

# 'Drama Has Given Me a Home'

## PERSPECTIVES OF EXPERIENCED SECONDARY SCHOOL DRAMA / THEATRE STUDENTS IN TWO COUNTRIES<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract:**

In two earlier studies, experienced upper secondary theatre students in Sweden (Østerlind, 2011) and the US (McCammon, 2010) completed the same questionnaire about their experiences with theatre. The questionnaire included questions about the number of years involved in theatre, reasons for choosing theatre study, activities participated in, favorite memories, biggest challenges and future benefits. This paper provides a comparison of the responses in the two sites to these questions:

*Why do secondary school students choose and stay with drama/theatre studies? According to the students themselves, what do they learn in theatre and how do they benefit from their study? What similarities and/or differences might there be between experienced secondary theatre students in Tucson, Arizona and Stockholm, Sweden?*

Responses suggested remarkable agreement between the two sites and grouped around four themes — theatre creates fellowship and fun; theatre develops the person; development of specific theatre skills; and development of life competencies. Results also support other similar studies of student perception of their theatre participation.

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*Drama . . . has given me a home and a place  
that I know I will always be accepted and understood*

Arizona Secondary Student

Working in the field of drama and theatre education, we find the conditions for arts education within the formal educational system becoming increasingly contradictory (*cf.* O'Toole *et al.*, 2009). While arts education is rhetorically approved of and often appreciated by students of various ages, it is still marginalised or even neglected when it comes to such things as allocation of resources, scheduled time, teacher education, etc. The contradiction is even more remarkable considering evidence of the benefits of arts rich education (Bamford, 2006). Educational research suggests multimodality and collaboration, as in aesthetic subjects, is beneficial for *all* students (Østerlind, 2010).

There is a growing body of research that examines the perspective of young people who participate in theatre in formal and informal (after school) settings (e.g., Chaib, 1996; Gutiérrez and Spencer, 2008; Innes *et al.*, 2001; Larson and Brown, 2007). Youth Theatre participants in the UK, for example, reported that along with experience of the performance and creative process, they developed personal skills and resources and contexts for personal and social development (Hughes and Wilson, 2004:63-67). In an ethnographic study of why youngsters spend their spare time, often for years, doing amateur theatre Chaib (1996:253) reports that the participants' identity and self-confidence is strengthened, their sense of freedom increases, their communicative competence and empathy develops. She refers to the post-modern society where people 'by various means actualise themselves . . . [and] search for a stronger sense of identity'. A stronger sense of identity and increased freedom could also be understood in terms of psychological development or in socio-cultural terms, as an expansion of personal habitus (Østerlind, 2008a). This exemplifies the post-modern conditions for drama research, with a mixture of genres and a multiplicity of theoretical positions (Taylor, 2006), necessitating that 'researchers have to deal with many perspectives, interpretations and voices around any given event' (Østerlind, 2008b:96).

Although the cultural sector is growing, upper secondary education in arts (and drama/theatre) is regularly challenged, based on references to a limited job market. In this paradoxical situation, we find it important to focus on students' motives for studying drama/theatre. To investigate this, we turned to upper secondary school students who have chosen to study theatre. We ask, what makes drama and theatre studies meaningful and rewarding for students?

### **Purpose and Procedure**

This project has grown out of our independent academic practice, shared experiences, and perspectives. As teacher educators, we were interested in articulating what young people perceive about their drama/theatre secondary experiences in academic settings; furthermore, we wanted to involve our theatre education students in the research process. Using the same questionnaire, we each surveyed secondary theatre students individually (McCammon, 2010; Østerlind, 2011). In this paper, we merge and reanalyse the data to answer the following questions:

1. Why do secondary school students choose and stay with drama/theatre studies?
2. According to the students themselves, what do they learn in theatre and how do they benefit from their study?
3. What similarities and/or differences might there be between experienced secondary theatre students in Tucson, Arizona and Stockholm, Sweden?

### **Student Questionnaires**

Questionnaires allow for a greater number of respondents and are less time consuming than interviews. They are suitable when an overview is sought rather than in-depth information (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). In this case, several theatre education students served as collectors for the questionnaire data. Unavoidably there is 'bias' inherent in the questions; as the researchers were not present in the data collection process, they could not influence the answers at all. The questionnaire used in both settings was developed originally as part of a *Theatre in Our Schools (TIOS)* project, a national advocacy program in the US.

The TIOS theme as it was expressed in Arizona was: 'Celebrate Theatre in Our Schools — for Theatre Challenges, Inspires, and Unites . . . Us!'. The questionnaire loosely addressed this theme with open ended questions and even more specifically addressed the words, *challenges, inspires* and *unites*. These questions would also give the secondary students the opportunity to reflect broadly on aspects of their drama/theatre learning:

1. Why did you decide to take a theatre class (Arizona) / to choose the theatre arts program (Sweden)?
2. Describe briefly some of the things you have participated in.
3. What is the most challenging thing about taking theatre?
4. Describe your most memorable theatre experience (as a participant or as an audience member).
5. Do you think your participation in theatre will affect you in the future?
6. Would you recommend to others that they take a theatre course/choose the theatre arts program or participate in theatre at your school?

The aim of Question 4 was to prompt students to see connections between themselves and the characters they portrayed. The students, however, tended to refer to friendships, accidents on stage, moments when they connected with an audience or were moved by seeing a performance, all valid experiences. A seventh question was added in 2009: 'Can you think of times when you were inspired by a character you portrayed and/or learned something new about people whose lives and times are different than yours?' Data from this question are not included here. The secondary theatre students were also asked for their names, their grade levels and the number of years they had participated in theatre. In this paper we present a comparison of the questionnaire results from three schools in Arizona (School #1 2004, #2 2007, #4 2009, total of 49 responses) and one school in Sweden (School #3, 2008, total of 30 responses).

### **The Questionnaire 'Backstory' — Arizona**

When Laura and her students at the University of Arizona (UA) decided to launch a *Theatre in our Schools* (TIOS) program in 2004, they elected to feature one secondary school with a strong teacher and program each year. The school principals and teachers gave UA permission to conduct the TIOS activities (including the questionnaire which informs this paper); permission was also granted by the school district where needed. All students were given a UA consent form for parental consent and student assent to participate in interviews, use their words from the questionnaires and take pictures of the students 'in action'. The questionnaires were distributed and collected in the Advanced Theatre classes by the teacher and given to UA TIOS committee members who later interviewed and photographed those students who had returned forms along with the teacher. The university students also used questionnaire and interview responses as part of a display at the university showcasing that school.

Because the accumulated questionnaires presented an opportunity to explore the perspective of these experienced students, Laura conducted an item analysis of the surveys from 2004 and 2007. Even though these questionnaires were not originally gathered as part of a university approved research project, ethical considerations — especially Informed Consent protocols — were observed. She presented suggested findings at the National Drama Conference in Durham 2008, and subsequently published a paper based on this presentation (McCammon, 2010).

### **The Questionnaire 'Backstory' — Sweden**

An Arts Program was introduced in Swedish upper secondary schools in 1991. It turned out to be one of the most popular and one of the largest study programs. This was unexpected and not fully appreciated by the educational authorities. In 2008, the upper secondary school system was subject to reforms and suggestions were made to close the Arts Program or merge it into Arts and Humanities, with a focus on history and foreign languages. The students' voices were notably absent in this debate. When Eva heard Laura's presentation in Durham, she recognised the potential value in replicating the questionnaire to allow an investigation of the students' perspective of theatre studies. It would also provide a comparison of the results with those theatre studies students in Arizona.

With Laura's permission, Eva translated the questionnaire into Swedish and gave it to all third year theatre students at one secondary school and published the subsequent study (Østerlind, 2011). In Sweden, ethical recommendations for research in humanities and social sciences state that for students older than 16 years parental consent is not required. The students were asked by two student teachers to fill in the questionnaire and while first being told that this was optional. They were informed that the purpose was for research and that no one except the researcher would be able to read the answers or identify anyone, even if quoted. The questionnaires were answered by 30 students.

### **Context**

Before turning to the analysis it will be useful to take a look briefly at the context of theatre studies in both countries. We have found sufficient similarities to make a comparison meaningful.

## **Upper Secondary Education and School Context – Arizona**

Arizona has a long tradition of secondary programs in speech and theatre. Arizona secondary students must have at least one arts credit to complete their diploma — this requirement has improved enrollments for all arts classes. Most US high schools are comprehensive, offering both college preparatory classes and vocational training for students in grades 9-12 (ages 14-18). Theatre classes in Arizona generally will have multiple levels:

- 1 beginning — open to all students, satisfies arts requirement;
- 2 intermediate — second year students, who either self-select or are chosen by audition; and
- 3 advanced — generally audition-only students.

Beyond the beginning level, curricula focus primarily on theatre and play production.

The three schools included in this study were all large, comprehensive high schools in the Tucson area. Each school had a long-standing tradition in the arts, especially theatre. Each teacher had been at the school for a number of years, had mentored four or more student teachers and had strong ties with the university, which was one of the primary criteria for selection as a 'featured teacher'.

## **Upper Secondary Education and School Context — Sweden**

Upper secondary education in Sweden, grades 10-12 (ages 16-19), is organised in pre-designed study programs, each one directed towards a specific subject area. Within a study program most of the classes are mandatory. This means that the choice of study program has a huge impact on the three years of schooling. The Arts Program has four separate branches: Art and Design, Dance, Music and Theatre. Choosing Theatre means this will be your main subject for three years and, in addition to acting, theatre includes working on stage projects from ideas to complete performances. Theatre classes can normally only be taken within the Arts Program. Some schools chose theatre students by audition, others base selection on grades. The procedure is valid for all three years. In many cases all applicants will be accepted.

The specific school, called School #3, is situated in the central part of Stockholm. The school offers a wide range of both vocational and study preparation programs including several branches of the Arts program. The drama/theatre teachers had mentored several student teachers. During autumn 2008, two student teachers were responsible for distributing the questionnaires.

## **Theatre Curriculum and Students' Experience**

All students reported participating in a variety of curricular theatre experiences. In both sites the theatre curriculum included drama work, improvisation, theatre training, leadership activities and performance of many kinds of plays, from short pantomimes to rehearsed full length plays. The Swedish students mentioned monologues and clown work as particularly memorable. The students in Arizona experienced several activities outside of class, like field trips, competitions and theatre festivals. In both sites the students also learned about technical theatre, costume and mask, and performed for peers, children, and adults.

Since the students completing the questionnaires had been in secondary school for three or four years, we made the assumption that they had been in a theatre class for at least three years. The majority of respondents, however, reported more than three to four years of theatre experience, as many began participating in theatre prior to beginning high school (Table 1); the median years of theatre participation for all 79 students was 5.9 years.

	No. of students	Average years of experience
<b>Arizona — 3school</b> <b>School #1, 2, 4</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>5.4</b>
<b>Sweden — 1school</b> <b>School #3</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>6.9</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>6.0</b>

*Table 1. Years of Experience*

The surveys suggest that many of these young people already had an interest in theatre before they began their secondary school study. Some had been in a summer program, after school activities or youth theatre in their community. Others had taken drama in elementary or middle school. The relationship of these early experiences to secondary theatre enrollment is important — secondary students point out that previous experience paves the way for a well-informed choice and yet these are the very programs that are often eliminated in times of economic difficulties.

### Preliminary Findings: Why Theatre?

With a choice of subjects available to secondary students, what prompts them to choose theatre? Overall, students are drawn to theatre because they 'love' the *artform* and performing, especially those with prior theatre experience. They want to learn more about the discipline and to grow personally. Students are also attracted by the reputation of the teacher and program, through the influence of others and by a desire to find a 'tribe' of like-minded teens. Some students from Arizona took the course merely to satisfy the fine arts requirement, while some Swedish students chose theatre to avoid being bored in upper secondary school. As our work has been carried out in an ongoing and sometimes parallel process, this section illustrates suggested answers to the question of students' motives.

### One question — two answers

When Laura conducted her first analysis, she pooled responses to all questions. She used a standard coding process suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (2003) — that is, reading through the answers to all questions, looking for *coding categories*. In doing so, Laura found that the student responses matched extremely well with what Kellmer-Pringle (as cited in Woodhead, 1990) noted were four basic needs of young people:

1. Praise and recognition (compliments from the audience).
2. New experiences (mastering theatre skills).
3. Responsibility (teamwork, others depend on you).
4. Love and security (camaraderie on stage).

For a complete discussion of this analysis, see McCammon (2010).

Eva's original analysis focused on identifying students' motives for choosing theatre studies and the experienced meaning(s) related to studying theatre. It was inspired by phenomenography (Marton, 1981; Marton and Booth, 1997), a way to describe the variation in peoples' *conceptions* of a given phenomenon. Two open questions guided the analysis, 'What do the respondents talk about?' and 'How do they talk about it?' The first question is literal, the latter is more interpretative, focussing on the implicit meanings or what underpins the explicit utterances. The result is often presented in metaphors. Eva first analysed her data question by question and then considered the data material as a whole. She identified five conceptions of theatre studies in the Swedish student responses (Østerlind, 2009):

1. Theatre creates fellowship and includes having a lot of fun.
2. Theatre as a remedy for school-tiredness.
3. Theatre as personal development.
4. Theatre as developing specific skills.
5. Theatre as fostering general competencies.

For a more detailed analysis of the Swedish data, see Østerlind (2011).

Thus, the question of why students choose theatre studies can then be answered in more than one way. Taken together these two versions — one 'external' related to a theoretical framework and one 'internal' extracted from the data — gives a more complete picture of the students' motives than either one could do alone. Although they differ, they are neither contradictory nor exclusive.

In order to compare the whole body of data, Laura reanalysed the Arizona responses, now from three schools, according to the themes Eva had formulated. There was considerable overlap between the two locations for four of the five original themes. The category 'Theatre as a remedy for school-tiredness' was merged with the first category of 'fellowship and fun', as 'having fun' was seen to relate to 'not being bored'. The analysis to follow explores the student responses as they are grouped around four themes:

1. Theatre as a source of fellowship and fun.
2. Theatre as personal development.
3. Theatre as developing specific theatre skills.
4. Theatre as fostering general competencies.

The responses relate mainly to a psycho-social theoretical framework, as suggested by Laura's initial analysis.

### **What the research revealed**

In this section we present responses from 79 experienced theatre students according to the four themes presented above. While the last three themes describe specific skills young people develop, the first theme relates more to inter- and intrapersonal experiences, which are perhaps the most important to the young people themselves. The main point here, we propose, is to let the students' own voices be heard (*cf.* Innes *et al.*, 2001).

## Theatre as a Source of Fellowship and Fun

*I always recommend people to take drama because it is very different from regular classes and it is super fun! You make a ton of friends and it feels like a big family!*

One of the most attractive aspects of theatre participation for young people is that their theatre participation is **fun** — through theatre, they create a wonderful, supportive **community**. Furthermore, theatre is different from the other classes they take which often seem ‘boring’.

### Fellowship / Family

The students reported a feeling of good fellowship and family in their classes:

*A theatre class is like a team; we work as a family and you can only have a good show if everyone works together. Once the lights come on, and all the actors get on stage, it becomes **their** show and this is what makes theatre so special.*

Theatre is said to create a very special, positive atmosphere and increase bonding among the students. ‘You get to know others better’. It is joyful, fun and rewarding, ‘a wonderful experience and challenge’.

In addition, the social environment strongly affects creative behaviour because creative expression involves personal risk:

*For me the most challenging part of theatre class is taking risks and not holding back. It is also challenging to trust everyone in the class.*

Brown (2009:62) makes the connection between creating art and building community — ‘The impulse to create art is a direct result of the play impulse; furthermore, art promotes community. It is literally a communion’. When arts are created in schools, a sense of ‘belonging’ is generated which can put young people ‘in sync with those around [them]. It is a way to tap into common emotions and thoughts and share them with others’ (2009:63).

*My most memorable moment was on the closing night of the play ‘The Little Prince’. It was the last play of the year . . . I was part of the ensemble and, as we carried off the Prince, there was a dead silence and I could feel the emotion running through the theatre. It was great because I knew we had come together to create a really great play, and I was so proud to be ending the year so well.*

Student comments suggest a strong feeling of what Turner (1982) called *communitas* — a sense of sharing and intimacy developing when people engage in a collective task with full attention. For teenagers this kind of shared power experienced in the collective spirit is transformative.

Many of these students have moved through their theatre program together and have, over time, developed a shared identity. As Wigfield and Wagner (2005:224) note, ‘Peers often gravitate to similar others, and strengthen each other’s motivational orientations and achievement patterns’. The work ethic and motivation to succeed have built over a number of years.

## Fun

Consistently across all four schools, students thought of their theatre participation as *fun*. Fun, for these young people includes those things which they perceive as entertaining, enjoyable and cool — in other words, **not boring**. This comment sums up it up, ‘You have more fun when you’re in the theatre!’ Fun is often thought of as the antidote to intensive academic study and pressure that many secondary students experience. Students describe wanting to have fun during those years and to do something they love while at school.

So what does *fun* mean? To answer that question, we look at the relationship of fun to *play*. Brown (2009:60) defines *play* as ‘an absorbing, apparently purposeless activity that provides enjoyment and a suspension of self-consciousness and sense of time. It is also self-motivating and makes you want to do it again’. According to Brown, humans **need** to play to continue to develop brain functioning — play stimulates multiple centers of perception and cognition across the whole brain. There is a strong link between play and memory — because the play state promotes both heightened attention and emotional rewards, students are more motivated to remember what they learned. This student comment makes a link between fun and learning:

*The arts are proven to build brain capacity . . . but not only that, theatre especially, I would recommend because it's a blast. Anybody can do it, as long as they put forth the effort and are committed to their character.*

Through play and fantasy, young people not only develop cognitive skills, but also their imaginations which, in Brown’s (2009) view, are key not only to creativity but more fundamentally to emotional resilience.

## Remedy for School-Tiredness

Since secondary school attendance is mandatory in both countries, not all students are highly motivated. A few students refer to theatre as a way to handle or put up with upper secondary school, as this comment demonstrates: ‘I would probably have been enormously school-tired if it wasn’t for the theatre lessons!’ For some of them the theatre arts program has been a solution because they were not motivated to take a study preparation program like Science or Social Sciences. ‘I’ve always had a hard time at school’. Students stated, ‘[I] did not want to choose an ordinary, boring study programme’, and ‘[I] didn’t want to meet only “grey” people who’d be studying all the time’.

## Theatre as Personal Development

*The most challenging thing is definitely getting up the courage to take a risk and express myself, not only on stage in front of hundreds of people, but also in class in front of my peers. High school is a really hard time to do this, but the good actors have to find the courage.*

Research suggests that within each student there are unique psychological barriers which impede creative interactions. Shallcross (1981) cites rigidity and inflexibility, fear of ridicule and failure, reliance on authority, habits of mind or routines that prevent divergent thinking as psychological barriers. O’Neill (1996) states that drama has the power to enlarge our frames of reference and emancipate us from rigid ways of thinking and perceiving, and

Neelands (2004) suggests that personal transformation might be the rule, rather than the exception, in drama in education. It is not surprising then that in many of the questionnaires, students refer to their own personal development — getting to know oneself and one's limits, expanding limitations, being more open, giving one's all, and facing both setbacks and successes.

The strong emphasis on personal development is also described by Chaib (1996). Theatre is not the only way to personal development but Chaib claims that the theatre environment, with its practical approach, facilitates such development and strengthens social bonds. The students often describe personal development that has already occurred — they have become more self-confident, social and focused; they are less shy, more playful and able to keep things in perspective and not take them too seriously. Theatre has affected 'the way I look at life'. To be able to 'let go of aggressiveness in order to achieve a good result' and to 'work very close to other people' are also described as positive outcomes.

Theatre is about 'being visible and proactive'. It 'demands a lot of you as a person' because one gets 'new challenges every lesson'. In the end, one learns new things, to meet new situations, or to 'try things you never thought of before'. 'You grow as a person if you dare to open up to others'. The most challenging is related to finding oneself, to 'find and show aspects of you that you did not even know about'; to 'be ready to be open'; to dare because 'you are quite naked' and to go outside the frame and 'expand the limits'. As a result, 'You may find yourself — who you really are'. Similar findings are reported by Olsson (2006) who emphasises the literal playing with identities as an essential quality.

This desire and achievement of personal competencies is a key to students' enjoyment and development through theatre and their motivation to continue in theatre. As Elliot and Dweck note:

Competence motivation is present in daily life, has a substantial impact on emotion and well-being, operates across a life span and is evident in all individuals across cultural boundaries. (2005:7)

### **Developing Specific Theatre Skills**

*I believe that the hardest thing in theatre is getting your point across with your body and dialogue. You can be doing a serious role but yet say the line with different intentions and your point will be lost.*

The study suggested that students who chose to take a theatre class because they loved theatre were motivated to develop their theatre skills. Some of these skills relate specifically to acting skills:

*The most challenging thing about theatre is understanding and fully developing your character and conveying their motives to the audience.*

Some students reported learning more about the technical production:

*Learning about and participating in crews other than just acting on stage. We learn the complete experience of theatre including sets, props, lights, media, script writing, sound, costumes, publicity, directing, choreography.*

Some students found the chance to direct to be a meaningful learning experience:

*Directing is a whole new world of acting. I loved it.*

Students described specific skills, disciplines and habits of mind they developed relating directly to a better performance — making oneself trustworthy on stage, establishing contact with the audience and being prepared to constantly strive to overcome setbacks. They reported that it was also about learning about what one is capable of doing, 'to get rid of the fear of being on stage, at the centre of attention, in front of many people' and 'to pluck up the courage to perform a monologue with confidence, energy, and focus to control nerves and put a lot of effort in performing'.

One strand in responses had to do with believing in a play or adopting a character — to become involved, the feeling of really 'getting into' a role or a play. A second strand related to making contact with the audience — for example, when a performance moved an audience. A third strand had to do with meeting and overcoming difficulties and obstacles. The young people learned a lot about their own style of acting. They reported that if one does not feel comfortable, it shows on stage. Other challenges were to get into and play different roles, to 'stay with a character' and to 'show feelings that are difficult for you to express' on stage, to interpret a 'troublesome' character and learning texts by heart.

The diversity of jobs needed to produce a play — actor, designer, stage manager, set crew — offered many students a way to be involved. Over time as students built competencies, they not only gained a sense of satisfaction, but they also developed a better sense of who they are (McCammon, 2010). In addition, engaging in fiction can release individuals *sociologically* into new experiences of role, time and space and into a 'no penalty zone of creative response and action' and *psychologically* through role protection and, by having them 'walk in somebody else's shoes', they can take risks, engage and express themselves (McCammon *et al.*, 2011).

*The most memorable theatre experience for me would have to be my first solo [in a musical] on opening night. It was such a rush to know that everyone in the auditorium was listening and watching every move I made. I love how theatre can give you that power to get people's attention & entertain them.*

## **Fostering General Competences**

*Theatre provides you with lifelong skills such as communication, responsibility, dependability, and commitment. All of these skills and many more are needed to succeed in further schooling and careers.*

The students were aware that through their theatre participation, they were developing competencies that would benefit them in many contexts outside the theatre classroom. Among these are better speaking skills, the ability to understand and relate to others, and the ability to work with commitment.

## **Confident Speaking Skills**

Most people fear speaking in public; this condition is called *communication anxiety* or *stage fright*. It occurs when a person fears being embarrassed in public or being judged by others (Horwitz, 2002). For young people, this fear can be exacerbated by the usual

teenage anxieties or a fear of looking foolish in front of their peers. Some students took a theatre course initially to overcome shyness and build self-confidence:

*I used to be a very shy person who dreaded talking in front of others, so I knew I had to take a stand and the best way to come out of my shell . . . was to join Drama to have both fun and practice to become confident and perform in front of others.*

Many of the students reported that, through their theatre participation, they overcame these anxieties and became confident and competent speakers. They gained the ability to ‘stand in front of and talk to a group without being afraid’, to ‘be able to speak loud and clear’.

*If nothing else, it’s prepared me for public speaking. Theatre has given me the chance to speak to large groups of people and get over any misgivings I would have about it. Not only that, but I can really express myself much more completely than I would have without participating in theatre.*

Furthermore, they realised that good presentation skills would be important to them later on in life:

*My participation in theatre will help me in the future because I feel comfortable talking in public, expressing myself and memorisation . . . [and] I think that theatre will help me be more outgoing. Many jobs may require me to deal with people and be a little more outgoing. Theatre will definitely help with that.*

### **Ability to Understand Others and Work as a Team**

The study highlighted theatre participation and the way in which it enabled young people to understand others in two ways. First, there were the benefits from taking on a role and seeing the world through the eyes of a character. As Brown (2009:87) noted, ‘Imagining the inner life of others and comparing it to one’s own — is one of the keys to developing empathy, understanding and trust of others as well as personal coping skills’. This student comment illustrates:

*Drama teaches you how to relate to people and see that no one is a flat character.*

Because there is a strong element of teamwork needed for a successful production of a play, students reported learning to work with others for a common goal:

*The most challenging thing is working [well] with different types of people. It teaches me to work with a team and be patient with myself and others.*

### **Commitment and Resiliency**

As students became more competent in their theatre skills, they developed the discipline necessary to work effectively:

*Hard work, devotion, responsibility and respect are always good tools to incorporate into daily life.*

*To be more professional and punctual as well as responsible.*

Because theatre is a live performing art, there are many things that occur in the moment, accidents on stage for example that student must deal with: ‘it teaches courage in the face of insecurity’. There are also problems occurring in the rehearsal stages of a play, which

students learn to solve: 'to know how to improvise and find solutions to problems'; 'to completely focus and be emotionally involved regardless of other things going on in life to commit to character and choices'. The difficulty is to be like that all the time and be able to disconnect from other states of mind and circumstances.

Aspects of life outside the theatre class can be challenging, like 'to get up in the morning and enter the stage, even if you feel low and worn out'. 'Sometimes you might feel low because of something outside school that is hard to stop thinking about. Sometimes you just don't want to open up'. But such challenges can be transformed into something valuable. 'To work with others, you have to be generous and really trust other persons in order to make things work. In the long run that becomes more of an asset than a challenge'.

### **Similarities and Differences**

The first thing we can observe is that, despite the differences in context, the students report **very** similar experiences and benefits to them from their theatre courses. In the uncertain days of adolescence, there can be little doubt that theatrical study and performance empowers young people brave enough to give it a try. Furthermore, the suggestions from this project compare well with the results of previous research (e.g., Gutiérrez and Spencer, 2008; Hughes and Wilson, 2004; Larson and Brown, 2007; McLauchlan, 2010). The themes suggested by this project match very well with McLauchlan's (2010:145-149) more in-depth study of drama students in three Canadian schools. For example, McLauchlan found five distinct categories of student learning:

1. Subject-specific skills, techniques, and concepts.
2. Transferable social and collaborative skills.
3. Empathy with characters they portray or observe.
4. Personal growth and enhanced general life skills.
5. Success in other classes and preparation for employment and post-secondary education.

With the exception perhaps of the third point, this project noted the same kind of learning.

It is also possible that the kind of learning the students in this project reported will stay with them for life. Recently 234 North American adults were surveyed about their perceptions of learning from their high school theatre and/or speech participation. This study suggested that there are enduring outcomes from theatre participation across time, such as improved inquiry skills, appreciation for the role of art in society, motivation for learning and academic performance, ability to work with others, successful work ethics, a sense of belonging and 'safe haven', sense of identity and voice, nurturing of talents, development as a whole human being and, most of all, **confidence** (McCammon, Saldaña, Hines and Omasta, 2011).

In a more elaborated analysis of the Swedish data, two categories were added in order to cover the complete range of responses — Theatre as too much of a good thing and Theatre as un-challenging (Østerlind, 2011). Compared to the responses from Arizona, some of the Swedish students expressed a more critical view. In fact, all comments relating to lack of motivation, having had enough and so on came from Swedish students. The main reason for this perhaps relates to the structural differences of the educational system — for example, having to stay with the subject for an entire three years. There could also

be other reasons. For example, the vast majority of Swedish youngsters continue to upper secondary school, motivated to study or not. Perhaps the situation is slightly different in Arizona where upper secondary schooling may not be taken for granted to the same degree. But the critical voices are indeed very few — two or three people, or less than five per cent.

The strong notion of increased confidence is interesting, as it could be labelled a ‘general outcome’ of participating in drama/theatre. It has also been reported in very different settings from optional, informal after-school activities (Chaib, 1996) to upper secondary students at risk (Rasmussen and Khachik, 2000). And, it was reported by adolescents in their theatre classes in western countries like Canada, Norway, US, Sweden, and by adults many years after their school theatre/speech experiences (McCammon, Saldaña, Hines and Omasta, 2011). A possible expansion of this project would be to explore whether studies in other arts subjects have the same impact on self-confidence and general social skills as those claimed by theatre participants in various contexts.

### Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

In contrast to many research studies, this project was the result of an ‘organic’ process of collaborative, small-scale research. We created the path as we walked (*cf.* the metaphor of drama research as ‘entering a labyrinth’ (O’Neill, 1996)).

We freely acknowledge that this project used a *purposive* sampling method (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000) — that is, we **deliberately** sought out experienced drama/theatre students. We do not necessarily see this as a limitation since we feel that the experienced students were in the best position to reflect on their drama/theatre learning. Although these respondents can be expected to appreciate theatre studies, the results are overwhelmingly positive to a degree where it almost creates a credibility problem. A delicate question is, how to design and conduct research that is able to handle such strong, positive expressions without drawing criticism for being partial or false?

The survey instrument itself did not generate exactly the response we had hoped for. As discussed earlier, a seventh question was added to ask students to reflect on what they learned about others from adopting and playing a role character. The survey also did not generate much information about the teacher’s role in student learning. To gain more knowledge about the teacher’s impact from a student perspective, the survey could be expanded to include a question such as, ‘How does your teacher help you learn?’

We believe that this survey could be expanded to include non-Western locations, but the first language of the respondent should be factored in. The Swedish students responded in Swedish and their responses were translated to English (Østerlind, 2011). We gave the same survey to students in Norway; they answered in English or in a combination of English and Norwegian which then had to be translated. Clearly the responses were limited by the students comfort with written English (McCammon, Østerlind and Runde, 2011).

We think this project offers useful insights for teacher education and can serve as an advocacy document for theatre with young people. This project is hopefully only the beginning.

*Just because what we do here is fiction, it does not mean that we can’t use it in real life.*  
Swedish Secondary Student.

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