Keywords: multiculturalism, power, community, playmaking, process drama, in–role

Schools do not simply reflect the problems of the larger society, they perpetuate them. Schools are designed to create citizens, fill market needs, and generally replicate the socioeconomic divisions represented by the student population and in society as a whole (Apple, 1995). Consequently, students of color and the urban poor experience the same oppression and lack of substantial opportunities for advancement in schools that are reflected in wider society. They attend schools that are under-resourced and prepare them to fill the same lower socio-economic slots occupied by the members of their communities (Fine and Weis, 2003; Apple, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Further, “young people who are subjugated by oppressive social, economic and cultural forces are denied any real sense of agency and lack a capacity to act on and change their world” (McInerney, 2009, p. 28).

Educational theorists agree that the development of identity is a critical task of schooling, schooling which should disrupt socially imposed constructs around race, class, gender, sexuality, and traditional power roles. By utilizing curriculum, pedagogy, and structural dynamics that integrate opportunities for students to think critically, explore multiple perspectives, experiment with a range of identities and presentations of the self, and draw connections between the oppression they experience in their lives and larger social dynamics, students in schools will be better prepared to participate in redefining themselves and the society of which they are a part (McInerney, 2009; Gallagher, 2007; Fine and Weis, 2003; Freire, 1993). Further, theorists on culturally relevant teaching agree on the importance of the establishment of community as a necessary factor for facilitating school success for urban students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Reflecting a communal orientation characteristic of the home cultures of many urban students generates a sense of belonging for individual students, and allows them to scaffold new learning on familiar group dynamics.

Through drama, we can create communities of learners engaged in a collective struggle against the status quo. Process Drama, in-role drama, and playmaking are optimal tools for facilitating the development of community among students and between students and teachers, exploring unequal power dynamics, and practicing various forms of power. For the purposes of the following discussion, process drama refers to drama work that utilizes a variety of drama and theatre conventions, in which “the conventions selected are mainly concerned with the processes of theatre as a means of developing understanding about both human experience and theatre itself” (Neelands & Goode, 1990, p. 5). In-role drama refers to work in which students in role as experts, stakeholders or problem-solvers are confronted with a
real or fictitious problem and are asked to question, debate, discuss, consider, and come to a resolution of that problem. Playmaking refers to the use of a variety of drama/theatre techniques to develop original performance work with students which emphasizes the exploration of their ideas and realities with the goal of developing their voices and visions of the world and bringing them to a broader audience.

DRAMA AND COMMUNITY

The fact that drama is an effective way to build community is nearly a truism in the field, and practitioners point to the way that the fictional community of drama situations fosters the development of real community among participants. In previous research on the effects of drama on classroom community, there is compelling evidence that drama structures facilitate a sense of collaboration between teachers and students, and within the peer group (Gallagher, 2007; Manley and O’Neill, 1997; Neelands & Goode, 1990).

The dramatic arts have a unique capacity to create an experience of community. The collaborative processes of the drama classroom can provide a powerful opportunity to enhance young people’s need for belonging and purpose. (Cahill, 2002, p. 21)

Community is characterized by caring relationships, high expectation messages and opportunities for meaningful participation and contribution (Cahill, 2002). Further, the development of trust, among students and between students and teachers, is identified as a critical element in the establishment of community.

Playmaking, in-role, and process drama facilitate the development of classroom community. In these approaches, the focus is on group roles and group activities, in which students become responsible for and to each other. For example, in in-role drama, students work collaboratively to gain an understanding of a situation and explore and implement possible solutions. In playmaking, students share their ideas and life experiences and work together to bring them into effective dramatic action. In process drama work, the teacher often works alongside the students, taking role or serving as a coach and facilitator, and guiding the students’ exploration of the topic rather than mandating their learning, facilitating a sense of collaboration between teacher and students. In the process of working collaboratively toward a common goal, hearing others and being heard about issues that are of consequence to them, classroom community builds.

DRAMA AND POWER

“Power is always in and around classrooms.” (Foucault, in Fine et al, 2000; Fine & Weis, 2003, p. 125). Power, and the reinforcement of White, middle-class power in particular, are apparent in curriculum, tracking, the racial and class make-up of the staff, faculty, and administration of schools, and in the buildings themselves (Gallagher, 2007; Fine and Weis, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Students of color