a part of a creative learning community, a team if you will. Different from other group activities like sports, the arts require the addition of creativity. Learning early in life, that you have an impact on others, builds selflessness as you are made aware of more than just yourself. Empathy for your peers can lead you to make responsible decisions for the greater good of your entire community. In having a true understanding that you are always in a position of power, you are made aware that your decisions can and will leave an impact. In my life experience, I know that the idea of power can be perplexing for Black youth, as Black youth have been systemically deprived of power and autonomy by way of discrimination and law. Based on conversation with students, it is common that in these households and communities' youth will feel a low sense of influence, thus, the desire to make responsible decisions for the greater good is low. With an integration of creativity, the performing arts combat this by

developing a community that is reliant on one another. For example, after participating in CPT Education's Brick City Theatre production of "Lil Red in the Hood" a third-grade student shared that he learned how a show is run; from the stage manager depending on the actor, to the actor depending on the stage crew, to stage crew depending on scenic design. It was learned that each decision made, within that community, had an effect on the functionality of the whole.

Interestingly enough, he also shared, "This is why I came to camp, because I know my friends were waiting on me to do my part,"⁸ It is clear that this knowledge then transferred into everyday thought and consideration because the same student showed up early to our end of the year presentation because he knew that we could not start our presentation without him.

Relationship Skills

In a conversation with Actor, Musician and Vocal Coach of NYC they shared, "You have to go through life with people. The arts allowed me to create lifetime friendships. There are people I met years ago, in a show who followed me up into my adulthood. I owe the ability of owning who I am and being able to create dynamic relationships to the arts."⁹ When you're in a cast, a choir, a chorus, you are building a family. In doing so you are learning how different relationships and the roles within them have to function. Relationship skills as defined by CASEL: "The ability to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed" (CASEL 2). There are a multitude of different relationship categories, a few to name would be family, friends, romantic, and professional relationships. Developing the skills

necessary to create and sustain nurtured and healthy relationships, for example effective communication and listening skills, takes a great amount of practice and intentionality. Broken families, absent parents, overactive parents, friend groups and professional relationships, on the job or at school, can affect our interactions daily. Relationships skills serve as the foundation for how we co-exist with those around us because well-developed relationship skills, allow us to better understand body language, non-verbal cues, conflict management and effective communication with others.

I view the performing arts a community and believe that while engaging in the performing arts, especially beginning at an early age, one can learn about what community is and the inner workings of it. There are lessons from the environment that speak to the necessity of healthy symbiosis. Let's compare a jazz band to a bigger community, for example, your neighborhood. In a conversation with former Jazz Band member and Saxophone Player of Cleveland, Ohio they mention, "Everybody has a vital role to play. Every piece of a jazz band has a special job. Certain instruments work well with certain instruments and the presence or absence of these instruments affects the functionality of the band as a whole, just like in a community."¹⁰ While engaging in the performing arts, you learn the importance of your individuality within the whole and with that your sense of belonging expands and you develop dependability.

Self-Management

Self-Management as defined by CASEL is “the ability to effectively manage stress, control impulses, and motivate oneself to set and achieve goals.” There are benefits to developing self-management skills during youth, a few being the ability to thoughtfully manage stress and regulate emotions from an early age. These highly sought-after skills, in adulthood, become second nature as they are integrated into everyday life as a child. When you can manage yourself successfully, you tend to have a heightened ability to set and achieve goals because you have the tools necessary to organize your thoughts and prioritize tasks. I know many married, career focused, adults who struggle daily with self-management as they are working to discover what it means to them and their lives. Although I do believe the act of self-management changes overtime, the foundation remains the same making it a valuable skill to begin developing in childhood. When involved in the performing arts one maintains responsibility, whether that be to memorize lines, or music, learning blocking or being in time with a dance step. As self-management skills increase the ability of assessing how you are feeling increases, therefore allowing you to better manage yourself. You learn your social and emotional triggers and then you are able to find ways to healthily manage them. Self-management is tied into the other competencies of SEL but has a more direct linking to self-awareness. Finding the awareness of self is the first step in preparing to manage oneself. This is because if you are unsure of self, it becomes more difficult to manage as there is no subject to manage. Lack of self-management by Black youth has been revealed by years of Psychological research that states the Black population is more stressed than other populations in America. “For several decades, research

has shown that blacks (or African Americans) often have higher rates of psychological distress than whites...” (Dohrenwend 1969, Vega, and Rumbaut 1991). Black people tend to report lower levels of psychological well-being on cognitively focused measures such as life satisfaction and happiness.” For Black youth, successful self-management could look like lower stress levels, higher levels of happiness and greater ability to effectively complete tasks.

Closing

The performing arts are imperative to the social - emotional development of Black youth as they fully support the ability to self-manage, make responsible decisions, develop relationship skills, and enhance social and self-awareness. Introducing our children to dance, song, team building, public speaking and so many other performing arts subcategories, has many times over shown to be necessary. Through research, personal experience, and observation, I can attest to the truth of this. Social - Emotional Learning cannot work in the way it is meant to work, if educators continue to lead unintentionally and community leaders continue to disregard the benefit of programming that inherently enhances social skill and ability, such as the performing arts. Black students are in the deficit of social emotional wellness and life skills because we, educators, parents, and community, are not putting an emphasis on implementing programs that support them. This research serves as a call to action to Black communities: parents, educators, and programs, it is time to bring more public attention to the benefits of the performing arts by integrating and funding programs in our schools and community centers. Though I am not a quintessential person, I believe my education, career path and viewpoints serve as a living

reference to the fact that these programs can enhance lives. With intentional SEL based performing arts programs, our communities will continue to be ameliorated by them, and we can choose to serve each other through them. Social-Emotional health is wealth, it is time we put the work in.

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FIGURE I :

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¹ Impoverished in the sense that they were reliant on public assistance.

² This interview was conducted with a Special Education Teacher of NE via phone call Ohio April 11, 2022.

³ This interview was conducted with the CEO of Five Pillars Inc. via ZOOM on February 1, 2022.

⁴ This interview was conducted with local Cleveland based rapper, Artist, Activist, Educator via ZOOM on February 4, 2022.

⁵ This interview was conducted with the CEO of Five Pillars Inc. via ZOOM on February 1, 2022.

⁶ This interview was conducted with Singer, Actor and Kindergarten Teacher of Cleveland, Ohio via ZOOM on March 2, 2022.

⁷ This Interview was conducted with Project Manager, Artist, Producer from Cleveland, Ohio via phone call April 22, 2022.

⁸ This was a conversation with a third-grade student in +Cleveland, Ohio at the Outhwaite community center Summer 2019.

⁹ This interview was conducted with New York based Actor, Musician and Vocal coach via ZOOM on February 10, 2022.

¹⁰ This interview was conducted with Phoenix, AZ former Jazz Band member and saxophone player via phone call April 9, 2022.