

4-26-2010

Impact Repertory Theatre as a Tool of Empowerment: Black Youth Describe their Experiences and Perceptions

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IMPACT REPERTORY THEATRE AS A TOOL OF EMPOWERMENT:
BLACK YOUTH DESCRIBE THEIR EXPERIENCES
AND PERCEPTIONS

by

ASANTEWA F. SUNNI-ALI

Under the Direction of Makungu Akinyela

ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study explores the role of Theatre as a tool of empowerment for Black youth. This study involves IMPACT Repertory Theatre of Harlem (IMPACT), a Theatre group that consists of Black youth between the ages of 12-19. Observations, focus-group interviews and audiovisual material were used to explore Black youth's experiences with and perceptions of Theatre via IMPACT. The existing literature surrounding the topic of Theatre for youth empowerment contains the following gaps: they do not give a voice to the youth in question, they are seldom conducted in the U.S. and they do not specifically focus on Black youth. Analysis included categorizing the data and then putting it into themes. In the study's findings, participants reveal that Theatre via IMPACT offers a source of family like support, a safe space and opportunities for self discovery and transformation.

INDEX WORDS: Black youth pedagogy, Theatre and African American youth, Black youth, Black youth problems, Theatre for development, Theatre pedagogy.

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
in the College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
2010

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Asantewa Fulani Sunni-Ali
2010

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BLACK YOUTH DESCRIBE THEIR EXPERIENCES WITH
AND PERCEPTIONS OF THEATRE AS A TOOL OF EMPOWERMENT

by

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May 2010

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my parents who not only brought me into existence but also fought and prayed for me to survive their struggles and safely arrive in this place that we call life. I dedicate this to my six siblings who have nurtured me in many ways throughout my life and throughout this process; I am proud to be the last and first. I dedicate this work to the countless Theatre practitioners who use the art not merely to entertain but to transform their lives and the lives of others. This work is dedicated to the Afrikan liberation struggle, whose freedom fighters continue to discover various libratory avenues to end oppression. This work is dedicated to Black youth throughout the Diaspora who knowingly and unknowingly bear the burden of dual otherness. I dedicate this work to my undying passion for theatrical expression and experience of immediate (unspoken and spoken) exchange with the community, which is my audience.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend gratitude to the entire IMPACT Repertory Theatre family for warmly welcoming me and allowing me to be a part of the family. Thank you to my committee members for your guidance and feedback.

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PROLOGUE

At age six, I declared that I would be an actress and a teacher. For much of my adolescence I fantasized about the glamorous life I wanted to live. By eighteen, I had performed in a few community theater productions and had been accepted to a top Acting conservatory in New York City. After a year of attendance I was convinced that I would have to alter myself significantly to “make it” in the business. I was encouraged by professors to lose my “southern drawl,” remove my nose ring, straighten my natural hair, and by any means keep and perhaps reduce my size 4 body frame. After matriculating in a four-year college, I had the opportunity to be exposed to a full range of Theater and Africana Studies courses, all of which reinforced and solidified my intense interest in (performing) Theatre. The courses were both enjoyable and enlightening. I was reminded of what my family taught me about African pride, self-love and combating oppression. In addition, the courses provided me with a new perspective about the world in which we live. What particularly influenced my education was a Black Theater course, which allowed me to become conscious of the fact that in addition to being a performing artist I yearned to be a scholar. I wanted to be a scholar with the intellectual ability to articulate the importance of using the arts as a tool for education and development as well as the knowledge and resources to bring it into fruition. In this class I was introduced to Theatre practitioners like August Wilson, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, and many others who used Theatre to develop and empower Africana communities. I identified with a notion introduced to me by my Black Theater Professor which is that in order to begin educating, liberating and developing it is vital for one to be aware that development “is not only economic growth, nor merely the acquisition of certain tastes and habits. Rather it is the integrated transformation of people and their society in such a way that they

live fuller lives in which their basic human needs are met and they feel proud to be a part of their societies.” At this time, it became clear that it was my duty to work with youth and teach them that true Theatre art is cultural expression and “making it” should not call for the eradication of one’s identity but rather the full embrace of one’s cultural identity. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, Theatre can (and should, for oppressed people) be a vehicle by which we investigate the ways in which the dominant culture dictates our thoughts, behaviors and life desires. After graduating, I had the opportunity to put some of my education into practice when I taught a theater class at a local private elementary school. Sharing my knowledge and receiving feedback from the students proved to be beyond doubt a rewarding experience. As opposed to teaching acting techniques, my students and I explored the basic concepts of theater art through hands-on exercises that promote self and community awareness. In my studies toward a Master’s degree, I have been particularly interested in Black Theater as a reflection of the ever-changing black experience in America and as an instrument for understanding and expressing cultural identity. I currently teach drama at an elementary and middle schools where we perform plays that raise awareness about social issues as well as expose our audiences to the rich history and culture of Africa and African people. As a drama teacher I have witnessed my students be empowered by the work we do. Some gained a boost in self-esteem by overcoming stage fright and learning how to project and enunciate while others were empowered by the issues faced by their characters. I conducted this study because I was interested in examining Theatre as empowerment for youth who have an ongoing relationship with Theatre. I wanted to know if the empowerment that I witnessed with my students was similar for other youth; and if so, I wanted to add to the body of literature the voices of these students and capture *what* it is that empowers them.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

This qualitative phenomenological study will explore the role of Theatre as a tool of empowerment for Black youth as well as describe their experiences with and perceptions of Theatre. It examines Theatre as a participatory learning medium that provides a space for creative collective learning and self-expression, helping youth to make sense of the social changes around them by visualizing issues and using their words and bodies in a clear way that everyone can understand and enjoy. It explores how Theatre can provide an environment that fosters and reinforces social activity and interpersonal communication as well as a space where young Blacks can become critical agents able to recognize, appropriate, and transform how dominant power works on and through them. The study involves *IMPACT Repertory Theatre of Harlem (IMPACT)*; a youth Theatre group that consists of Black youth ages 12-19 in and around Harlem, NY. *IMPACT* is rooted in creative self-expression and anchored by a commitment to Safe space. *IMPACT* believes that Theatre arts and education play a pivotal role in providing opportunities and transitions for the leaders of tomorrow. *IMPACT's* mission is to use performing arts and the dynamics of leadership training to develop and empower youth.

BACKGROUND

IMPACT stands for inspiration, motivation, preparation, activism, commitment and teamwork. It “operates as a major branch of New Heritage Theatre Group (NHTG), established in 1964” during the Black Arts Movement era, “one of the oldest Black not-for-profit Theatre companies in New York City.” (Impact, n.d.) Founders include Alice Arlen, Jamal Joseph, Joyce Joseph, Voza Rivers, Courtney Bennett and Raymond Johnson. What the founders have in common is intense passion for the arts as a tool to empower inner city youth. The elder founders Voza Rivers and Jamal Joseph have an extended amount of experience in socio-political activism as well as in the African American Theatre. Grammy nominated producer, Rivers has worked with Black musical artists including Nina Simone, Stevie Wonder and Hugh Masekela. He produced the Broadway musical *Sarafina!* and the Obie Award winning play *A Huey P. Newton Story*. (Impact, n.d.) Joseph joined the Black Panther Party at age fifteen and has been active in his community ever since. Because of his activism in the Party, he was incarcerated. During this time, he earned two degrees and started an all Black Theatre company that explored Black history and Black prison life through the plays that he wrote. As Columbia University's Chair of the Film Department since 1997, he feels that it is necessary for him to “pass the torch” and empower the next generation by helping them to use the creative arts as a way to change their/the world. (Dvrrepublic, n.d.)

“Born from an incident of violence in 1997, IMPACT strives always to promote a positive paradigm of PEACE.” (Impact, n.d.) In a short video entitled *Why We IMPACT*, husband and wife Jamal and Joyce Joseph describe the unforgettable cries of their neighbor, a young Black mother whose son had been killed. “We had watched this kid grow up, this wasn’t a trouble

maker, this wasn't a thug he was a good kid" said Jamal. After Andre was killed, Jamal realized that he "wasn't doing enough" for his community. Remembering the Black Panther slogan, "the youth are the future, the youth will make the revolution" the Josephs used their own funds to begin youth workshops in a townhouse basement.

There is no charge for the program but it is not free. You earn your place in IMPACT by demonstrating your commitment to engage in disciplined study, hard work and service to your family, friends and community. The core age group is 12-19. Senior Impact members and staff then graduate to Impact VIBE. Young people between the ages of 12 and 19 can become members by auditioning twice a year once in the fall/winter. The most important aspect of the process is a willingness to work and learn. Youth who are interested should come prepared with a song and monologue, and be ready to learn a short dance routine. New IMPACT members are required to attend IMPACT Boot Camp: 12-16 weeks of intensive arts and leadership training before they can perform with the entire company.

Throughout its existence, IMPACT has engaged its members in a variety of activities including "arts and leadership workshops, performance opportunities, community service, tutoring and mentoring to its participants." Members of the IMPACT Repertory team also participate in the following programs:

Dance: Modern, Jazz, Traditional African, Hip-Hop and Ballet

Movement: Martial Arts, Stage Combat, Stepping and Pantomime

Music: Voice, Composition, Keyboards, and Musical Theatre

Drama: Improvisation, Scene Study, Monologues, Performance and Audition Techniques

Leadership: Conflict Resolution, Human Rights Activism, Public Speaking, Drug Prevention, Career Planning, Community Organizing, Time Management and Personal Growth

Writing: Poetry, Songs, Essays, Short Stories, Plays and Movie Scripts

IMPACT has over fifty performances in front of over 10,000 people per year at venues ranging from the United Nations Headquarters, NYC's City Hall, hospitals, public schools, penitentiaries, college campuses and homeless shelters to the 2008 Academy Awards where their song "Raise it Up" was nominated for an Oscar. (Impact, n.d.) IMPACT "actively promotes the practice of ART-IVISM, using art and activism to change the world." (Impact, n.d.) Young people use current events and their own personal experience as material to explore the issues facing young people in America. An Art-ivist uses his/her art work (song, theatre, dance) as a medium to create awareness about a social issue. IMPACT Artists have written and performed about many issues such as AIDS awareness, drug prevention, peer pressure and youth development. IMPACT Art-ivists also make it a priority to be globally aware and informed about issues that affect not just American kids, but youth all around the world. IMPACT's long ranged objective and mission is "to use performing arts and the dynamics of leadership training to develop and empower youth. Impact Repertory Theatre of Harlem believes that Theatre arts and education play a pivotal role in providing opportunities and transitions for the leaders of tomorrow." IMPACT believes the first step of true leadership is service. Every year, their members visit nursing homes, participate in block clean ups and organize food drives to assist in the health of their community. (Impact, n.d.)

IMPACT collaborates with various local and national agencies and organizations. The organization has established alliances with an extensive list of groups that share a similar mission of empowering youth. Some of these groups include The 52nd Street Project, Abrons Arts Center / Henry Street Settlement, Amas Musical Theatre, Inc., Art Start, Blue Nile Rite of Passage, Brotherhood Sistersol, Center for Arts Education, Harlem School of the Arts, Tupac Amaru Shakur Center For The Arts and Hip Hop Summit Action Network.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Black youth have been and remain consequentially disenfranchised-educationally, politically, economically, and socially-within the U.S. (Paul, 2000). Institutions from schools to churches to the juvenile justice system, are failing Black youth (Coleman, 2006). Educationally, Black students arrive in the school environment with a set of unique and legitimate ways of being that are cognitively, linguistically, and behaviorally different from White middle-class norms (Phillips, 2008) and traditional lessons immersed in white culture (Gates, 1999). Economically, politically and socially, “African kids are the bearers of a dual otherness. They are others both due to their Africanness and their status as dependent, wild, and uncontrollable youth. As children of the other, they gain none of the positive benefits of childhood. They are viewed as threats, burdens, and competitors to “deserving” (white) children. As children, they gain no protection from the ravages of racist oppression. Racial profiling starting at three or four and pre-school expulsion (for being aggressive, violent and using bad language) rates for Blacks being twice that of Whites (Coleman, 2006) speaks to the history of discrimination and denigration of African Americans (with no regards to age). One study estimates that, if recent trends continue, a third of the black males born in 2001 can expect to do time. (Coll, 2007) They “still carry the stigma associated with Blackness in [American] culture” (Nunn, 2002). According to Cecily Jones (2007), a researcher who conducted a study on Slavery and its legacies for African descended children the government and media fuel this demonizing of Black youth. Dealing with and in most cases leading statistical rates of dropping out of school, teenage parenthood, criminal activity and substance abuse black youth are in need of a space that is conducive to their growth and survival.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact that Theatre has on Black youth who are educationally and socially disadvantaged by exploring the use of Theatre as empowerment and a source of support. It aims to explore how empowerment takes place for young people, including those areas of empowerment inherent in the drama activity, and the empowerment that occurs through indirect development (simply being in the IMPACT environment). The study also aims to explore how this empowerment affects change in the lives of the participants.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

There is much significance of this study to institutions of learning, social workers, community organizers, Theatre for development advocates and the like. The information obtained can be used to implement effective community participatory Theatre programs and other outreach programs to further their efforts to provide Black youth with safe and positive outlets, educational opportunities and cultural awareness.

NATURE OF THE STUDY

This study is qualitative and has a non-experimental design. Qualitative focus group interviews were conducted. Conducting qualitative focus group interviews was the most efficient way of gathering information to determine the impact of Theatre involvement (classes/workshops/performance) on self-identity and community consciousness amongst Black youth. A similar design was used in a study aiming to explore the role of drama and Theatre in

promoting the emotional and social wellbeing of a group of young Black men living in south London (Kemp, 2006). This design was useful because it allowed participants to reflect on and openly discuss their experiences and perceptions through the communal setting of a focus group.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Study participants answered ten questions (Appendix C) about their experiences with and feelings about Theatre and its impact on them. Some of the questions were: How does being involved in Theatre make you feel? How does Theatre help you to learn about yourself? And How does Theatre help you to communicate with others? These questions were formulated from the following larger research questions:

- How can Theatre promote individual and social change amongst Black youth?
- What are Black youth's perceptions about Theatre and how it impacts them?
- Does Theatre give Black youth a greater sense of self (as it relates to self identity, i.e. positive self-esteem, self-acceptance, self-love, self-respect)?
- Does Theatre make Black youth feel *empowered* and *motivated* (to make personal and community change), *connected* (to community members and issues), and *aware* (of personal and community issues)?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A culturally relevant framework attributes significance to the everyday contexts of students' lives, particularly students of color, such as African American, Native American, and Latino youth, and carefully examines the indigenous cultural practices by acknowledging and valuing these practices as building on students' "funds of knowledge" (Moll & Greenberg, 2005). The conceptual framework used in this study is Linda Smith's research agenda of decolonization.

This framework guides the study by helping to inform the research questions, design of data collection and analysis to help answer the research questions. In Smith's research agenda, she uses ocean tides as a metaphor representing movement, change, process, life, inward and outward flows of ideas, reflections and actions (Smith, 2007). This conceptual framework is appropriate for this study in the process of analyzing data to determine the impact of Theatre on Black youth due to the fact that Theatre for development production takes on these very characteristics such as planning, investigating, story development, rehearsal, discussion and follow-up action and allowing participants to explore the connections between the way the world is run and the way their own lives are run (Martin, 2007). See chart in methodology section.

DEFINITIONS

Black Theatre a rich practice that displays the strong presence, self-determination and great artistic talent of Africans of the Diaspora or a dramatic movement encompassing plays written by, for, and about Blacks. It is art that feeds the spirit and celebrates the life of Black America by designing its strategies for survival and prosperity. (Wilson, 1996) The late Barbara Ann Teer of

the National Black Theatre of Harlem defined/used it as a medium that seeks to re-educate, to restore spirituality and a cultural tradition that has been stripped from Blacks in America.

Black youth- children (age 18 and under) of African descent

Theatre for Development can be “participatory Theatre that encourages improvisation and audience members to take roles in the performance, or can be fully scripted and staged, with the audience observing.” (“Theatre for Development,” 2008, “Definition,” para. 1).

ASSUMPTIONS

See Researcher Bias in Chapter 3.

SCOPE, LIMITATIONS, DELIMITATIONS

The scope of the study is to gather information that will be used to analyze the impact of Theatre involvement on the increase of self-identity and community consciousness of Black youth in Harlem, NY. The limitations and delimitations of this study include the existence of other outlets that may positively effect and influence Black youth between the ages of twelve and nineteen, as a result the researcher will ask the questions to ensure that what is intended to be measured actually is. (see Chapter 3 data analysis section) The participants will also be asked to describe how other factors (school, community programs) contribute to their feelings about themselves and their communities.

CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY

Chapter 1 describes the numerous challenges faced by Black youth in the U.S. and the significance of using Theatre as a space and opportunity to combat their issues. The background of the problem provides a summary of the historical and present day issues faced by Black youth along with statistical projections for the future. The purpose of the study is to explore the impact of Theatre involvement (classes/workshops, performance, observance) on increasing the self and social consciousness amongst Black youth. The nature of the study is also described in Chapter 1, including the design and methodology and its appropriateness in fulfilling the purpose of this study. This is followed by the research questions guiding the study. The conceptual framework, applying concepts of Linda Smith's decolonization is discussed. The end of Chapter 1 contains definitions of terms, identifies assumptions, scope, limitations and delimitations relating to the study.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

LITERATURE SEARCHES

The Keywords searched include Black youth pedagogy, Theatre and Blacks, Theatre and African American youth, high school dropout rates, teen pregnancy, Black youth, Black youth problems, Theatre for development, Theatre pedagogy, hip-hop and youth, Theatre and Black children.

The databases used for the literature search were JSTOR, Proquest and Ebsco Host. The types of journals used in the search were The African American Review, Theatre, Theatre Journal, Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy and The Journal of Negro Education.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Theatre has been used in various ways and settings to challenge audiences to take active roles in the transformation of their lives. For oppressed people in particular Theatre has been used as a vehicle to promote and support liberation from various forms of oppression through re-education and re-storing spirituality and cultural traditions. Examples of this include Barbara Ann Teer's National Black Theatre of Harlem, Ngugi Wa Thiongo's Theater for development (which fuses elements of traditional African performance with components of Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed) and Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed to name a few. All of which have roots in traditional African performance.

Theater in traditional African societies was "couched in action-centered ceremonies, rituals, and incantations told through storytelling or dance-drama," it was "an extremely religious

act” that celebrated life (Kennedy, 1973, p. 73). Thiongo (1999) notes that “pre-colonial African performances were always communal” taking place at festivals, rites of passage ceremonies as well as arena’s where “there was a constant exchange between those performing at the center of the arena and those watching at the edges” (p. xiii). It was “a meeting ground for ideas and sharing community culture through performance” (Byam, 1999 p. 231). “Playing a given scenario, be it dialogue, dance, song, pantomime, or a combination of these elements, is addressed to the audience and is done as an act of remembrance and celebration” helping “to unite the community by reminding it of ancestral beliefs and shared history” (Hill, 1992, p.16)

“Drama, like any other art form, is created and executed within a specific physical environment. It naturally interacts with that environment, is influenced by it, influences that environment in turn and acts together with the environment in the larger and far more complex history of society” (Soyinka, 1994, p.134) Given this understanding colonialism inevitably changed theater for Africans on the continent and throughout the Diaspora.

On the continent, “African theatre in the colonial period reveals itself as largely a history of cultural resistance and survival” (Soyinka, 1994, p.134). “Colonialism and especially its economic base, colonial capitalism, split communities into new classes and social groupings giving rise to new social forces which tried to manipulate performances to suit their sectional needs” banning “performances which had the community as the center and only allowed those where the content had been devaluated leaving only the form” (Thiongo, 1999, p.xiv).

In the Diaspora, particularly in the U.S. (the location of focus for this study) Black Theater was similarly transformed, in fact, “during the voyage from Africa, enslaved Blacks were forced to act, dance, and entertain their captor crews on the decks of the slave ships.” Upon their

arrival in the “New World,” enslaved Africans continued to involuntarily provide amusement for white spectators “on plantations, city squares, and riverboats throughout the South” (Anderson and Stewart 2007, p.322). “This entertainment for whites consisted of whatever the slave master wanted to see and hear” on the other hand “when the African in the confines of the slave quarters sought to invest his spirit with the strength of his ancestors by conceiving in his art, in his song and dance, a world in which he was the spiritual center and his existence was a manifest act of the creator from whom life flowed. He then could create art that was functional and furnished him with a spiritual temperament necessary for his survival as property and the dehumanizing status that was attendant to that” (Wilson, 1996, p.16)

Africans “despite the disjuncture of slavery, had retained aspects of inherited African traditions, adapted to their new environment and conditions of livelihood” producing a new “performance culture.” They “showed a fondness for singing, music-making and dancing...they would stay up all night enjoying themselves” (Hill, 1992, p.220-221). “The first professional Black company acting in America, the African company (1820-1827) worked in a Manhattan theater, the African grove; here they performed for the Black community exclusively” (Hatch, 2000, p.14). They would “entertain themselves by mimicking the mannerisms, walking, and talking styles of their enslavers” leading amused whites to “adopt a style of performance in which they would apply black makeup to their faces (blackface) and engage in stereotypical imitations of Blacks...as lazy, shiftless, simple, dialect-speaking people with kinky hair and large lips.” This came to be known as minstrelsy. Blacks soon after began to form their own minstrel shows for the amusement of White audiences, popularizing the entertainment form that sustained for “almost a century” (Anderson and Stewart 2007, p.323).

Post emancipation, toward the end of the nineteenth century minstrelsy lost popularity and “black theatre evolved as a reappropriation and redefinition of white-controlled theatrical images of African Americans.” *Real African Americans* were casts in roles as the idea of “authenticity” emerged, opposing white minstrel imitations in blackface (Krasner, 1998, p.15). Cruse (1967) notes that the “Negro Renaissance” including the works of Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson and the emergence of “Negro playwrights...blossomed in the 1920’s and was killed by the Depression of the 1930’s” (p.522).

By the mid twentieth century America saw the rise, struggles and often collapse of the American Negro Theater, black repertory companies such as the Lafayette Players and black playwrights, James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry and the young Leroi Jones (now Amiri Baraka). Baraka felt “that a black theater should be about black people, with black people, for black people and only black people” and as a result launched *The Black Arts Repertory Theater and School in Harlem* (p.536). Writers Ralph Ellison and J. Saunders Redding “asserted that the artist does a disservice to himself/herself/ and his/her profession by being overly concerned with race and politics” a view argued against by “Langston Hughes, Richard Wright and the creative critics of the 60s...Hoyt Fuller, Larry Neal, Mari Evans, Haki Madhubuti...Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez” to name a few. The *Negro Digest* (later named the *Black World*) established in 1967 by Hoyt Fuller ran over a year of commentary and discussion reaffirming “the need for Blacks to create and employ an aesthetic in their own image and interest” (Karenga, 2002, p.465).

Harold Cruse and Black Arts Movement pioneer Larry Neal who described Black Theater as “the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept” shared this notion. “The Black aesthetic” he says, has a motive, which is “the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of

looking at the world.” Neal’s stance was later named by Molefi Asante the *Afrocentric idea*. A notion that discusses the necessity of being centered in the life experiences of Black people and assessing those experiences “from the viewpoint of the oppressed.” (Gayle, 1971)

In fact this was also a shared notion within the Black Power movement and the Africana Studies movement that “forced the American society to be aware that black people were no longer willing to accept their subordinate and subservient positions without challenging the system that continued to oppress them” (Aldridge and Young, 2000, p.3) Africana Studies advocates felt that the black student much like black artist “makes assumptions based on the wrong models, white models. These assumptions are not only wrong; they are antithetical to his/her existence. The black artist must construct models which correspond to his own reality, consistent with a black style, our natural aesthetic style, and our moral and spiritual styles” (Baraka and Neal, 2007). In regards to its weaknesses Black Arts Movement pioneer and renowned poet Askia Toure’ claims “we failed to thoroughly train the masses of the people to totally claim ownership of the Movement.” Toure’ also credits The FBI’s Counter Intelligence Program (COINTEL-PRO) for dismantling the movement as it had similarly done to many other Black Nationalist organizations and/or movements such as the Black Panthers, the US organization and many others.

Black Theatre as an art form much like the discipline of Africana Studies grew out of the Black Power Movement and that period’s struggle of the Black community to be humanized (recognized, respected, given equal rights), to speak and be heard with their own voices and to share with the world their rich history and present culture. Like Africana Studies, Black Theatre has also engaged in much struggle to establish and prove its “legitimacy” within the Eurocentric hegemonic discourse.

IMPACT, the group of focus for this study, embodies the communal rituals of traditional African performance. In fact, the creative vitality and character of present day Black Theatre (such as IMPACT) owes more to traditions of folk performance than many contemporary dramatists realize. Conceived as aesthetic values and processes rather than as static cultural forms, African performance traditions offer a wealth of expressive resources. Black popular Theatre is rooted in the historical transformation of these traditions, and they are indispensable to the development of a culturally integrated, broadly effective Black Theatre (Coplan 1986). An example of this is Teer's National Black Theatre of Harlem (mentioned above) that continues to produce performances that explore issues relevant to the Harlem community providing the largely Harlem spectators with new information about themselves, so that they leave uplifted, reaffirmed (and) enlightened (Harris 1972).

WA THIONGO'S THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT

Similar to Black Theatre, Theatre for Development practitioner Wa' Thiongo (re)introduced this medium to East African villages in the late 1980s with the aims to promote positive social change. As defined above Theater for development can be participatory Theatre that encourages improvisation and audience members to take roles in the performance, or can be fully scripted and staged, with the audience observing. In her book, *Community in Motion Theatre for Development in Africa*, Dale Byam (1999) discusses the emergence of Theatre for Development (primarily in East) Africa which much like traditional African performance is community based and has "internal cultural resources that have positively influenced its development." Byam argues, "Theatre for Development borrows concepts of traditional African performance" in order to raise the consciousness of its participants. Byam also explores the relationship be-

tween Theatre and Freirian pedagogy (which will be discussed further below). She refocuses the development strategies on human rather than technical resources by showing how culture has traditionally played an important role in African development.

FREIRE'S PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED

Nobody liberates anybody else, and nobody liberates themselves all alone. People liberate themselves in fellowship with each other. -Paulo Freire

Freire puts forth a pedagogy in which the individual learns to cultivate his own growth through situations from his daily life that provide useful learning experiences. It requires that they create their own words, words that allow them to become aware of reality in order to fight for their own emancipation. Without this, some people acquire a kind of naive consciousness in which they are aware of their situation but do not make any effort to change it; they take a conformist stance and consider their situation something normal, even to the point of supporting it themselves. Other individuals construct their own reality and liberate themselves from oppression, only to go to the opposite extreme and become the antithesis of what they were fighting against.

Freire argues, the person who thinks and reflects goes about creating himself from the inside out. He creates his consciousness of struggle by transforming reality and liberating himself from the oppression that has been inserted by traditional pedagogy. Freire says the individual should form himself rather than be formed. To this end, he proposes that educational topics or opportunities (such as Theatre) be taken from the daily experiences the individual constantly encounters and that we avoid the current educational pitfall of resorting to artificial experiences. He

proposes that one problematize his own life in order to realize that he both requires and can achieve a different status.

Freire recognizes that the practices he suggests can encounter "limiting situations" that block them, and that these situations are the product of resistance on the part of the oppressing classes to any change in the status they so closely protect. He describes some of the different methods, including ideologies, that the oppressors use to maintain their own status and the status quo, and if possible to oppress people even further, since these are a "law of life" that we cannot evade.

IMPACT is a medium that offers a "safe space" for Black youth. It speaks to their existence and the struggles they are faced with within that existence; it provides "a meeting ground" for them to ask questions, discuss ideas and become active participants in the shaping of their lives. Freire asserts "it is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves" which must "involve action" and "serious reflection" (Kuppers and Robertson, 2007). Black youth are consumed with images and narratives that do not reflect their actual lives leaving them without a platform to visualize and make sense of their own lives. They are being shaped by a "death-affirming climate of oppression" which dehumanizes them reducing them to objects. A "mirror up to nature" can lead to ending this oppression. As Freire says the continuation of "propaganda, management, manipulation-all arms of domination-cannot be the instruments of their rehumanization" (Kuppers and Robertson, 2007).

AUGUSTO BOAL'S THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED

Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed introduces the concept of "the people's code" which "allows and encourages the spectator to ask questions, to dialogue, to participate" with the actors. An idea that is very contrary to "the bourgeois code of manners", the Eurocentric type of Theatre in which the audience sits quietly as spectators and wouldn't dare interrupt or pose questions for discussion but instead "wait politely" until the end of the play. What Boal is describing is the very nature of traditional African performance in which "performers and audience experience alternating serious and non-serious frames" where "social identities are manufactured and negotiated" and "frames of ritual, Theatre, art, and play interact" (Rasmussen 1997).

Amongst Boal's notions that are similar to the other Theatre concepts discussed is his belief in catharsis, not of the dynamic factor (as in Aristotelian catharsis) but the catharsis of the blockage that prevents liberation and getting rid of what does you harm. In addition, Boal favors the dynamicization of people-making people do. Boal asserts "I don't want people to use Theatre as a way of not doing in real life" (Schutzman, M. and Cohen-Cruz, J 1994 pg. 27). Therefore, catharsis according to Boal is not intended to replace frustration with a temporary feeling of calm or relief; it is not intended to produce balance but rather to encourage imbalance, thus kindling the urge for further deeds and actions (Boal 1990). Boal argues Theatre emerges in the moment in which the human being recognizes that s/he can see himself or herself (the function of the mirror); s/he recognizes who s/he is and is not; s/he imagines who s/he could become. Boal's notions of catharsis and function of the mirror are explored in this study through the interview

questions: How does IMPACT help you to learn about yourself? And How has IMPACT influenced your community involvement?

CURRENT FINDINGS

Several studies report that young visual artists and media artists, as well as the creative writers, dancers, musicians, and Theatre artists, all score higher than average on all of the self-concept scales. This confirms some of the earliest and most influential research in gifted and talented education, in which Terman concluded that individuals who had made great achievements were relatively free from inferiority feelings, and were all-around emotionally and socially adjusted (Terman & Oden, 1959). In studies regarding artistically talented students, Guskin, Zimmerman, Okola, and Peng (1986) and Blake (1996) found that artistically talented students had highly favorable views of themselves. In the process of creating, artists visualize and set goals to find and define a problem, choose techniques to collect data, reflect on their work, consider alternative points of view, evaluate and revise the problem solution, try out changes, and begin the cycle of revision again. Comparing this process to the scientific method makes a convincing argument for all of the arts as a critical and complex experience of discovery. (Cukierkom, 2008)

Researchers have done individual studies for years to investigate the alternative ways in which Black youth learn and overcome using cultural and/or creative outlets. Many studies are focused on the educators of Black youth and discuss the importance of using culture as a “vehicle for learning.”

“The way members of a minority group perceive, interpret, and respond to education is a result of their unique history and adaptations to their minority status in the United States,” and “community forces” play a role in this “academic underachievement” (Bridglall, 2006). There-

fore, culture-specific communication practices and routine shared activities in the home are potentially rich intellectual sources for learning (Lee, Mendenhall, Rivers, & Tynes, 1999) African American students may access various forms of their own cultural knowledge to demonstrate their capacities and skills as readers and writers in settings both inside and outside of school (Hull 2001).

In 1995, Ladson-Billings conducted a study on teachers in California schools that served a Black community: *Improving the Schooling Experiences of African American students*. She argued that teachers must ensure that Black students experience academic success, develop and maintain their cultural competence, that their culture serves as a vehicle for learning, and that teachers help students develop a critical consciousness so that they can challenge the status quo. Using culture as a vehicle for learning, balances traditional lessons immersed in white culture. With a culturally relevant stance and approach, students have opportunities to draw on their cultural knowledge and resources to facilitate more relevant and useful learning experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This idea is much like Freire's assertion that "the educational methods employed by the oppressor" must be denied.

Another example of this is a study about Black youth's use of images, ideas, and practices of popular culture to support and enhance their literacy learning (Dyson, 1997). In this study, it was concluded that Rap gives Black youth a chance to critically explore significant issues attached to language, culture, and power through texts to which students relate in their everyday lives (Paul, 2000). Rap is "the music of Hip Hop" according to Hip Hop rapper philosopher KRS-One and Black youth are immersed in the culture and consciousness of Hip Hop. Therefore, Rap gives Black youth a chance to critically explore significant issues attached to language, culture, and power through texts to which students relate in their everyday lives (Paul, 2000).

Rap fosters a "pedagogy which engages popular culture in order to affirm rather than mute the voice of the student" (Giroux & Simon, 1989, p. 228) and is an innovative, educationally sound approach that considers and develops the cultural capital students bring to the classroom, making education relevant and purposeful. Similar to Theatre for development, which provides the basis for improvisation and responsible resistance, Rap provides a space where youth are able to not only address their issues and status but the media that perpetuates it; a place where youth can come to understand the nature of the media and how it influences their lives. Where they can figure out how dependent they are on the mass media, which might enable them to determine how much it affects their values and priorities.

These studies are important because they describe key components of Theatre as a tool for empowerment. However, while the findings in both of these and similar studies are relevant to understanding the possibilities of alternative ways of empowering Black youth they do not include the voices of Black youth. With the exception of the Rap pedagogy study, these studies also omit a discussion of a space where Black youth can use their culture while simultaneously examining it in relation to the dominant white culture.

An example of studies conducted with a *specific focus* on using Theatre to *empower* Black youth is Martin Kemp's 2006 study, Promoting the health and wellbeing of young Black men using community-based drama. It aimed to explore the role of drama and Theatre in promoting the emotional and social wellbeing of a group of young Black men living in south London. He used a qualitative methodology in a process and outcome evaluation of a drama-based initiative. The research found that this community-based initiative was able to promote young people's self-esteem and a positive sense of agency. This was achieved by creating opportunities for self-expression, reflection and self-understanding, and through the development

of relationships between participants characterized by trust and reciprocity. The young men were actually interviewed and shared their perceptions about their drama experience and themselves as a result of it. What this study does not provide is the voices of young Black women.

Another relatively recent study is *Popular Theatre: Empowering Pedagogy for Youth* by Diane Conrad, a professor of drama/Theatre education at the University of Alberta in which she drew on the experiences of the participants to create images and scenes and explore issues they have identified as relevant to their lives through theatrical means. This study as others mentioned above did not include the voices of the youth and was aimed at empowering “at-risk” youth of or belonging to several different ethnic groups.

Other significant studies include those that investigate the influence of the media on the lived experiences of Black youth. According to Cecily Jones (2007), a researcher who conducted a study on Slavery and its legacies for African descended children the government and media fuel the demonizing of Black youth. Prentki (2007) agrees that mass media also known as global communications: satellite television, the internet and all the other proliferating technologies, are in fact a part of the problem. Black youth are of the “electronic age,” spending an average of “six and a half hours per day with multiple media forms” (Rideout and Roberts, 2005) in a media-driven society that is not conducive to their growth and survival (Martin, 2007)

Researchers have done individual studies for years to learn how media affect children. A newly released review, which analyzed 173 of the strongest papers over 28 years, finds that 80% agree that heavy media exposure increases the risk of harm, including obesity, smoking, unsafe sex, drug and alcohol use, attention problems and poor grades. (Szabo, 2008) The U.S. is not preparing its young people to survive in a global economy (Jensen, 2008). Information transmit-

ted and received by young people whose lives are “media saturated” (Rideout and Roberts 2005) through global communications forces them to “lose contact with reality” resulting in “depression and alienation.” “They are torn between their inner (fantasy) lives of fame and fortune and the humdrum reality their minds no longer inhabit (Monbiot, 2006).

In his book *Literacy in a New Media Age*, Kress (2003) wants us to recognize that the world has recently shifted from a “world-told,” or one that depended on written communication for its exchange of ideas to a “world-shown,” in which the image and the screen dominate as the primary conduits of meaning making. In 2005, the Kaiser Family Foundation in a study that catalogued young people’s relationship to technology and electronic media describes young people’s lives as “media saturated” spending an average of “six and a half hours per day with multiple media forms; 56% of the children surveyed have two or more video game players, 55 % also have premium cable television channels and 34% have digital video recorders (Rideout and Roberts, 2005).

These interactions with and through media devices have replaced genuine social activity (Giroux 1997). In his article “Mass media and Interpersonal Relationships” David Seamon similarly asserts, “The medium is beginning to fill the role of identity formation that once was shared with interpersonal relationships.” He goes on to say that the media has become so much a part of the scheme of things that much of the public is unaware of how dependent it is; it has come to be accepted as ‘natural’ as running water, electricity, and automobiles. This includes all the ways human beings receive and process information; symbolize thoughts, feelings and experiences, encode messages, and the ways these functions relate to the socio-cultural context. In short, it becomes engrained in the way of life of the individual and how they interact with culture. Sea-

mon describes the mind as a working replica of the world fed into it. In the case of Black youth and media, they accept the world presented to them as the real world rather than the flesh and blood world around them. When media images become the role models for young persons, we are bound to have an increase in alienation as more and more of them find out that these mythic roles are inappropriate for working out the day-to-day problems of interpersonal communication.” (Seamon and Summer, 2006).

In spite of this, mass media and technology may have *some* benefits. Using Theatre in conjunction with digital technology has proven to be useful according to Jenkins. Combining traditional Theatre principles with popular media tools to enhance students’ ability to talk with their peers, experiment with new texts and literacy, and explore the Theatre creation process through popular tools and technologies is possible. There is proof that young people can become critical and active agents in their interactions with new media when given the opportunity to explore understand and make use of their natural social environment (Jenkins, 2007). Creating and producing digital texts provide opportunities for African American children and youth to be seekers, speakers, listeners, and translators of the values of their own unique historical culture (Jackson & Richardson, 2003)

While some studies focus on Theatre’s impact on Black males only or youth in general others focus on its impact on “at-risk” or “minority” youth, which could include Latinos, Asians, and Whites. Therefore, the use of Theatre for the empowerment of Black youth (exclusively) in the U.S. remains relatively unstudied. These facts speak to the significance and need for this study, which fills a gap in the literature by providing an empirical account of Black youth’s experiences with and perceptions about Theatre and its impact on them. Furthermore, the study is conducted in the U.S., a location with a unique history of enslavement, racism, discrimination,

dehumanizing treatment and institutionalized oppression of Black people, as well the unique history of Black youth's continued physical and psychological resistance to this oppression.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact that Theatre has on Black youth. It explores the use of Theatre as a tool of empowerment and a source of support for Black youth. This chapter discusses the research design, the researcher's philosophical assumptions and worldview and why it is apt for fulfilling the purpose of this study. It describes the sample selection process and the data collection procedures. The chapter goes on to discuss the methods of data analysis and concludes with an address of threats to external and internal validity as well as reliability.

RESEARCH METHOD AND DESIGN APPROPRIATENESS

Qualitative methodology provides the most appropriate design to understand Black youth's perceptions of and experiences with Theatre. Creswell (2007) says, "We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study." He continues, "We conduct qualitative research when we want to write in a literary, flexible style that conveys stories, or theater, or poems, without the restrictions of formal academic structures of writing." Lastly, he says, "we also use qualitative research because quantitative measures and the statistical analyses simply do not *fit* the problem. Interactions among people, for example, are difficult to capture with existing measures, and these measures may not be sensitive to issues such as gender differences, race, economic status, and individual differences" (p. 40).

In addition to the above definitions, Creswell presents nine common characteristics of qualitative research:

1. *Natural setting.* Qualitative researchers tend to collect data in the field at the site where participants' experience the issue or problem under study. This up-close information gathered by actually talking directly to people and seeing them behave and act within their context is a major characteristic of qualitative research. (p.37)
2. *Researcher as key instrument.* The qualitative researchers collect data themselves through examining documents, observing behavior, and interviewing participants. They do not tend to use or rely on questionnaires or instruments developed by other researchers.
3. *Multiple sources of data.* Qualitative researchers typically gather multiple forms of data, such as interviews, observations, and documents, rather than rely on a single data source. Then the researchers review all of the data and make sense of them organizing them into categories or themes that cut across all of the data sources.
4. *Inductive data analysis.* Qualitative researchers build their patterns, categories, and themes from the "bottom-up" by organizing the data into increasingly more abstract units of information. (p.38)
5. *Participants' meanings.* In the entire qualitative research process, the researchers keep a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning that the researchers bring to the research or writers from the literature.
6. *Emergent design.* This means that the initial plan for research cannot be tightly prescribed, and that all phases of the process may change or shift after the researchers enter the field and begin to collect data.
7. *Theoretical lens.* Qualitative researchers often use a lens to view their studies, such as the concept of culture, or gendered, racial, or class differences.
8. *Interpretive inquiry.* Qualitative research is a form of inquiry in which researcher's make an interpretation of what they see, hear, and understand. The researchers' interpretations cannot be separated from their own background, history, context, and prior understandings.
9. *Holistic account.* Qualitative researchers try to develop a complex picture of the problem or issue under study. (p.39)

Subsequent to a reflection on these characteristics and the above definitions, I deemed a qualitative research design as the optimum choice for this study. According to Creswell (2007) “qualitative research begins with philosophical assumptions...researchers bring their own worldviews, paradigms, or sets of beliefs to the research project, and these inform the conduct and writing of the qualitative study” (p. 15)

The philosophical assumption that I make is the epistemological one which means that I “try to get as close as possible to the participants being studied.” Creswell (2007) maintains that the researcher with an epistemological assumption “attempts to lessen distance between...herself and that being researched” and “collaborates, spends time in the field with participants, and becomes an ‘insider’” (p.17). Becoming an “insider” and spending “time in the field” was not difficult for me as I am involved in Theatre in many ways (acting, directing, teaching, writing and tech/backstage) and I have had a rapport with IMPACT since 2001.

The “basic set of beliefs” that shapes my research study aligns with the Advocacy/Participatory worldview. This worldview’s basic tenet “is that research should contain an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of participants, the institutions in which they live and work, or even the researchers’ lives” (Creswell, 2007, p.21). This is relevant to this study given that the participants are a part of a larger marginalized group (see above discussion on statement of the problem) and the very questions garner discussion that enables consciousness raising. This worldview is practical and collaborative because it is inquiry completed “with” others rather than “on” or “to” others and “it engages the participants as active collaborators in their inquiries” (Creswell, 2007, p. 22). This is exemplified in my request for additional questions and/or comments that were of interest/importance to the participants after completing the pre-constructed interview questions.

After identifying a philosophical assumption and paradigm that reflect my “set of beliefs,” I selected an approach to guide me in designing the study. Creswell (2007) describes five approaches and presents outlines of the structure of each approach. Upon careful consideration of each, I deemed phenomenology as the most fitting approach to accomplish the aims of this study. A phenomenological study “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon.” The focus of phenomenology is to understand “the essence of the experience” (Creswell, 2007, p. 78). In the case of this study, the phenomenon is Theatre and more specifically the concept is Theatre as empowerment.

SAMPLE SELECTION

Qualitative research utilizes the concept of purposeful sampling. “This means that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2007, p.125). Therefore, in terms of sampling strategies and criteria, “it is essential that all participants have experience of the phenomenon being studied.” While the sampling size for a phenomenology has ranged from “1 up to 325,” Creswell (2007) recommends “3 to 10 subjects” (p.126). This information guided me in determining a sampling number of ten participants who continuously experience the phenomenon (Theatre). The chosen participants share the following characteristics and meet the following criterion:

- Were between the ages of 12-19 years old
- Identified as Black
- Were active members of IMPACT Repertory Theatre of Harlem

- Were open to sharing their experiences with and perceptions of Theatre

Black youth have been and remain consequentially disenfranchised-educationally, politically, economically, and socially-within the U.S. (Paul, 2000). Therefore, members of this particular group were the target sample for this study. Being active members of IMPACT ensures that the participants actually experience the phenomenon. Openness to sharing their experiences with and perceptions of Theatre via IMPACT speaks to participants' capacity to answer the interview questions thus fulfilling the study's purpose.

The type of sampling strategy used for this study was Criterion sampling. Since all IMPACT members were between the ages of 12-19, Black and active in the organization the artistic director assisted me in purposefully choosing ten members who were most open to sharing their experiences with and perceptions of Theatre. Based on my two-week observations and her extended experiences with IMPACT members we were able to select nine study participants who met all of the criteria. In addition, because youth 18 and under needed parental permission to be study participants according to Georgia State University's Institutional Review Board she identified youth over which she had power of attorney. In the interest of time, she was able to sign the parent permission forms on the same day of the interviews.

DATA COLLECTION

For a phenomenological study, the process of collecting information involves primarily in-depth interviews. However, Creswell (2007) "encourage(s) individuals designing qualitative projects to include new and creative data collection methods" such as the "metaphorical visual narratives" used in conjunction with my observation protocol (p.129). The three forms of data collection for this study were observations, focus group interviews and audiovisual materials. I

chose these approaches because they enabled me to gather information in a *natural setting*, which, as described above, is a major characteristic of qualitative research. Through observations and focus group interviews I was able to “collect data in the field at the site where participants’ experience the (phenomenon) under study,” talk directly to people and see “them behave and act within their context” (Creswell, 2007, p. 37). Due to the lack of time I would have in the field, audiovisual materials obtained through various IMAPCT websites allowed me to capture information and observe participants through music videos, short movies/documentaries and songs at any time.

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

A focus group is “a technique involving the use of in-depth group interviews in which participants are selected because they are a purposive, although not necessarily representative, sampling of a specific population, this group being ‘focused’ on a given topic’. Participants in this type of research are, therefore, selected on the criteria that they would have something to say on the topic, are within the age-range, have similar socio-characteristics and would be comfortable talking to the interviewer and each other” (Richardson & Rabiee, 2001).

According to Creswell (2007), focus groups are useful when:

- the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information
- interviewees are similar and cooperative with each other
- time to collect information is limited, and
- individuals interviewed one-on-one may be hesitant to provide information.

(p.133)

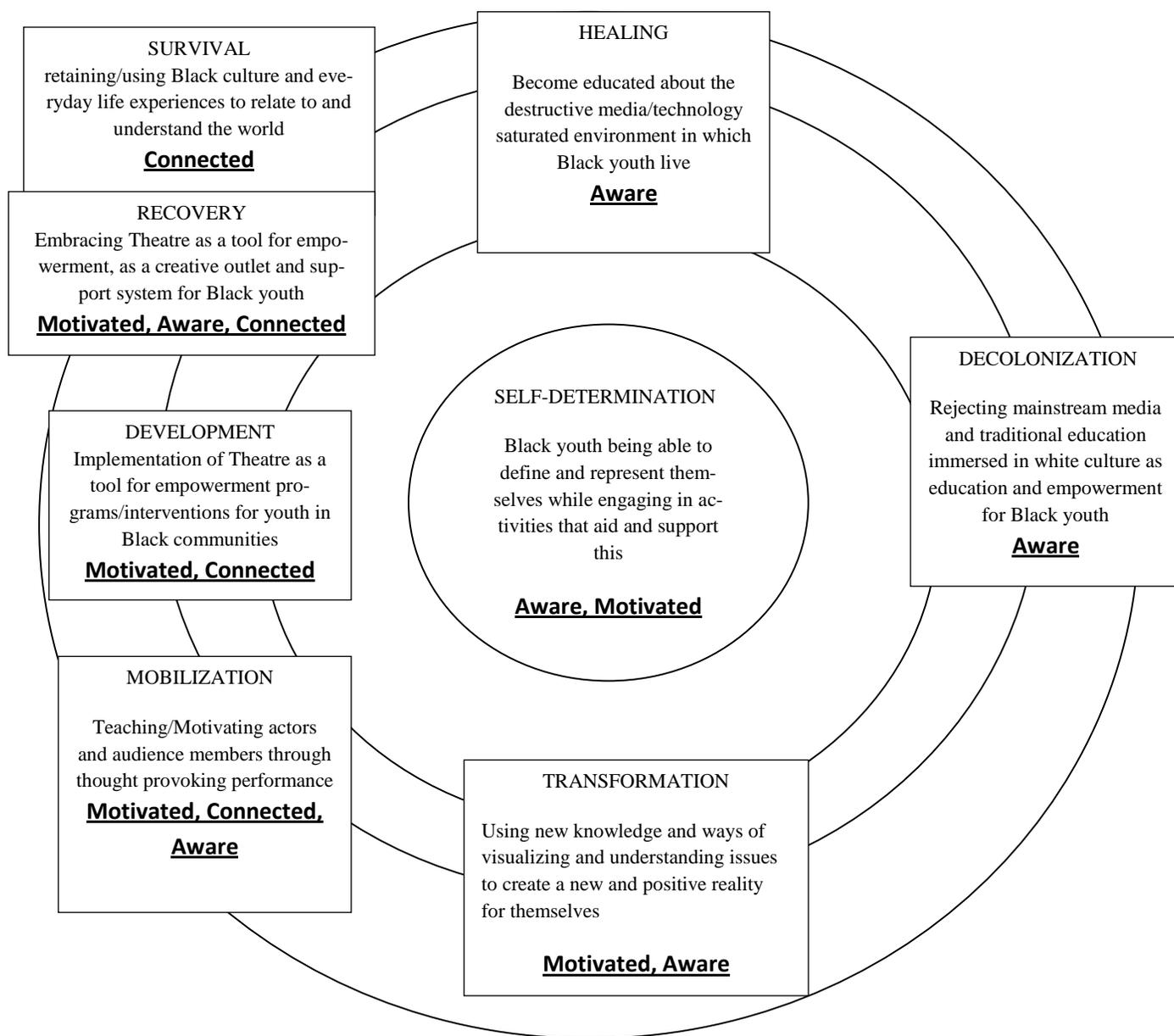
These descriptions and definitions solidified my choice to use focus group interviews as a data collection approach. Focus group interviews were used in a study aiming to explore the role of drama and Theatre in promoting the emotional and social wellbeing of a group of young Black men living in south London (Kemp, 2006). This design was useful for this study due to the fact that it allowed participants to reflect on and openly discuss their experiences and perceptions through the communal setting of a focus group.

While interviewing participants in a group setting is beneficial in the many ways described above, the use of focus group interviews was particularly useful in regards to time. Given the fact that the study was conducted in New York and I live in Atlanta, Georgia, time to collect information was valuable and limited. It was not only limited for me but for IMPACT members as well. Conducting the interviews in their *natural setting* meant that I had to pull them from rehearsals to be interviewed in a separate area. Pulling two groups of five or less members at a time allowed me to gather information quickly and lessen the disruption that pulling individuals for extended amounts of time would have caused to the larger group rehearsal process.

Below are the interview questions chosen to “net the most useful information to answer (the) research questions” (Creswell, 2007, p132). They are grouped according to how they are related to the overarching research question as well as the tides in Smith’s research agenda.

Smith’s research agenda uses ocean tides as a metaphor representing movement, change, process, life, inward and outward flows of ideas, reflections, and actions. The four directions of decolonization, healing and transformation and mobilizations represent processes. The four major tides represented in the chart as survival, recovery, development and self-determination are

conditions and states of being through which indigenous communities are moving (Smith, 2007). The chart below illustrates the application of these processes and states of being to the empowerment of Black youth through Theatre. The underlined words are components of the larger research question: How are Black youth empowered by Theatre involvement? (more specifically) How does Theatre make Black youth feel *motivated* (to make personal and community change), *connected* (to community members and issues), *aware* (of personal and community issues)? And the relation of these elements (motivated, connected, aware) to Smith's tides and processes.



A. Motivated (to make personal and community change)

- I. Recovery and Transformation:* Question 3. How does being involved in IMPACT make you feel?

*this question hopes to gather information that speaks to youth's desire to embrace Theatre and use it to create positive change for themselves and others.

- II. Mobilization:* Question 8. How has IMPACT influenced your community involvement?

*this question assesses whether and/or specifically how IMPACT involvement enables youth to empower their communities through collective performance and/or individual outreach.

- III. Self-determination and Development:* Question 10. What are your career goals and (how) does IMPACT help you to prepare for them?

*knowing the career goals and whether IMPACT helps youth to prepare for them allows the researcher to understand how youth are able to define and articulate future goals. Additionally, it will assess whether youth recognize IMPACT as vehicle for developing themselves for the future (for careers in the performing arts or any other field).

- IV. Self-determination:* Question 2. Is it your choice to be involved in IMPACT?

*this refers to the element of self-determination that the Theatre practitioner may or may not have had before immersion into the organization. Knowing this helps the researcher to understand how this self-determination was enhanced or developed as a result of involvement w/ IMPACT.

B. Connected (to community members and issues)

- I. Mobilization:* Question 5. How does IMPACT help you to communicate with others?

* this question assesses a number of things: whether youth recognize IMPACT as a vehicle for addressing community issues through performance, whether through performance (as a result of playing different roles, writing/singing a song) they are able to better understand/connect to community members and issues, has IMPACT involvement helped youth to communicate better interpersonally.

- II. Mobilization:* Question 6. How has your involvement made you feel more connected to others?

*see explanation directly above

- III. Mobilization, Transformation, Recovery and Development:* Question 7. What would you say to friends about getting involved in IMPACT?

*similar to question 3 (How does being involved in IMPACT make you feel) this question helps the researcher to understand youth's perceptions of IMPACT as a space that allows youth to embrace Theatre as tool for empowerment of themselves and others. (it also assesses once again youth's positive perception and connection to Theatre- as youth will not recommend something that they feel is "wack" (not cool) or beneficial)

IV. *Survival:* Question 9. Is IMPACT something that you will continue to be a part of?

*similar to question 2 (Is it your choice to be involved in Theatre) this question helps the researcher to understand youth self-determination/youth's desire to remain connected to an environment that is conducive to their growth and survival and whether they can thus recognize and identify personal benefits of this involvement.

C. Aware (of personal and community issues)

I. *Recovery and Transformation:* Question 1. How long have you been involved in IMPACT? in what capacity?

*knowing how long a participant has been involved with IMPACT or other Theatre groups and in what capacity they are involved gives the researcher insight into how the following questions are answered. It allows the researcher to apply this knowledge in order to make meaning of the experiences discussed during the duration of the interview.

II. *Decolonization, Self-determination and Healing:* Question 4. How does IMPACT help you to learn about yourself?

* this question assesses a number of things: how Theatre helps youth to define and make choices for themselves, whether youth recognize IMPACT as a vehicle for addressing personal issues through performance, whether through performance (as a result of playing different roles, writing/singing a song) they are able to better understand their own issues.

III. *Mobilization:* Question 6. How has your involvement made you feel more connected to others?

*see above explanation for the same question

OBSERVATIONS

Creswell (2007) notes:

Observing in a setting is a special skill that requires addressing issues such as the potential *deception* of the people being interviewed, impression management, and the potential marginality of the researcher in a strange setting. (p.134)

I chose observations as a method of data collection for the reasons stated in the above definition. In order to avoid potential deception of the participants being interviewed I chose to observe the participants as *they* experienced Theatre individually and collectively. Another reason I chose to observe prior to conducting interviews was to make the participants feel comfortable with and in my presence. Following the procedure outlined by Creswell (2007), I was an “outsider” initially and at the first few performances/rehearsals I simply observed and took few notes. I became an “insider” over time by being “passive and friendly” and gradually participating in a few of the activities (134). I was able to successfully shift between the roles of nonparticipant and participant observer from the beginning until the end of my two-week data collection process. On my observation protocol, I took descriptive notes (in narrative form) during activities followed by reflective notes written later (Creswell, 2007, p. 137).

The methods of data collection for this study are as follows:

- i. Completed IRB (Human subjects protocol) application
- ii. As a part of the IRB application approval was acquired from IMPACT to recruit study participants and conduct research study. (see Appendix D for approval letter)
- iii. Obtained IRB and thesis committee approval to begin conducting research
- iv. Traveled to New York and began data collection through observations at IMPACT workshops, performances and performing arts classes.
- v. Nine Black youth between the ages of twelve and nineteen from IMPACT were selected based on the above criteria.
- vi. Participants were broken into two groups; one group of four and the other of five.
- vii. Participants were read the Child Assent forms (Appendix A) aloud. Participants agreed to participate verbally and by signing the Child Assent forms. Parent Permission forms (Appendix B) were signed by IMPACT's artistic director who has the power of attorney to do so.
- viii. Participants participated in an approximately 30 minute focus group interview. (notes were taken and interviews (and verbal consent) were recorded with a digital voice recorder).

INTERNAL VALIDITY

Creswell (2007) considers “‘validation’ in qualitative research to be an attempt to assess the ‘accuracy’ of the findings, as best described by the researcher and the participants.” He uses the term “validation” to emphasize a process, rather than “verification” and offers eight validation strategies to document the accuracy of a given study (p. 207). Creswell (2007) recommends, “that qualitative researchers engage in at least two of them in any given study”. In the effort to reduce threats to internal validity, I used the following three validation strategies: clarifying researcher bias (see below), rich, thick description and prolonged engagement/persistent observation in the field as discussed above (p.208).

EXTERNAL VALIDITY

LeCompte and Goetz (1982) identify threats to external validation as “effects that obstruct or reduce a study’s comparability or translatability” (p.51). The purpose of this study is not to compare, translate or generalize but rather to explore and describe this particular group’s experiences with and perceptions of Theatre.

RESEARCHER BIAS

It is important that the reader understands the researcher’s position and any biases or assumptions that impact the study (Merriam, 1988). My past experiences with Theater have most likely shaped my interpretation of and approach to the study. Having been involved in Theater in many ways (as an actress, playwright, youth acting teacher and director) for approximately ten years, I have experienced theatre as an instrument of education and empowerment for myself and

those that I have worked with. My positive experiences with theater have created a somewhat romanticized disposition that theater has a high capacity to positively affect all who are involved. I attempted to minimize my biases by engaging in the validation strategies discussed above.

DATA ANALYSIS

In analyzing the collected data from the focus group interviews and observations, I utilized Creswell's (2007) approach:

- First, I described personal experiences with the phenomenon under study.
- I then developed a list of significant statements.
- I grouped the significant statements into larger units of information, called “meaning units” or themes.
- This is followed by a description of “what” the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon.
- Next, I wrote a description of “how” the experience happened.
- Finally, I wrote a composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions. This passage is the “essence” of the experience and represents the culminating aspect of a phenomenological study. (p.159)

Summary

This Chapter discussed my research methods approach. It specifically outlines my approach to data collection and analysis. The threats to validity are addressed as well as my biases as the researcher.

CHAPTER 4 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

This chapter presents the results and analysis of the data collected in this study. It presents the detailed analysis of two ten question focus group interviews in which nine people participated. The answers of the interview questions are presented in a table in the form of significant statements and are categorized into three themes or essence meanings. The chapter describes each study participant and the settings of where interviews and observations took place. It describes the Saturday workshops, acting classes and one of IMPACT's performances. Finally, it shows pictures from performances as well as analyzes songs and videos from the audiovisual material found on the Repertory's websites. The analysis of the audiovisual material is linked to the significant statements of the participants as well as the theories of Wa Thiongo, Freiere and Boal. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the impact that Theatre has on Black youth. It specifically aims to explore the use of Theatre as a tool of empowerment and a source of support for Black youth. The interview questions were constructed from the following larger research questions:

- How can Theatre promote individual and social change amongst Black youth?
- What are Black youth's perceptions about Theatre and how it affects them?
- Does Theatre give Black youth a greater sense of self (as it relates to self identity, i.e. positive self-esteem, self-acceptance, self-love, self-respect)?
- Does Theatre make Black youth feel *empowered* and *motivated* (to make personal and community change), *connected* (to community members and issues), and *aware* (of personal and community issues)?

This qualitative study began in August 2009 and ended in March 2010.

PARTICIPANTS: IMPACT MEMBERS

IMPACT membership is open to all youth between the ages of 12 and 19. Membership consists of predominately-Black, mixed gender and working class youth of varying sexual orientations. Members attend Theatre workshops and various performing arts classes as well as write scripts related to their life experiences that they perform at schools and community venues. Nine IMPACT members participated in this study by answering questions in a focus group interview. The ages of the participants ranged from 13 to 17 years old. While one participant identified as Hispanic in a follow up demographic survey, the other eight of African descent identified as Black and West Indian. Due to the purpose of this study to explore how Theatre affects youth of African descent, I will exclude the responses of the self-identified Hispanic participant. All participants reside in and around Harlem, NY. There were two focus group interviews conducted. The first focus group interview consisted of IMPACT members: Jill, Paul, Key and Amy. In the second focus group interview were Ari, Ben, Eve and Ash. These names are not the real names of the participants. To protect the identity of the participants, who are minors, they were given aliases.

Jill is a 13-year-old female who at the time of the interview had only been involved in theatre as a member of IMPACT for “a couple of months.” When asked if it was *her* choice to be involved in theatre she replied, “My mother actually forced me for the first couple of months, but I got used to it and I started coming here on my own time when I wanted to.” She was the only participant who expressed that it was not their choice *initially* to become involved with theatre.

Paul, a 15-year-old male has been an IMPACT member for 3 years. IMPACT is his first theatre experience. He says that being involved in theatre is definitely his choice. He goes on to say, “Well for me it’s just another family actually. I call Impact my family.” Paul says that in addition to going to Broadway he has always wanted to “go to a university and major in business marketing.” When asked if he let go of this aspiration after becoming involved with IMPACT he responds “actually no, ‘cause you know like I might have a client like I market you and I could be in the commercial, it could go both ways, it can benefit me, I can market myself and all this type of stuff, I’m trying to put it together.”

14-year-old Key has been involved in theatre for two years prior to joining IMPACT. About her experience she says, “I made a completely new family.” She continues, “I enjoy it because of the fact that one I enjoy singing too, I don’t do so much of the dancing that I would like and that I should be doing but like I enjoy the theatre, like just the theatre of it, together and the whole company comes together.” In terms of communicating with her audience through theater she says, “it helps because when you’re spreading the music to other people you know for a fact that somebody is not feeling well that day. Like I’ll tell one of my friends just listen to the song, don’t question me about it, just listen to the song and sometimes it’ll help and other times it won’t but for me I feel that I’m helping them in one of the many ways that I know how.”

Amy is a 15-year-old female who had 4 years of theatre experience prior to joining IMPACT. She says that IMPACT “keeps you busy” and is a place where “I have people to talk to when I have trouble.” Her awareness that her involvement affects members of her community is evident in the following statement, “it opens eyes to other people, like when I’m not here or when I’m outside, when I’m on my way here and they know what I’m doing it, like kind of motivates other people to try to be better.”

Ari, age 17 has been an IMPACT member for a year and a half. She especially enjoys dancing. When asked how theatre made her feel she responded, “If you’re angry before you walk through that door it’ll change.” She says that IMPACT has given her discipline and taught her how to control her “horrible sarcasm” and “communicate with other people positively.”

Ben is a 14-year-old male who proudly states that he has been involved in theatre since age 2 when he began acting. While he joined IMPACT only 3 months ago, he has played piano for 4 years and has been singing for 7 years. When asked how Theatre makes him feel he responded “there’s something about IMPACT that’s not like every other like theater thing, it’s like a sense of family because in other theater things you can’t act the same way you act in IMPACT it’s definitely different... it’s like one big happy family.”

Eve, a 17 year old danced for 7 years before joining IMPACT. About her experience at IMPACT she shares:

“Everyone really does have a story. You think about what brings everybody to IMPACT, we all have one common situation. We’re all looking for some type of escape from something. Everybody comes to IMPACT for a certain reason, like I know me, my parents just get annoying sometimes. I go to the office like “Mommy I have rehearsal today” and I’ll be good. To me it’s like a second escape, like just like when I just don’t feel like hearing it I just come to IMPACT and everything is cool and I just feel a connection with everyone. Me personally, if I didn’t ask I wouldn’t know who was the first, who was the last, or who was the third, who was the new members ‘cause everyone, it’s not like a little caste system, everyone is together, everyone just talks to everybody, it’s not like a clique here and a clique there everyone talks to every single person.”

Ash, 16 has been an IMPACT member for “5-6 years.” When asked how long she had been involved in theatre she laughs and says, “I was in theater since I was 3. The first time I did a play I was in kindergarten we did *Men in Black* I was um Will Smith.” In regards to how IM-

PACT helps her to communicate with people she says, “people be like oh she from the projects she ghetto or whatever IMPACT taught me to you know kind of control myself, calm down.”

All of the interview questions appear in the following table except “How long have you been involved in theatre? in what capacity?”, “Is it your choice to be involved in theatre?” and “Is theatre something that you will continue to be a part of?” These questions were omitted from the chart, as they do not explore the youth’s perception of the impact that Theatre has on them but rather provides background information that shapes their answers to the subsequent questions.

Interview questions	Participant answers in the form of significant statements	“Essence” meaning of statements (theme)
How does being involved in theatre make you feel?	<p>“well for me it’s like another way to keep me out of the house and off the street.”</p> <p>“makes me feel like I’m not afraid to be who I am”</p>	<p>“safe space”</p> <p>A physical and mental outlet, a place where they feel liberated and comfortable</p>
How does theatre help you to learn about yourself?	<p>“it really helps me find myself, make me feel comfortable, like in a comfortable place so I’m not so uptight and so mean all the time.”</p> <p>“I found out that I can actually carry a tune somewhat and I’m not as bad as I thought and I’m not like afraid to go and attack something when I’m given.”</p> <p>“it gives you like the different person that you never knew was inside of you... it helps you find yourself like you being other people...they get you to be somebody else and then you never knew you can connect to the person, like to your character and everything and it interferes with who you are as a person .”</p> <p>“I was never confrontational but like I just find myself solving problems like so much better than things would’ve turned out before.”</p>	<p>Self-discovery and transformation</p> <p>Becoming self aware and an active participant in self transformation.</p>
How does theatre help you to communicate with others?	<p>“isn’t that kinda what it is? Like theatre in general, dancing, singing, acting. That’s what we doing. That’s like basically the whole point.”</p> <p>“I’m helping them in one of the many ways that I know how and maybe for me the best way to communicate to them like for me to sing or share with</p>	<p>“Artivism”</p> <p>using theater/the power of art for positive social change. Being a vessel of empowerment.</p>

	<p>them a monologue or like just to help inform them about what could be going wrong and how to help better yourself.”</p> <p>“like when we’re doing a song or whatever ... we actually like speak to the audience we like “yo be happy and dance, come on, life’s not over and you not about to die, come on”</p>	
<p>How has your involvement made you feel more connected to others?</p>	<p>“every dance move, every piece of work we do just makes a connection to real life...it actually explains how life is, life problems, and it helps you deal with the problems...all the songs that we made <i>Happiness, Reaching Up</i> are all motivational songs so what I take here is also what I take where I go where I live and I share it.”</p>	<p>Artivism</p>
<p>How has theatre impacted your community involvement?</p>	<p>“well like for me I hang out with the little ones and I try to talk to them (what not to do)”</p> <p>“it changed me a lot, I never used to be a gentleman like the way I am now...help ladies out with they strollers, open doors and stuff and help me to be a better person to share with the community, help people you know....”</p> <p>“it helps me to be more aware, before I became aware of what’s going on in my community in general, like I see certain things going on and...I might go along with it because it’s not concerning me or like I’ll just walk away... but sometimes people don’t know that that’s just not the right way to go about a situation and for me I learned that I have to be the example for people in my community, my friends sometimes people in my</p>	<p>Artivism and Self-discovery/transformation</p>

	family” ‘it’s good that you have the opportunity to play other roles and do other things to get to the audience and get to everybody else.’	
What would you say to friends about getting involved in theater?	“...when they see what I’m doing like “yo I’m going to Miami next week.” “What you doing tomorrow?” “Oh I’m staying at home” (laughs) “Im just saying so What you <i>doing</i> ?” once they hear what Im doing they like “oh I should do that too” get to go places meet new people get experiences and do a lot of stuff”	Artivism

THEMES

The essence meanings, which can also be viewed as common themes, are “safe space” with a subtheme of family, “artivism” and self discovery/transformation.

“Safe space”

(a physical and mental outlet, a place where participants feel liberated and comfortable)

Safe space is a term used by the entire IMPACT family. According to the artistic director Raymond Johnson, whom the participants affectionately call Ray, it refers to an “environment where young people are able to examine themselves creatively and emotionally...a place where everybody can feel comfortable and free to be themselves.” Co-founder Jamal Joseph says “you’re coming into an environment where you’re physically going to be safe, nobody’s going to like threaten you and also people aren’t going to diss’ you and form these cliques, so that you feel safe and also so that you’re safe to try some of those things that you’ve wanted to try, with-

out being laughed at...” Co-founder Voza Rivers says it refers to the “old school values” of respect and “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Throughout my observations, during workshops or simply eating lunch members would remind each other to provide a “safe space.” They did so by simply calling out “safe space” if someone laughed at someone’s efforts or spoke while someone else was talking. Other examples can be found in the significant statements in the above table.

Family

The subtheme of “safe space” is family. In addition to feeling safe and comfortable in the IMPACT environment participants discuss a feeling of family-hood. In fact, they associate comfort and safety with family. For example, Jamal Joseph, the repertory’s director is not referred to as Mr. Joseph but “Uncle Jamal.” The following quotes are more examples of the sense of family hood amongst IMPACT members and in the IMPACT environment:

“...it helps to be a part of IMPACT to feel that you’re in a family and you’re safe in being able to like open up.” -Key

“Well they say like be yourself don’t put on a act for nobody like you would do outside with your friends...and so they respect you.” –Amy

“you can express yourself”-Ari

“like whoever judges me like, “oh you can’t sing, you can’t act” IMPACT is not about that, as long as you try, give your best.” –Ben

Artivism

(using theater/the power of art for positive social change, being a vessel of empowerment)

IMPACT “actively promotes the practice of ART-IVISM, using art and activism to change the world.” (Impact, n.d.) Artivism refers to using the power of art for positive social change. Within this theme participants speak to the notion of being a vessel of community empowerment. When asked, “How does Theatre help you to communicate with others?” the participants respond:

“yea it does because the songs really open up to people like it actually explains how life is, life problems, and it helps you deal with the problems” –Paul

“it helps because when you’re spreading the music to other people. You know for a fact that somebody is not feeling well that day. Like I’ll tell one of my friends just listen to the song don’t question me about it just listen to the song and sometimes it’ll help and other times it won’t but for me I feel that I’m helping them in one of the many ways that I know how” -Key

Self-discovery and self-transformation

(Becoming self-aware and an active participant in self transformation)

Participants reveal that IMPACT fosters positive self-transformation and have excitedly witnessed their own growth. When asked, “How does Theatre help you to learn about yourself?” Paul says, “Theatre really gives you a chance to express yourself in any type of way that you would like, so it really does help. It also disciplines you in every way possible. Also with theatre comes leadership training, you know, learning how to be responsible and all that stuff, so it just help you in life.” Key says “ It helps with the discipline but it also helps to bring out parts of

singing or dancing or acting would do to bring out of you in general...even if you've never sung a single note in your life and you come and they're gonna force you to sing to show you that its possible..."

OBSERVATIONS

My observations began on Friday July 31, 2009. I attended a performance, which was at youth club night at a Community Center in Uptown Harlem. That evening I simply observed and did not engage in conversation with any of the performers. The performance took place in the Center's auditorium and all of the performers were youth groups. These groups, like IMPACT danced and sang. While IMPACT sang motivational songs that I will discuss in the next section of this chapter, the other performers sang Gospel songs. IMPACT no doubt stood out, their energy was high and the chemistry among the performers was evident. Members not only seemed connected to each other but also connected to the dances and songs that they shared and most of all connected to the audience. The ensemble was comfortable on stage and committed to sharing the message they had come to bring.

Following this, I observed two Saturday workshops, a master acting class on Wednesdays and various performances. At the beginning of the first Saturday workshop, which was held in the Film department of Columbia University where "Uncle Jamal" is the chair, I observed the following call and response exercise:

Ray: What is IMPACT?

IMPACT members: It's not a game!

Ray: Why is not a game?

IMPACT members: Because what we do now matters forever!

Ray: What is IMPACT?

IMPACT members: It's not a game!

Ray: Why is not a game?

IMPACT members: Because what we do now matters forever!

After this the youth seemed to freely choose a workshop. Hip Hop Dance, Vocal and Acting workshops were simultaneously offered in different rooms. I overheard one participant say, "I'm more of a dancer than a singer" as she walked towards the dance workshop. "Uncle Jamal," members of IMPACT Vibe and senior IMPACT members teach or lead the workshops. It was on this observation day that I noticed the emphasis placed on dance and singing. When asked about the inclusion of acting in performances Ray explained that drama/spoken word sometimes finds its way in performances depending on the venue and/or occasion.

After sitting in on each workshop for about 15 minutes each, I was able to sit in on a production meeting. This was lunchtime for the youth. While the board members stuck to their agenda, they informally conversed and sprinkled a few jokes in the conversation. Each board member is a member of IMPACT Vibe, described on their MySpace page as "a dynamic performance group, with a collective of singers, rappers, producers, dancers, musicians and spoken words artists, who create conscious urban soul for the masses." As stated earlier Senior IMPACT members (who are over 19 years old) graduate to IMPACT Vibe. In this meeting, they discussed upcoming IMPACT performances and the appropriate costume and song choices for each. They also talked about new ways to market the group and what to highlight.

After two slices of pizza and a cup of juice, I joined the entire company in the theater. After a quick rehearsal of two songs, *Raise it Up* and *Happiness*, IMPACT Vibe member, music producer and New York Police officer Charles Mackey lead a Police Safety workshop. In this

workshop, he provided tips for dealing with police and answered questions that the youth had about avoiding crime, police etiquette, racial profiling, gendered racism etc. This was the day's last event.

I resumed my observations on the following Wednesday in the Master Acting class. It was held in the living room/office area of the Harlem townhouse brownstone, which is the IM-PACT office. "Uncle Jamal" lead this class and at the beginning reminded everyone of the Improv acting rules. "Acceptance, no real names and no questions" he said. As the exercises began, he encouraged the students to "take chances" and "keep it big." To those who seemed afraid to fully engage in the exercise he said, "get over yourselves." He assured them "I'm pushing you because I love you, if you want to move to a higher level put in the work. These classes work when u put in the work."

One student, embarrassed, began to cry, Jamal then encouraged her to use that emotion "crying is not gonna get you off the hook, we can hug later but now you must work, you're on stage, doing the work will get u off the hook...come out of the circles (small emotions/physicality) do u want your instrument to grow? show me something...get out that comfort zone...take a deep breath and let me see it...go to the floor, your gonna have to get that nice outfit dirty...acting is not imitating...immerse yourself in the role...challenge your instrument." The student was able to use the emotion she felt to successfully complete her scene. Following Jamal's advice to be vulnerable in the acting space allowed her to connect to the imaginary circumstance that she was confronted with.

A few days later, I went to IMPACT's performance at a Manhattan Block party. The theme was linking the New York Police Department to community members and community issues. State officials attended, free food and drinks were given to the community and pamphlets about local voting and information about upcoming changes to the Harlem community were disseminated. IMPACT members seemed to know and/or be admired by most that attended. Before the performance, I observed them eat, shake hands and converse with each other and various audience members. Just as before, when IMPACT performed, they commanded the audience's attention. I observed audience members rise from their seats, sing along, and clap to the beat. IMPACT members made eye contact with audience members, and genuine connections were evident. At one point a few performers left the stage area and moved into the audience all while continuing to perform, but this time it was *with* rather than *for* the audience. The performance of their most popular song *Raise it Up* sent chills through my body and captivated audience members. Below are the words of the song that was nominated for an Oscar at the 2008 Academy Awards:

Raise it Up

No father figure in the house
 And I'm wondering how
 I'm gonna work it out
 Oh
 My friends keep on telling me
 How I don't need that man
 But they don't really understand

There's far too many pressures in reality
 With dealing with the pain, the stress and poverty
 And I gotta be myself because
 There's nobody else for me
 (Noo)

(Hang in there with me)
Sometimes it takes a different kind of love to raise a child
(So don't give up)
So don't give up
(When pressures come down)
Sometimes it takes a different kind of dream to make you smile
(So raise it up)
So raise
(Hang in there with me)
Sometimes we need another helping hand to show the way
(So don't give up)
So don't give up
(When pressures come down)
Sometimes it seems impossible and that's why we pray
(So raise it up)
We pray

Seems to be nothing left for me
Mommas gone and Daddy didn't wanna be
And now I'm all by myself
Wondering where is love
Or should I just give up
(Ya kno)

Life falls down on me cuts into my soul
But I know I got the strength to make it through it all
Cause I'm still standing tall
Breaking through these walls
I'm gonna give my all

Feeling like a motherless child
Pain cuts into my soul
It's bringing me down
Can't find my smile
On the face of a motherless child
I'm gonna break down these walls
Gonna give my all
Ya know
Yeah, yeah, yeah

Yeahhhhh

(Hang in there with me)

Sometimes it takes a different kind of love to raise a child

(So don't give up)

So don't give up

(When pressures come down)

Sometimes it takes a different kind of dream to make you smile

(So raise it up)

So raise

(Hang in there with me)

Sometimes we need another helping hand to show the way

(So don't give up)

So don't give up

(When pressures come down)

Sometimes it seems impossible and that's why we pray

(So raise it up)

So raise it up

These lyrics were obtained from:

http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/i/impact_repertory_theatre/#share

Watch IMPACT'S Oscar performance of *Raise it Up* at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n6oyzTPGGqM>

This song tells the story of a young man and woman who do not have parental figures or guidance. They talk about the power of prayer in overcoming obstacles that seem impossible to conquer. They speak of the inner strength that they possess as well as the need for another person to help alleviate their problems. IMPACT's performance style and performance content follow the tradition of pre-colonial African Theatre, Wa Thiongo's Theater for Development and Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. IMPACT's likeness to these ways of teaching, producing and performing Theatre is what sets it apart from others. The need for others to help alleviate problems is similar to Freire's argument that "*Nobody liberates anybody else, and nobody liberates*

themselves all alone. People liberate themselves in fellowship with each other.” Another element of Friere’s pedagogy of the oppressed is his concept of coding, which is presenting the audience with something that they are familiar with (i.e. a life experience). This song in particular presents to the Harlem community an issue of which they are aware. The community issue of single or no parent homes is codified into the song *Raise it Up* and is then presented back to the community. Like Theatre for Development and Theatre of the Oppressed performances, this performance broke audience/performer barriers. Performers were able to freely enter the audience space and engage audience members through personal and physical connection. Audience members did not sit quietly, but spoke encouragingly to the performers on stage saying things like “Go on IMPACT!” and doing their own renditions of IMPACT’s choreographed dance.

AUDIOVISUAL MATERIALS

Videos and images were obtained from various websites including

<http://www.myspace.com/impactreptheatre> and IMPACT’s main website

<http://www.impactreptheatre.org/>

The songs and scripts that IMPACT write and perform all have messages about life obstacles with suggestions of how to overcome them. Below I have identified some of the songs and I briefly describe the message that it brings. It is followed by names and descriptions of four short movie-style videos found on their main website.

Happiness

In this song, members sing, “I’m choosing today, I’m finally free, I’m changing my life, ‘cause happiness is in me.” They send a message that happiness is a choice and that it is always

within, not based on circumstances. The song continues, “I’m happy ‘cause I choose to be, it’s gon’ be alright, I live the life that I wanna see, don’t get lost in the past, there’s joy is in today, make this moment last and choose happiness, don’t hold onto the pain, don’t let love slip away, make this moment last and choose happiness.”

Magic

This song says, “you still got a magic, a beautiful magic and it shines bright. Just look in the mirror and you’ll see a reason to celebrate your life, life is what you make it, enjoy every moment.” This song tells the listener that even if they feel depressed or inadequate they are still important, they still have the ability to find something to celebrate and live for.

Reaching Up

“Look inside yourself, just reach up, when it seems you had enough, keep the faith and you know when it’s right, just be strong, strong in love your keep your hands reaching up.” This song like the last, reminds the listener to be faithful and optimistic about improving the condition of their lives.

Forever

This song tells listeners to be responsible for their action. It sends a message that present actions affect future outcomes. It also encourages listeners to treat the planet and each other right. It says, “What we do now, matters forever. Choose today, to be better than yesterday for tomorrow’s sake.”

Uptown

The term Uptown refers to north of downtown Manhattan, the Harlem area, which is the home of IMPACT Repertory Theatre. “Uptown. We’re the survivors, strong and powerful.”

They make a point to say that they are not just speaking of Harlem but New York’s other boroughs as well including the Bronx, Queens and Brooklyn.

Heartbeat

This song resembles a Gospel song. It offers thanks to the Creator who they call Lord. They sing, “Lord you make my heartbeat” and encourages listeners to seek the Lord when faced with struggle.

Love Situation

“All we need is a love situation, hate, hurt and hostility blinds what the heart can see.”

Videos

Scarlet’s Webb

Through poetry and dialogue, this short movie explores sexual decisions made by teens. It sends a message that protection is important and necessary and that one’s S.T.I. status cannot be determined by their looks.

Halfway

This short film features IMPACT youth and an IMPACT Vibe member. It depicts the struggles faced by a teenage Harlem boy who goes to a predominantly white school. It also explores the realities of being raised by a single mother and having an imprisoned father.

“Hughes’ Dream Harlem”

This documentary with IMPACT members and Brooklyn conscious Hip Hop artist Talib Kweli, talks about Langston Hughes legacy and links his works to contemporary spoken word art and music. It features an IMPACT song called *Gunz* that speaks about how guns are destroying their communities and taking away their friends.

Are you really Happy?

This documentary explores sexual pressures faced by teens and asks questions about being forced into sexual relationships.

The following are pictures of IMPACT performances at various events and venues. The title of each event is below each picture.



*Photo from the Daily News article Harlem singers will 'Raise It Up' at Oscars
Wednesday, February 20 2008, 12:11 AM*



Harlem, Cultural Capital: Naming The Future (a community dialogue)



Champions for Children Luncheon



Seventh annual We are Family Foundation Gala

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings of the various forms of data collected: focus group interviews, observations and audiovisual materials. The analysis of the focus group data reveals three themes: safe space with a sub-theme of family, activism and self-discovery/transformation. The data collected from observations and audiovisual materials is linked to the theories of Wa Thiongo, Freire and Boal. The results provide evidence that IMPACT follows a tradition of using Theatre to raise awareness and thus empower disenfranchised communities. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the impact that Theatre has on Black youth. It specifically aims to explore the use of Theatre as a tool of empowerment and a source of support for

Black youth. The interview questions were constructed from the following larger research questions:

- How can Theatre promote individual and social change amongst Black youth?
- What are Black youth's perceptions about Theatre and how it impacts them?
- Does Theatre give Black youth a greater sense of self (as it relates to self identity, i.e. positive self-esteem, self-acceptance, self-love, self-respect)?
- Does Theatre make Black youth feel *empowered* and *motivated* (to make personal and community change), *connected* (to community members and issues), and *aware* (of personal and community issues)?

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the impact that Theatre has on Black youth. It specifically aims to explore the use of Theatre as a tool of empowerment and a source of support for Black youth. The interview questions were constructed from the following larger research questions:

- How can Theatre promote individual and social change amongst Black youth?
- What are Black youth's perceptions about Theatre and how it impacts them?
- Does Theatre give Black youth a greater sense of self (as it relates to self identity, i.e. positive self-esteem, self-acceptance, self-love, self-respect)?
- Does Theatre make Black youth feel *empowered* and *motivated* (to make personal and community change), *connected* (to community members and issues), and *aware* (of personal and community issues)?

The purpose of this study was certainly fulfilled. While the results presented in Chapter 4 provide in depth answers to the interview questions, I will discuss the results in relation to each of the larger research questions:

How can Theatre promote individual and social change amongst Black youth?

Theatre as practiced by IMPACT (acting, singing and dancing) follows a tradition of performance for social change for Africana and other oppressed groups similar to Wa Thiong'o's Theatre for development and elements of Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed. This type of theatre draws from the everyday lived experiences of its participants as they discuss the songs, dance pieces and dialogue which speaks to the realities of their lives.

What are Black youth's perceptions about Theatre and how it impacts them?

The participant's overall perception about Theatre is that it is fun, cool and important work. Participants perceive that Theatre has a positive impact on them.

Does Theatre give Black youth a greater sense of self (as it relates to self-identity, i.e. positive self-esteem, self-acceptance, self-love, self-respect)?

Participants reveal that the practice of Theatre and the IMPACT environment provides them with a higher level of discipline and self-control. They also discuss self-discovery and positive transformation resulting from their involvement. The way that theatre is taught, produced and performed has much influence over the outcomes observed in the youth and what they themselves share about their experiences. As the participants discuss, in acting, dance and/or music workshops they are able to safely explore, learn and hone their craft. Both performance and production of theatre at IMPACT is collaborative. Youth participate in the writing of songs, poetry and/or monologues that are presented in a performance. At all of the performances that I observed all members participated in specific and varying roles. These factors no doubt contribute to the participants' self-discovery, discipline, self-control and positive transformation.

Does Theatre make Black youth feel empowered and motivated (to make personal and community change), connected (to community members and issues), and aware (of personal and community issues)?

The results show that participants feel empowered by their positions as performing artists. Subsequently they are motivated to continue a path of personal growth and to motivate others to do the same. Participants share that they feel connected to community issues and members when they perform. Whether it is knowing certain audience members and that the

performance elements/message speaks to their reality or looking into the eyes of and/or physically reaching out to unknown spectators. Like Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, IMPACT encourages audience participation and embodies the notion of "people making people do."

The main implication of this work is that Theatre, as practiced by IMPACT and the atmosphere that it produces is empowering for Black youth. It makes them feel renewed, safe, happy, liberated and important. Although all of the participants discussed the existence of other outlets that may positively affect them like church and school they all agreed, that IMPACT provides a "safe space" for them to comfortably be who they are, offers as a system of family-like support and fosters self and community transformation. Impact members construct both individual and collective meanings for their participation with theater. They embrace support for and from their communities, whom they call friends, family and schoolmates.

Impact as members of the larger cultural group of Black youth can serve as a model for members of that group as well as other "at risk," marginalized and oppressed groups. A model of how positive outlets and/or mediums such as theatre can be used to explore, invent, reflect, learn/teach and develop.

One of the most significant missions of the Africana Studies discipline is to assume "social responsibility" and "to use knowledge to improve human condition" (Karenga, 2002). Following this tradition, these results will provide information that will add to the body of literature and aid social workers, community organizers, theater for development advocates and the like in the implementation of community participatory theater programs and other outreach programs to further their efforts to provide Black youth with safe and positive spaces, educational opportunities and cultural awareness.

Further research

Until the data collection process I did not realize that acting was not the primary theatrical art form practiced by the company. It seemed that more emphasis was placed on singing and dancing. I initially wanted to explore how theatre, particularly acting (playing various roles) affected Black youth. For future research studies I would like to explore a theatre group whose primary focus is on acting to see if the impact is stronger and/or more far reaching.

This research provides a beginning look at how empowerment through Theatre can be measured. Going beyond the exploration of perceptions and experiences can be beneficial in determining *actual* (short and long-term) impact on theatre practitioners and their communities. Particularly, how youth draw performance material from every day lived experiences and how they then reflect on and learn from these theatre pieces.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A CHILD ASSENT FORM

Georgia State University

Department of African American Studies

Child Assent Form

Title: Theatre's impact on the self-identity and community
awareness of Black Youth.

Researcher: Asantewa Sunni-Ali

You have been invited to participate in a research study! The purpose of this study is to explore the impact that Theatre has on you. As a participant in the study, you will be asked nine questions in a focus group interview that should last for approximately 45 minutes.

The information that will be discussed in the focus group interview does not pose a potential risk to you.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study and your parent(s)/legal guardian(s) cannot force you to participate. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you may drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you decide you will not be penalized.

Please sign below to confirm that this form has been explained to you and that you plan to participate.

Child/ Participant Printed Name and Signature	Date
---	------

Asantewa Sunni-Ali (Researcher) Signature	Date
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THANK YOU!

APPENDIX B PARENT PERMISSION FORM

Georgia State University

Department of African American Studies

Parent Permission Form

Title: Theatre's impact on the self-identity and community awareness of Black Youth.

Researcher: Asantewa Sunni-Ali

Your child has been invited to participate in a research study! The purpose of this study is to explore the impact that Theatre has on your child. Your child is invited to participate because he/she is a member of Impact. We will recruit a total of fifteen members for this study. Participation will require 45 minutes of your child's time.

As a research participant your child will answer nine questions in a focus group interview with 4 other members of Impact. The interview will be conducted and audio taped by Asantewa Sunni-Ali. The research study will take place at 2pm on Saturday, August 1, 2009 in the Kennedy Center lobby.

In this study, your child will not have any more risks than he/she would in a normal day of life. The information that will be discussed in the focus group interview does not pose a potential risk. However, your child will be reminded that the conversations should be treated confidentially (and that certain kinds of information may not be appropriate to mention at all).

Overall, we hope to gain information about Black youth's perceptions about Theatre and its impact on them. This is a benefit to society.

Your child's participation in this research is voluntary. He/she does not have to be in this study. If your child decides to be in the study and changes his/her mind, he/she has the right to drop out at any time. He/she may skip questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you and/or your child decide your child will not be penalized.

We will keep study records private to the extent allowed by law. We will use your child's initials, rather than your child's name on study records. Only the researcher, Asantewa Sunni-Ali will have access to the information your child provides. Interview text and the digital audio file will be stored in a password- and firewall-protected computer. Your child's name and other facts that might point to your child will not appear when we present this study or publish its results.

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are granting permission for your child to volunteer for this research and be audio recorded please sign below:

Child's name (please print)

Parent/Guardian Signature

Date

Asantewa Sunni-Ali (Researcher) Signature

Date

If you have any questions about the study please contact Asantewa Sunni-Ali at 404 914-6903 or asunniali@aol.com. If you have questions or concerns about your child's rights as a participant in this research study, you may contact Susan Vogtner in the Office of Research Integrity at 404-413-3513 or svogtner1@gsu.edu.

THANK YOU!

APPENDIX C INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Georgia State University

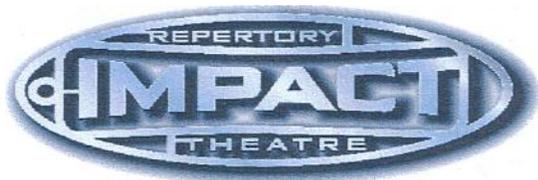
Department of African American Studies

Interview Questions/Focus Group Interview Guide

Title: Theatre's impact on the self-identity and community awareness of Black Youth.

Researcher: Asantewa Sunni-Ali

1. How long have you been involved in IMPACT? in what capacity?
2. Is it your choice to be involved in IMPACT?
3. How does being involved in IMPACT make you feel?
4. How does IMPACT help you to learn about yourself?
5. How does IMPACT help you to communicate with others?
6. How has your involvement made you feel more connected to others?
7. What would you say to friends about getting involved in IMPACT?
8. How has IMPACT influenced your community involvement (making you aware of community and larger societal issues)?
9. Is IMPACT something that you will continue to be a part of?
10. What are your career goals and how does IMPACT help you to prepare for them?

APPENDIX D IMPACT APPROVAL LETTER

**253 West 138th Street Suit 100
New York, N.Y. 10030-2102**

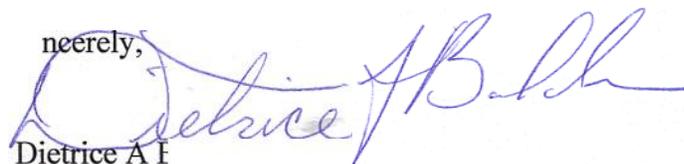
**Tel: 212-926-4516 Fax 212-926-0224
Impactreptheatre.org**

July 2, 2009

Dear Georgia State University Institutional Review Board:

I, Dietrice A Bolden, Assistant Artistic Director of Impact Repertory Theatre grant permission for the researcher, Asantewa Sunni-Ali to conduct a research study which aims to explore the impact of theater involvement (workshops and performance) on fifteen Impact Repertory Theatre members' self identity and community awareness.

Sincerely,

neerely,

Dietrice A Bolden

Dietrice A Bolden

Impact Repertory Theatre Assistant Artistic Director

APPENDIX E OBSERVATIONAL PROTOCOL

Activity:	
Date and time:	time activity ended:
Participants:	
DESCRIPTIVE NOTES	REFLECTIVE NOTES
General: What are the experiences of IIMPACT members as they participate in theatre activity?	

--	--

APPENDIX F DEMOGRAPHIC FORM

NAME:

AGE:

GENDER:

RACE:

In what city do you currently reside?

What is your birth city/state?

Including your parent(s)/guardian(s) how many people live in your household?

What is your household's approximate annual income?

APPENDIX G PARTICIPANT LOG

Participant	Age	Gender	Place of residence
Ben	14	Male	New York, NY
Ari	17	Female	Bronx, New York
Paul	15	Male	New York, NY
Ash	16	Female	New York, NY
Amy	15	Female	New York, NY
Eve	17	Female	New York, NY
Jill	14	Female	New York, NY
Key	14	Female	New York, NY