

THE PERFORMING ARTS AND EMPOWERMENT OF YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

LAS ARTES ESCÉNICAS Y EL EMPODERAMIENTO DE JÓVENES DISCAPACITADOS

ARTES CÊNICAS E O EMPODERAMENTO DOS JOVENS COM DEFICIÊNCIA

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ABSTRACT: The field of youth practice has made tremendous strides in expanding its scope and reaching previously underserved youth groups in seeking to achieve its transformative mission, with empowerment playing a critical role in its universal appeal. However, the field has not achieved its potential for empowerment and transformation in reaching youth with both visible and invisible disabilities. This failure has increasingly been recognized, and notable efforts to rectify this situation can be found in the field, although not without encountering significant conceptual and research challenges. In the United States and internationally, inclusion is generally a goal for advocates and self-advocates for people with disabilities, including for youth with disabilities. It is a basic prerequisite for empowerment, another advocacy goal for youth with disabilities. With the access to the benefits of society, choices, and relationships inclusion brings, people have fewer barriers to empowering themselves. For youth with disabilities, the performing arts, defined here as acting, music, or dance performed before an audience, can be an avenue for both inclusion and empowerment. The construct of intersectionality is critical, too, to consider regarding the inclusion of youth with disabilities in the performing arts. This manuscript explores how empowerment can be applied to youth with disabilities, including those who are marginalized because of their race/ethnicity, gender, sexual identity or gender expression, or socio-economic class as well as their disabilities. The performing arts is used to illustrate one way participation, inclusion, and empowerment can be achieved with youth with disabilities.

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<p>PALABRAS CLAVES: empoderamiento juventud discapacidad autores de artes escénicas</p>	<p>RESUMEN: El campo de la práctica juvenil ha avanzado a pasos agigantados aumentando su ámbito de actuación y posibilitando que grupos de jóvenes que previamente han sido considerados marginados hayan podido lograr una misión transformadora, con el empoderamiento jugando un papel primordial en ella. Sin embargo, si nos referimos a jóvenes con discapacidades, ya sean evidentes o invisibles, dicho campo no ha alcanzado su potencial de empoderamiento y transformación. Este fracaso ha sido reconocido de manera progresiva y se pueden encontrar notables esfuerzos para rectificar esta situación, aunque no sin encontrar desafíos significativos tanto conceptuales como de investigación. En Estados Unidos, así como de manera internacional, la inclusión es un objetivo perseguido tanto por los defensores de las personas con discapacidades como por ellas mismas, incluyendo los jóvenes discapacitados. Es además considerada un prerrequisito básico del empoderamiento, otro de los objetivos de los jóvenes discapacitados. Gracias al acceso a los beneficios de la sociedad, posibilidades y relaciones que la inclusión ofrece, la gente encuentra menos barreras a la hora de conseguir su empoderamiento. Para los jóvenes discapacitados, las artes escénicas, definidas aquí como la actuación, la música o la danza interpretada ante un público, pueden ser un medio importante para la inclusión y el empoderamiento. También es fundamental la consideración del constructo de interseccionalidad en relación con la inclusión de jóvenes discapacitados en las artes escénicas. Este texto analiza cómo el empoderamiento puede aplicarse a jóvenes discapacitados, incluyendo aquellos que son marginados en función de su raza, etnia, género, identidad o expresión sexual o clase socioeconómica además de por su discapacidad. Las artes escénicas se utilizan aquí para ilustrar que los jóvenes discapacitados pueden conseguir su participación, inclusión y empoderamiento.</p>
<p>PALAVRAS-CHAVE: empoderamento juventude deficiência autores das artes cênicas</p>	<p>RESUMO: O campo de prática juvenil tem realizado grandes progressos para aumentar o seu alcance e grupos de jovens, permitindo que tenham sido consideradas anteriormente como capazes de alcançar uma missão transformadora, o empoderamento desempenha um papel fundamental nessa missão. No entanto, se nos referirmos aos jovens com deficiência, está obvio, que o campo ainda não atingiu o seu potencial de empoderamento e transformação. Este fracasso tem sido reconhecido gradualmente e pode ser encontrado esforços notáveis para corrigir esta situação, embora não sem encontrar desafios significativos tanto conceitual e de investigação. Nos Estados Unidos, como a nível internacional, a inclusão é um objetivo perseguido tanto pelos defensores das pessoas com deficiência como a si mesmos, incluindo jovens com deficiência. Também é considerado um pré-requisito básico do empoderamento outro objetivo dos jovens com deficiência. Com acesso aos benefícios da sociedade, as possibilidades e as relações que a inclusão oferece, as pessoas encontram menos barreiras para atingir seu empoderamento. Para os jovens com deficiência, artes cênicas, defini aqui, como a atuação, o uso da música ou dança executadas ante ao público como um meio importante para a inclusão e empoderamento. É também considerado a crítica da construção da interseccionalidade sobre a inclusão de jovens com deficiência nas artes cênicas. Este texto discute como o empoderamento pode ser aplicado as jovens com deficiência, incluindo aqueles que são marginalizados com base na raça, etnia, gênero, identidade, opção sexual ou classe socioeconômica, além de sua deficiência. Artes cênicas são usadas aqui para ilustrar que os jovens com deficiências podem conseguir sua participação, inclusão e empoderamento.</p>

1. Introduction

The field of youth practice, youth work, youth development, or social pedagogy, four of the more popular terms for working with youth, is one that has garnered considerable attention over the past two decades and witnessed an increasing reach to bring highly marginalized groups into programming of all types, including the performing arts (Banks, 2010; Beck & Purcell, 2010, Delgado, In Press; Úcar, 2013). This reach has resulted in a need for practitioners and academics to critically examine closely held beliefs and social justice values that guide these interventions, including the fundamental belief that all youth, regardless of their abilities, should be able to meaningfully participate and thereby be included in the performing arts. Inclusion is central to overcoming marginalization and assists youth with their empowerment,

including youth with disabilities who are too often excluded. Although there are many notable examples of full inclusion of youth with disabilities in the performing arts, more needs to be done on a wider scale.

With the access to the benefits of society, choices, and relationships inclusion brings, people have fewer barriers to empowering themselves. For youth with disabilities, the performing arts, defined here as any acting, song, music, or dance performed before an audience in person, can be an avenue for both inclusion and empowerment.

To conceptualize the role that the performing arts can play in helping youth with disabilities to be included with peers and strive for empowerment, it is important to analyze what empowerment is, in general, and to explore examples of what it may mean. It is important, too, not to think of youth with disabilities as one dimensional because they

should not be defined just by their disabilities, and outreach to them needs to consider their identities holistically. Therefore, they should be appreciated in the various aspects of their unique personal experiences regarding factors such as their race, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, and other characteristics, through an understanding of what is called intersectionality. The value of inclusion of youth with disabilities in the performing arts is important to explore in its many aspects. Youth have to be engaged into performing arts activities, and successful ways to do so need to be considered. Finally, based on the goal of inclusion in the community and the larger society, the importance of relationships in empowerment and engagement in the performing arts should be explored.

2. Empowerment

Empowerment is arguably one of the fundamental and closely cherished values and constructs to which this field of youth practice subscribes, and for very good reasons. The construct of empowerment in the United States has existed since the 1970s, and its evolution since then has shown its saliency for engaging marginalized groups of all backgrounds. However, its application with youth with disabilities has suffered from a lack of program and scholarly attention (Anaby *et al.*, 2013; Bedell *et al.*, 2013; King, Rigby & Batorowicz, 2013), including in research (Aldana, Richards-Schuster, & Checkoway, 2010; Greeley & Washington, 2015).

Although tracing the origins of any social construct is challenging, empowerment origins can be traced back forty years to a book titled *Black empowerment: Social work with Oppressed Communities* by a social worker, Barbara Solomon (1976). Its initial application, as noted in the title of the book, was focused on African-Americans/Blacks in the United States and the role of the social work profession in fostering empowerment of this community by “a process whereby the social worker engages in a set of activities with the client or client system that aim to reduce the powerless that has been created by negative valuations based on membership in a stigmatized group” (p. 19). It is a construct that has continually evolved since then within social work and other disciplines and found wide acceptance across the entire social stratum, but with particular appeal among society’s marginalized groups, and that includes youth. A recent discussion in social work (DuBois & Miley, 2014) affirms the following:

As simultaneously personal and political, empowerment means both transforming oneself and

reforming the socioeconomic and political conditions of oppression. Personal empowerment results in individual growth and heightened self-esteem. Interpersonal empowerment results in altering relationships that cause oppression and cause damage to individuals. Political empowerment is the result of collective action against oppression. Empowerment involves developing a critical understanding about the nature of oppression and the contradictions in the social, political, and economic arrangements of society. (p. 22)

The wide appeal of empowerment, though, makes it elusive to fully and conclusively define, and no more so than when it is applied to youth, regardless of their abilities.

In addition to social work, “Empowerment is a construct shared by many disciplines and arenas: community development, psychology, education, economics, studies of social movements and organizations. Recent literature reviews of articles with a focus on empowerment across several scholarly and practical disciplines have demonstrated that there is no clear definition of the concept” (Mbae, Mukulu & Kihoro, 2016, p. 120). Therefore, empowerment necessitates a contextual understanding to shape how it gets manifested. Nevertheless, the process of labeling or naming a social phenomenon is the critical first step in understanding what we are talking about in the social sciences (Callina *et al.*, 2015).

Empowerment can be a value, goal, process, and outcome, and it is integral to virtually all forms of youth practice, including the performing arts (Henderson, Biscocho & Gerstein, 2016; Kupperts, 2013; Morrel-Samuels *et al.*, 2015; Trayes, Harré & Overall, 2012; Wartemann, Sağlam & McAvoy, 2015; Wernick, Kulick & Woodford, 2014; Wijnen-daele, 2014). Empowerment can be conceptualized as a strategy for self-governance to act on one’s behalf or self-interest (Kwon, 2013, p.5). A number of critical values and constructs have been identified in this field, illustrating its depth and the importance of a social justice foundation (Delgado, 2017; Liljenquist *et al.*, 2016). It can be argued that youth empowerment is not possible without an embrace of social justice and social change (Delgado, 2016; Tolbert *et al.*, 2016). To be effective, however, it must also seek to change the social-ecological circumstances resulting in disempowerment and be a response to oppression for those who are marginalized, and that includes youth (Russell *et al.*, 2009).

Empowerment implies agency on the part of people and communities using their power to obtain what they have a right to within society by their own actions, not by the largesse of those

who hold society's resources. It is a value and form of practice that was never intended to simply increase agency in daily life, though. Instead, it was meant for more ambitious goals targeting oppression and using collective mobilization (Epstein, 2013):

The concept of empowerment has been vulgarized, coming to refer to usual improvements in individual functioning, thus encouraging social work as well as nursing, rehabilitation medicine, and many other fields to claim that they pursue political and social change by simply going about their daily chores without actually measuring empowerment outcomes. Improvements in the activities of daily living, socialization, psychological coping, and physical rehabilitation are not what Freire, Fanon, King, Friedan, and their contemporaries had in mind when they pressed for the empowerment of people. (p. 72)

This construct has the potential of creating major changes in societal attitudes and behaviors, resulting in significant social changes rather than just in individual people's daily behaviors (which, however, can be very damaging to youth with disabilities).

Youth empowerment has drawn extensive attention from scholars, resulting in numerous scholarly and literature reviews. One recent literature review, by Úcar Martínez *et al.* (2016), undertook an extensive review of the literature on youth and empowerment over a 15 year span and uncovered 297 bibliographical references. They determined that this construct needs to be nuanced to take age group into consideration, with six main dimensions associated with youth empowerment being identified: (1) growth and well-being; (2) relational; (3) educational; (4) political; (5) transformative; and (6) emancipative. The authors conclude regarding youth empowerment:

Our work reveals unanimity among most authors regarding the current ambiguous, imprecise nature of the concept, the cause of its versatile use in the various disciplines in which it appears and the number of ways in which it can be applied. Authors also coincide in stating that empowerment is related to change and transformation in people, groups and communities, and to a change from a situation of lack of power to one in which the aforementioned gain control over their lives. The three concepts most frequently linked to empowerment in the analysed research are: power, participation and education. Whether process or outcome, empowerment is always the effect or consequence of an interaction, to a greater or lesser extent negotiated, between the capacity for action of a person, group or community

and the options provided by the physical and socio-cultural environments in which their lives are led. When compared with empowerment per se, youth empowerment is relatively unspecific, suggesting the need for a deeper study into how youth empowerment is produced; such a study should be much more detailed and comparative. (p. 9)

These authors clearly recommend the need to develop a stronger focus on youth empowerment among scholars.

French (2015) reviews the literature on youth empowerment theories and models and identifies five themes that are essential to create a comprehensive understanding of youth empowerment programs: (1) a youth-adult sharing of power; (2) an individual and community focused orientation; (3) a safe and supportive/affirming environment; (4) a valuing of peer collaboration; and (5) an opportunity to engage in reflection. As the reader can, no doubt, surmise based on these two literature reviews, youth empowerment shares similarities with other group-focused efforts at empowerment but also different dimensions when compared to adult empowerment, bringing its unique share of challenges and rewards.

Helping to empower youth to challenge their marginalization and oppression embraces the intent of empowerment, and this is also the case regarding youth with disabilities. How empowerment gets integrated into the goals of youth practice, of course, is open to a wide variety of approaches, including the use of the performing arts, where youth with disabilities have found a home in some places. This field illustrates what is possible when the value of inclusiveness is embraced and there is a willingness to be flexible in programming.

Freire's concept of praxis is relevant to the empowerment of youth with disabilities in the performing arts. It is a construct that is certainly not alien to practitioners and scholars embracing social justice, empowerment, and marginalized groups such as youth with disabilities and other groups such as those of color (Anderson, De Cosson & McIntosh, 2015; Cammarota, 2016; Lorenzo *et al.*, 2015; Shiu *et al.*, 2015). This construct brings an important dimension to any programming that includes youth with disabilities because of the stigma associated with disabilities (Stock, 2016).

Theater, particularly when it actively encourages and incorporates improvisation, can be an effective participatory and empowering method for engaging youth with disabilities (Lobman, 2015; Pomeroy, 2016). Social justice and drama, for example, have a long and distinguished history, bringing this art form to the fore as a means

by which those who are marginalized because of their age, backgrounds, and physical and intellectual abilities can empower themselves (Freebody & Finneran, 2015).

Youth with various kinds of disabilities have been found to engage and benefit in singing, helping them achieve valuable social skills (Vaiouli, Grimmet & Ruich, 2015). O'Neill (2015) and Nils-son (2015), for example, see music as an attractive mechanism or vehicle for achieving youth empowerment. It has taken on added significance when applied to highly marginalized youth, such as those with disabilities engaged in those activities.

It is important to realize that there is a close relationship between empowerment and engagement in creative thinking (Lumsden, 2016), which is a strength for youth's development and self-expression. Youth empowerment is also closely associated with leadership (Moore, 2016), another valuable skill for all youth. The experiences of youth with disabilities in participating in community activities are very limited, though, which reduces their opportunities to experience empowerment processes associated with meaningful engagement (Law *et al.*, 2015; Lee, 2015; Murphy & McFerran, 2016; Willis *et al.*, 2016.) Youth with disabilities, however, can find the performing arts an empowering activity or mechanism through which to have their voices (narratives) shared outside of their immediate world and have this be an essential element of the empowerment process or journey (Young-Mason, 2015).

Service-learning can be used as creative arts performing projects for empowering youth with disabilities while having them "give back" to their communities (Alexander, 2015; Delgado, 2016). Community service projects initiated by these youth can thrust them into their communities to perform in community settings plays, dances, and musical performances (Lorenzo *et al.*, 2015). These projects not only benefit communities but also provide youth with an opportunity to learn about the staging of performances outside of schools and youth organizations, researching themes of importance in their communities, and engaging with audiences that represent the people with whom they interact on a daily basis but in a different context, for instance.

Huebner (1998), almost 20 years ago, identified three avenues through which youth empowerment can unfold or be operationalized: (1) through openly sharing information (information is power); (2) by creating realistic autonomy through which they exercise social agency; and (3) through staff exercising their roles in collaborative and participatory ways. Each of these perspectives provides

staff with ample ways of engaging and increasing the social agency of youth with disabilities.

Because praxis is the approach of analyzing the context in which one lives, then acting within that context, and further reflecting on the action and the forces that one has encountered in that activity, it can result in a powerful transformative experience (Elam, 2001). Reflecting on social forces beyond oneself contextualizes disability as largely socially constructed. Youth can understand that significant social forces are actively impeding them to achieve their potential. Consciousness raising and social action related to social justice can be fostered through the tapping of creative energies and reflection inherent in the performing arts. In fact, in the Disability Rights Movement in the United States, some activists have been engaged in the performing arts and, in their performances, recognized and showed the connection between activism and the arts (Golfus & Sampson, 1994).

It is appropriate to end this section by discussing the importance of trust and relationships. Empowerment is simply not possible without relationships based upon mutual trust, a key element found in meaningful relationships such as friendships and effective mentorship (Delgado, 2017; Ross *et al.*, 2016). Meaningful participation and empowerment go together very well, and one is not possible without the other being present (Jupp, 2007). Wooster (2009) specifically addresses the importance of defining what is meant by "inclusion" in the performance arts and presents the case study of the Odyssey Theatre, a group of performers with learning disabilities and performers without disabilities, illustrating how the performing arts have more than artistic and social worth, but also pay special attention to empowerment and leadership.

Segal (2011) introduces the concept of social empathy and an embrace of social justice as a humanistic manifestation translating into a noble purpose. Youth empowerment is impossible without social empathy and social connections, two elements that are essential in making them contributing members of a community and society (Modirzadeh, 2013; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Wagaman, 2011).

3. Intersectionality

Youth with disabilities face biases and stereotypes that can prevent them from reaching their potential (Carter, Brock & Trainor, 2014; Gorter *et al.*, 2014). These obstacles have to do with prejudices concerning their interests and capabilities. However, we often overlook the power of resiliency,

which is a construct that has rarely been applied to these youth, including tapping their definition of this construct (Runswick-Cole & Goodley, 2013). For example, youth of color who are deaf are rarely discussed in the professional literature that focuses on deafness, as if they simply do not exist (Moore & Mertens, 2015). The social consequences of this invisibility are insidious, with profound consequences for them, and applicability for other visible and invisible disabilities.

Youth who have disabilities, like all youth, bring identities and concerns that are multidimensional. These youth can also have other identities that are stigmatized by society, and it necessitates that social scientists and practitioners understand the power of intersectionality in shaping their existence. They may have privilege by their race, sex, or class, but they may have marginalized identities besides having a disability because of their race, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, class, or other characteristics.

Having a disability has both commonalities with, and differences from, other oppressed statuses. An obvious similarity with other oppressed statuses is that disabilities have been found to carry stigma worldwide, to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the nature of the disability (Room, Rehm, Trotter, Paglia & Üstün, 2001). An obvious difference from many other oppressed statuses is that the youth may not have other family members who share the oppressed status of disability within their own families.

The fact that they are not sharing the disability status with other family members should be considered when looking at the youth's experience of intersectionality. Family members need to have their consciousness raised about the experiences of the youth members, and the self-expression and teaching of others through the performing arts is one way to do so. Furthermore, the youth may experience few role models within their family who share other oppressed statuses the youth may experience, such as regarding their sexual orientation or gender expression, compounding the need to raise the consciousness of their own families as well as the larger community regarding intersectionality.

Collins and Bilge (2016) provide a definition of intersectionality that captures the complexity of this construct (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 2): "Intersectionality is a way of understanding and studying the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to inequality, people's lives and the organization of power

in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves".

The construct of intersectionality is not new, with some scholars tracing its origins back over two centuries to the Global South, which encompasses countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Its applicability is enhanced when discussing youth who are marginalized because of their ethnic and racial backgrounds, sexual identity, and disabilities (Slater, 2016).

Collins and Bilge (2016) propose a six core intersectionality framework that can facilitate critical inquiry and praxis: (1) social inequality; (2) power; (3) relationality; (4) social context; (5) complexity; and (6) social justice. These six perspectives lend themselves to an analysis of youth with disabilities engaging in the performing arts as a major participatory experience in youth practice.

It is impossible to separate intersectionality from the importance of social justice, and Collins and Bilge (2016) discuss this close relationship between social justice and intersectionality:

Social justice may be intersectionality's most contentious core idea, but it is one that expands the circle of intersectionality to include people who use intersectionality as an analytic tool for social justice. Working for social justice is not a requirement for intersectionality. Yet people who are engaged in using intersectionality as an analytic tool and people who see social justice as central rather than as peripheral to their lives are often one and the same. These people are typically critical of, rather than accepting of, the status quo. (p. 30)

These youth participants are thus empowered to play an active role in seeking solutions that are socially just, increasing their efficacy in the process and gaining important life lessons in the process, too.

4. The value of engaging youth with disabilities in the performing arts

Travis and Leech (2014) address the need and importance of counteracting conventional youth practice approaches that emphasize activities of engagement that are apolitical and ignore the struggles and political forces operative to marginalize youth who are "different":

A shift occurred in research about adolescents in the general population. Research is moving away

from deficits toward a resilience paradigm and understanding trajectories of positive youth development. This shift has been less consistent in research and practice with African American youth. A gap also exists in understanding whether individual youth development dimensions generate potential in other dimensions. This study presents an empowerment-based positive youth development model. It builds upon existing research to present a new vision of healthy development for African American youth that is strengths-based, developmental, culture-bound, and action-oriented. (p. 93)

Grounding empowerment within a social-political-cultural context allows this construct to be universal with necessary adjustments to take into account local circumstances and intersectionality.

Marginalization of youth with disabilities occurs by the measures of a youth's educational achievement used in schools, such as standardized testing, which tend to be based on ability to achieve in reading, math, and science. By their very nature, they ignore creative strengths that may be abundant in youth with disabilities and, in fact, those abilities, while strong, may never be tapped and supported in an educational setting. One cannot use a standardized measure of a youth's ability to convey ideas, emotion, and meaning through drama, music, or dance. Their "multiple intelligences" are not valued (Gardner, 2011).

Empowerment, too, is closely associated with self-realization for youth with disabilities (Osman *et al.*, 2016; Shogren & Shaw, 2016). The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) proclaims that all individuals have the right to participate meaningfully in the life of their community's political and public life (Trevisan, 2016; United Nations, 2006). This aspirational goal has not been achieved with youth with disabilities as a group, though. Developing solutions is not just a practical goal but also is an ethical imperative for people who have an influence within the performing arts. For example, the authors are social workers whose *Code of Ethics* is congruent with United Nations ethical guides such as the CRPD and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, 1948). Therefore, in work with youth, adults who support and guide the youth have an ethical responsibility to strive for inclusion and breaking down of barriers to inclusion. Key to that is seeking out, and then listening to, the particular experiences of youth with disabilities as to what their experiences are, both positive and negative.

The emergence of "disability equity" as a value and goal has tremendous relevance for performing arts empowerment and the field of youth

practice. Decottignies (2016) discusses the concept of "disability equity," although referring to Canada but applicable to other countries, for instance, as having profound implications for youth with disabilities in the performing arts:

Disability inequity arises from biased notions of disability as a form of tragedy and abnormality, and of disabled people as incapable and dependent. These notions are so deeply entrenched in mass and popular culture that they have come to dominate the collective Canadian psyche. Disability-identified art disrupts these misperceptions through the development and dissemination of artwork that inverts the position of disabled people in society as "lesser than" and affirms impairment as a source of diversity and pride. (p. 44)

Disability equity embraces values related to social justice, social change, and participatory democracy, and the importance of changing disempowering attitudes towards youth with disabilities.

What are called Positive Youth Development (PYD) programs have the goal of reaching youth at the community level for prevention goals. Integrating youth with disabilities within their activities must be prominent, if it seeks to be a field that is inclusive and not limited to just those who are "typical" (Becker & Dusing, 2010; Barrett & Bond, 2015; Olsen & Dieser, 2012). Unfortunately, it can certainly be argued that youth with disabilities have not found an affirming place within PYD programs or scholarship about them, even though youth with disabilities are a group that has very few options to engage in after-school activities because of the challenges they face in getting transportation and, depending upon disability, staff being able to assist them in participation. It should be noted that the field of youth work, in general, has not escaped this criticism (Taylor, 2012).

There are many potential benefits for youth with disabilities participating in the performing arts, and these will be unique to any individual's experience. Several possible general areas can be identified, though, that may be personally rewarding as well as help to develop a firm sense of self-empowerment and also make connections with a self-advocacy community.

These include simple fun and enjoyment with a social group; personal growth regarding self-empowerment and self-efficacy; development of various academic skills; increasing knowledge of the substance, stories, and history of the performing arts; sharing one's experiences, ideas, and emotions with the audience; expressing oneself artistically; using personal strengths that schools may be overlooking; being a role model for younger

youth with disabilities; working alongside adult performer role models with disabilities; transmitting culture (such as Deaf Culture); developing skills for life-long leisure activities; meeting other self-advocates for potential organizing; preparing for higher education; and developing skills for employment in the performing arts in a variety of roles as performers or in other roles in the performing arts.

In fact, not including youth with disabilities in the arts is not just a violation of their right to an educational experience; it can potentially be a violation of their right to employment. These are both protected by the United States Americans with Disabilities Act and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children with Disabilities. Before inclusion was mandated under disability rights laws, youth with disabilities were often excluded, not just from performing arts education in public schools, but from public schools in general.

In some instances, they might be educated at a separate school, such as a school for youth who were blind (which, in southern states in the United States, also were segregated by race, in addition to disability, an historical example of intersectionality) (Museum of the American Printing House for the Blind, 2017). One particularly well known United States musician and singer who was blind, Ray Charles, received several years of music education at the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind in St. Augustine, Florida (Florida School for the Deaf and Blind). Also, the nationally recognized United States gospel group, The Blind Boys of Alabama, met and were educated at what was, under segregation in Alabama, previously named the Talladega Institute for the Negro Deaf and Blind (now named the Alabama Institute for the Deaf and Blind) (Levintova, 2011). Of course, all youth with disabilities should have the opportunities to develop skills to find employment in the performing arts, whether they ever become famous or not.

The skills developed in the performing arts may be valuable to both the performing arts that are in person methods as well as be transferable to other arts areas, such as in film, television, and, more recently, Internet based performances. Increasingly, actors with disabilities have prominent roles in these media as well as the in person performing arts. Again, the roles can include performance as well as other roles that make film, television, and Internet media possibilities for employment.

5. Engagement of youth with disabilities in the performing arts

Ecological factors such as attitudes, physical barriers, supportive roles, lack of transportation, and

availability of opportunities, for example, have been found to wield significant influence on youth with disabilities participating in community activities and events of various types (Anaby *et al.*, 2013; Bedell *et al.*, 2013; King, Rigby & Batorowicz, 2013; Liljenquist *et al.*, 2016; Willis *et al.*, 2016). An explicit embrace of an empowerment value views social and environmental factors as targets that increase youth self-efficacy in the process of creating a social climate that embraces physical and intellectual diversity and removes structural barriers (Osman *et al.*, 2016; Shogren & Shaw, 2016).

There are several barriers to implementing inclusion of youth with disabilities in the performing arts that should be addressed: lack of knowledge; negative attitudes toward people with disabilities; lack of universal design in the social environment; and lack of universal design in the built or physical environment. "Universal design is the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design" (Center for Universal Design, 1997). Specialized design or assistive technology may be necessary, too, even with universal design, but universal design can help to include many youth with disabilities who would otherwise be excluded. Although any community may need to continue to strive to address these barriers well, acknowledging and analyzing them are the first steps in addressing them.

Attitudes that are either condescending or stigmatizing towards youth with disabilities can be influenced by education by various advocates towards consciousness raising, which should begin in local schools and other community organizations that influence potential allies of all ages. This education can be led by self-advocacy and ally organizations and professionals in education and human services.

Youth empowerment does not mean that they cannot have, or do not have, adult allies or that they do not focus beyond youth. In fact, they can achieve positive community changes those have an impact not only on their lives but also that of their family and friends (Delgado, 2016; Morrel-Samuels *et al.*, 2015; Tahzib, 2016). Youth adult allies are in an excellent position to move forward with collaborative performing arts projects that are inclusive. They can take the lead as role models for youth who do not have disabilities in implementing peer group inclusion as well as in recruiting youth with disabilities and, in some cases, their parents, too. Adults, both with and without disabilities, have important roles as advocates for the inclusion of youth with disabilities in the performing arts.

Garoián (1999, p.57) argues that casting performance art as a form of social change pedagogy

empowers youth by facilitating their being able “to intervene and reclaim their bodies from oppressive academic practices that assume students’ personal memories and cultural histories to be insignificant to identity construction and new mythic representations.” Youth adult allies must exercise respect to foster any form of empowerment in collaborative ventures (Weybright *et al.*, 2016). The performing arts are arguably in an advantageous position to embrace an inclusive stance and reach out and include youth with disabilities, adding an exciting perspective on the youth practice field. It is best to understand and appreciate youth empowerment not as an individual phenomenon but as a collective one, bringing the power of the group in shaping the experience.

Lack of awareness may be able to be addressed by professionals in leadership positions who, themselves, are knowledgeable, or become more knowledgeable, and then educate other professionals; community allies such as parents of youth with disabilities and adults with disabilities throughout the community; and youth self-advocates. Lack of knowledge as to how to make the performing arts inclusive can draw on the many models in both community-based performing arts associations that are inclusive as well as models in schools that serve youth with disabilities in their performing arts curricula. In addition, there are models in higher education of students with disabilities in the performing arts that can be instructive to those working with youth. One example for education of people who are deaf is Gallaudet University in Washington, DC, in the United States. This university is dedicated to students who are deaf and hard of hearing and communicates everything in both American Sign Language and English. Gallaudet grants students a Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Arts that includes both theatre and dance education (Gallaudet, 2017).

The social environment, a concern of universal design advocates in education and other fields, is closely tied to improved attitudes but can go beyond attitudes in terms of program design and implementation anti-discrimination laws. These laws draw on the experiences of self-advocates and their allies as to how and where social exclusion happens in the design and implementation of performing arts programs as well as other programs, including in the formats in which information about them is shared. The built environment, too, can be addressed by anti-discrimination legislation, but it needs to actually be actively applied and monitored in settings in which youth with disabilities spend their time, such as schools, which may still have existing physical barriers to their inclusion in their performing arts venues. This does

not, however, negate the ethical responsibility of adult leaders to educate themselves about specific disabilities and the international Disability Rights Movement and goals for inclusion. Furthermore, adults with disabilities and disability organizations, whether public or private, can be consulted for how to make performing arts venues accessible in their built or physical environments.

Although this discussion focuses on youth with disabilities in the performing arts as performers, of course, a parallel process should be carried out regarding their inclusion in the performing arts as audience members. Practices that make participation as audience members possible are mandated by laws worldwide such as the Americans with Disabilities Act in the United States and include having Sign Language interpretation and designated spaces for people who use wheelchairs as well as a variety of assistive technologies (Kilpatrick, 2007). Access to the role of audience member helps to break down barriers to access to activities that community members without disabilities enjoy and may even help to engage youth with disabilities to become performers themselves.

Community music performances provide an opportunity to integrate members of the community, including those with disabilities, to participate in this collective performing art (Veblen, 2013). Besides a music program within its school, the Perkins School for the Blind has partnered with other institutions, such as Berklee College of Music in Boston, for inclusiveness of musicians who are blind in education (Berklee College of Music, 2017). Also, currently, the United States Library of Congress is digitizing the largest Braille music collection in the world, a collection to which Perkins has donated Braille sheet music (Smithsonian.com, 2016).

Drama can be a therapeutic method in assisting youth with various disabilities, such as autism, for instance (D’Amico, Lalonde & Snow, 2015; O’Sullivan & Wilde, 2015). Goddard (2015) provides an excellent example of youth empowerment and the activities of a United Kingdom youth troupe with learning disabilities that used theatre to express the emotions and dilemmas they face in “transitioning from young people ‘participating’ in their world to more actively engaging in arts leadership roles”.

Reading or reciting poetry in person before an audience is a form of performing arts. Seen but Seldom Heard is a project in Scotland that utilizes performance poetry that focuses on youth with disabilities exploring their encounters with issues of identity, stigma, and stereotypes and seeks to have audiences understand how these issues have shaped their lives, besides as having audiences

reflect on experiences related to disabilities and discrimination. This was found to be an effective performance method for engaging and empowering youth with disabilities (Fenge, Hodges & Cutts, 2016).

The systematic identification and development of talented young dancers with disabilities can be incorporated into youth practice when addressed in an inclusive curriculum and programming perspective (Aujla & Redding, 2014; Whatley, 2007). Dance can be modified to include youth with disabilities, and no group, regardless of abilities, cannot engage in dance, if accommodations are made to the production. Zitomer and Reid (2011) found that youth with disabilities influence perceptions of dance ability, including the perceptions of those without disabilities. Both youth with disabilities and without with disabilities benefited from engaging in dance together.

The 1980s are characterized as a key decade during which the explicit embrace of inclusivity of dancers with disabilities to perform alongside those without disabilities occurred (Morris, Baldeon & Scheuneman, 2015). These youth, as in the case of those who are deaf, for example, can effectively engage with each other and the audience through dance. "Although ASL (American Sign Language) is accomplished with the hands and arms, while dancing utilizes the entire body, the ability to express emotion and meaning through movement links the two together... but it is the implementation of dance within the deaf community that is so vital. The ability to experience organized movement with a group bonds those dancers together and creates a united community that is sought after by every individual" (Edelstein, 2016, p. 5).

The goal and subject of inclusion is getting increasing attention in the dance professional literature because youth, regardless of their disabilities, can actively participate and benefit from engaging in dance. Bodén (2013) addresses the benefits of dance but also the challenges associated with this performing art:

"Dance is a universal language, a basic form of expression, whether it is for entertainment or communication. It is found in all corners of the world and as far back in history as can be seen. In the modern, western world though, it has become something embarrassing; most people (especially males) only dare enter the dance floor after a few drinks, if even then. Still, it is a built-in reflex, to move your body to the rhythm - just look at small children when they hear music! The health benefits of dancing are well researched and besides from being an excellent physical exercise form, they include many psychological

aspects such as increased self-esteem and creative thinking". (p. 5)

Although the theme of affirming and inclusivity can be found throughout the other performing arts, it has been highlighted as a particular reward of dance and physical movement.

Dance is an activity that serves as an attractive alternative for youth with various intellectual and physical disabilities to achieve positive outcomes, while incorporating diverse learner educational needs in a manner that can be fun and instructional, with lifelong implications (Munsell & Bryant Davis, 2015). Yet, dance as a performing art is usually associated with non-obvious physical disability (Burt, 2007). Eales and Goodwin (2015) describe the success of dance as a vehicle in an integrated dance program that includes people with various disabilities by approaching disabilities within a social justice framework. Youth who use wheelchairs, for example, can participate in dance by their movement being choreographed into the overall performance.

Hackney and Earhart (2010) advocate for their inclusion in tango classes. This is a dance form that is considered highly scripted and associated with a serious view of dancing and lends itself to including other types of performing arts, as in the case of singing. Bahl (2012), in keeping with a Spanish theme, brings an added dimension to dance and discusses the power of *duende* in flamenco and how this form of singing has tapped his experiences and identity in expressing deeper emotions related to disability and diasporic (social) identity. This dance form is an integral part of Spain's culture and a source of pride and expression in performances, regardless of the country in which the performers eventually resettle.

Many models exist for performance arts education for people with disabilities. One notable example is Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, Massachusetts, which, as the oldest school for the blind in the United States, has long and extensive experience in teaching the performing arts to its students who are blind, deafblind, or have visual impairments (Perkins School for the Blind). It uses physical design features that make stage performances accessible to its students which can be integrated into other settings quite easily, such as tactile markers to indicate where a stage ends. Perkins has used Braille scripts and sheet music with its students, too.

VSA, the international organization on the performing, visual, and literary arts and disability, was founded in 1974 and has 52 international affiliates. Currently, it serves seven million people. Its principles are that (1) every young person with

a disability deserves access to high quality arts learning experiences; (2) all artists in schools and art educators should be prepared to include students with disabilities in their instruction; (3) all children, youth, and adults with disabilities should have complete access to cultural facilities and activities; and (4) all individuals with disabilities who aspire to careers in the arts should have the opportunity to develop appropriate skills (The Kennedy Center, 2017). The principal of one of its public school partner schools with a model inclusive program in Boston, Massachusetts, who is himself blind, wrote a book that describes the value of inclusiveness to the entire school, not just for the approximately one-third of the children with disabilities (Henderson, 2011).

6. Conclusion

The next decade promises to bring new insights into making youth empowering practice more inclusive than ever. The performing arts are but one

programming vehicle, although a prominent one with a long history, for empowering youth with disabilities to tell their narratives as well as being a vehicle for achieving positive social change while experiencing personal transformation. This article has provided a glimpse into the world of youth performing arts, empowerment, and disabilities. There is little doubt that this youth field is primed to continue expanding and embracing concepts such as empowerment and challenging our thinking of how it will undergo changes.

How empowerment, youth with disabilities, and the performing arts will push conventional boundaries in the immediate future will ultimately transform what constitutes the field of youth work in its various manifestations internationally. Nevertheless, much empirical and conceptual work must be undertaken to apply concepts such as empowerment to a group of youth who have not benefited from these types of activities in the past because they were largely overlooked by the youth practice field.

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