

Say Something

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Abstract

Say Something tells the story of a high school drill team that utilized dance as a vehicle to overcome personal obstacles and to become a sisterhood while striving for academic success at a Title 1 high school in rural Texas. A drill team is a group of dancers who perform on the football field during halftime shows at weekly football games. The dances are precision-focused, oftentimes involving high kicks or pom-poms, and they celebrate uniformity. Although this dance form is imbedded in a tradition that commoditizes the gender stereotyping of women, presenting them as Southern Belles, the drill team also provides a safe space for adolescent girls to bond and explore their inter- and intrapersonal intelligences and communications. *Say Something* was a contemporary dance choreographed for the drill team's 2014 annual spring dance show. The piece reflected dancers' experiences of bonding with one another through performances and rehearsals while also struggling through poverty, language barriers as English Language Learners, and abuse, all the while carrying each other along the road toward high school graduation. A video of the dance performance can be seen here: <https://vimeo.com/130205070>

Several lifting sequences that were performed within the dance were created from contact improvisational studies that dancers experienced in the classroom. In one such study, students were guided through a series of partnerships where they were asked to connect emotionally and physically with one another. Some of these partnerships involved students simply looking into another dancer's eyes and silently asking themselves what they had in common with this other dancer, and how they felt they were different. This exercise helped students alter their perspectives of one another, allowing them to let go of any presumptions they may have had about the other. As the students continued with other pairings, they began to make physical contact, both manipulating and caring for one another, and participated in weight sharing. At the end of the exercise, students sat together in a circle and reflected on their experiences. Many began to tear up as they expressed how they felt taken care of by one another through the dance

exercise and how this was a representation of the dancers' bonds with one another outside of the classroom. This experience was at the core of the meaning behind *Say Something*.

This presentation also touched on the successful pedagogical approach to the dance program, which is situated in a school with a rich history of violence in and outside of the school building. This approach was rooted in tenets from Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed, as developed by Paulo Freire (2000) and Augusto Boal (2008). Through Freire's concept of opening dialogues within oppressed communities and constant reflection, the dance program was built on discussions with the student population so that dance could be used as a means to help students explore and reflect on their personal and yet shared experiences. The assignment's focus of allowing the student dancers to become a part of the community while the teacher bore witness to the relationship the students developed with dance allowed the performers to connect in more meaningful ways to *Say Something*.

Keywords: arts education, multicultural education, community, pedagogy

References

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Chell Parkins is a choreographer, educator, scholar, and performer who earned her MFA from the University of Texas at Austin, where she began investigating ways to integrate technology in her teaching and performance. She has taught performing arts in the private and public sectors for more than 20 years. She began using *Theatre of the Oppressed* as a guideline to create opportunities for social change among at-risk populations while teaching for Creative Action, a nonprofit organization in Austin, Texas. She spent the past three years teaching dance as a vehicle for empowerment in the Texas public school system before becoming a lecturer at Middle Tennessee State University, in Murfreesboro, Tennessee.