

# Theatre

# COUNTS:

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HOW THEATRE  
EDUCATION  
TRANSFORMS  
STUDENTS' LIVES



**ARTS**  
EDUCATION  
PARTNERSHIP




# Key Terms

**THEATRE EDUCATION** is an interdisciplinary form of learning that encompasses dramatic interpretation, writing, multimedia production and technical skill through the artistic processes of creating, performing, responding and connecting. A comprehensive theatre education includes instruction in acting, designing, writing, producing/directing and dramaturgy, all of which nurture the human need to express thoughts and feelings through storytelling. The terms “theatre education” and “drama education” are often used interchangeably, but for the purposes of this report, AEP uses the term “theatre” in alignment with our partner organizations and in a way that is inclusive of the many different types of theatre instruction that exist.

**TECHNICAL THEATRE** includes the broad array of creative design and hands-on activities and products that establish the visual, aural and aesthetic products of a given theatrical presentation before and during the production. Technical theatre instruction addresses the varied skills and knowledge necessary to help students become competent technicians. Along with gaining an understanding of the science and math implicit in every aspect of technical theatre, student technicians learn how to safely and effectively apply their training to design and build sound and lighting systems, costumes, makeup, sets, props and more to construct the world of a play inhabited by actors and experienced by audiences.

*These definitions were created for the purpose of this document in partnership with the Educational Theatre Association and American Alliance for Theatre & Education.*

# Theatre Counts



Theatre education research shows the power of the art form to transform students’ experiences of themselves as well as their relationships with peers and the larger world. The process and product of theatre learning incorporates creative and technical skills across many learning disciplines. Access to [adequately resourced](#) and [standards-based](#) theatre education during the school day is an important factor in promoting high-quality theatre experiences. As educators play a crucial role in nurturing students, educator preparation and professional development opportunities in multiple subject areas are also critical in effective theatre education. The process and the product of theatre learning incorporate creative and technical skills across many learning disciplines, and educators can play a crucial role in nurturing student success throughout their personal, academic and professional lives.

# Acknowledgments

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# About the Arts Education Partnership

AEP has been supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the U.S. Department of Education since 1995 and is administered by Education Commission of the States. AEP maintains ArtsEdSearch. Arts and theatre education specialists vetted all studies cited in this brief, and all studies can be found in ArtsEdSearch and contributing journals.



On stage, the audience sees a young person bow at the end of a theatre production. What the audience may not see are the hours of rehearsal spent preparing for this moment; their classmates poised on the catwalk and shining the stage light to capture the performer's joy; the costumers' research, drawings and design; the audio technician's artful and precise balance of sound; and the stage manager creating harmony among the performers and the crew. The audience may not recognize that they are seeing the result of years of training and commitment on the part of educators to support students. Theatre education benefits are numerous and powerful and exist across student populations, age levels and learning environments. It positively impacts K-12 learning environments by also preparing effective future theatre educators through college coursework.

Theatre education can help young people develop a strong sense of self and identity, build empathy and learning among peers and broaden the ways they make meaning of the world around them. Yet the [last comprehensive arts education study](#), examining the state of arts education during the 2008-09 school year, found that only 4% of all public elementary schools offered theatre instruction, and less than 50% of public secondary schools offered theatre instruction during the school day. Additional [data](#) from a 2012 Americans for the Arts report suggest that fewer schools offered theatre courses during the school day (79% sampled) than offered extracurricular theatre (95% sampled). In addition, schools that serve wealthier students are more likely to offer theatre education during the school day (41% to 56%) than schools serving student populations with higher concentrations of poverty (28%). These numbers highlight a general lack of access to theatre education and underline the need for continued research and data collection.

Limiting theater opportunities to after-school participation can create barriers to access for students from lower-income families, who are more likely to have limited access to transportation and competing demands of employment and child care responsibilities. The lack of curricular resources can also limit access in high-poverty schools. A 2012 Educational Theatre Association [Survey of Theatre Education in United States High Schools](#) found that over half of theatre teachers reported having no access to required instructional resources, including dedicated performance space, set construction space and storage space for costumes, props and scenery.

For this Special Report, the Arts Education Partnership reviewed research studies identified within ArtsEdSearch (the national clearinghouse of arts education research), the International Journal of Education and the Arts and the Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders to explore the importance of theatre in student learning and academic and personal growth. While most of the research shared in this report focuses on performative theatre, AEP recognizes the importance of technical theatre, which offers similar developmental benefits and important pathways for careers but has not been researched as extensively. The featured studies show theatre's positive impact on student success and bolster findings that theatre education:

- Promotes identity development and growth.
- Builds empathy and relationships among peers.
- Empowers participants to transform their understanding of their place in the world.

## Develops Self Concept and Identity

Theatre education offers students valuable identity formation tools through the ownership of organizational and creative playmaking decisions. From elementary and secondary school classrooms to out-of-school programs, research demonstrates that the core elements of theatre education build resilience and positive self-concept — vital personal development characteristics that can positively impact a child throughout their life.

## Enhances Self-Concept

A [2019 experiential design study](#) investigating the effect of improvisational theatre classes on elementary children found a positive effect on self-concept, particularly with students who began the classes with a lower self-concept. By engaging students in learning processes that rely on community interaction, personal spontaneity, commitment to group performance and being present in the moment, improvisational theatre education encourages students to take creative risks. A [study](#) of elementary children engaged in creative dramatic experiences found that young children who experience higher levels of personal distress can cultivate emotional control and resiliency through play-based expression and physicalizing emotional states and traits. A [study](#) of middle school girls engaged in theatre education demonstrates that certain teaching strategies can support positive self-concept by encouraging a decentering of knowledge and authority and empowering students to co-create a collaborative, affirming learning environment.

## Cultivates Positive Sense of Personal Identity

When students find their personal identity in conflict with others, inclusive theatre education programs can provide safe spaces for young people to explore who they are. A [study](#) of the narrative-performance process of workshops, discussion, writing and performance promoted positive

youth development among youth who identify as LGBTQI+. Through their theatre education experiences, students gained confidence in the value of their personal identities and were able to explore “possible selves” through performing character identities. [Another study](#) on community-based arts programming for LGBTQI+ young adults showed that participants learned ways to communicate emotion and personal meaning about their sexual identities and conflicts within their cultures.

## Prepares Educators to Create Empowering Learning Environments

Theatre education can be vital in helping young people to develop their self-concept and identity, as well as to question preconceived notions of who they should be. Professional development that encourages teachers to question their own preconceived notions of students' identity can help ensure that students' theatre education experiences are both high-quality and transformative. Researchers [who studied](#) a yearlong preschool educator professional development program that integrated drama strategies into literacy practices found that the strategies helped teachers rethink their implicit biases about children's learning identities and abilities. [Another study](#) conducted in a conventional high school drama classroom setting found that teachers who are critically conscious of restrictive gender norms depicted in plays can help guide students to deconstruct those norms within a safe space. A [third study](#) found that when preservice drama teachers are trained to be aware of their beliefs and biases about student populations, they can positively impact how they work with students.

## Improves Peer Relations and Empathy for Others

Theatre's inherent processes of artistic expression can promote a deeper understanding of others' points of view by creating opportunities for students to collaborate in play building and to “walk in someone else's shoes” in play performance.

## Builds Prosocial Behavior

Theatre education programming helps students develop prosocial behaviors, as well as problem-solving and creative-thinking skills. These competencies are key to developing both strong peer relationships and sensitivity and empathy to and for others. In [one study](#), researchers found that elementary students participating in a school theatre program on youth violence prevention — focused on rehearsing and performing conflict scenarios — demonstrated an increase in levels of all measured prosocial behaviors, including cooperation, assertiveness and self-control. [Another study](#) following middle school students in an after-school drama program concluded that students engaged in theatre education strategies develop self-efficacy and conflict resolution skills with peers. A similar [study](#) of middle school students found that those who participated in targeted drama programs are less likely to engage in harmful behaviors.

## Encourages Students to Embody Other Perspectives

Students who participate in theatre education programs have the unique experience of learning how to authentically embody people and ideas different from their own, improving their understanding of differences and fostering empathy for others. Researchers who observed a program of playback theatre for adolescents in South Africa — where participants' life stories are acted out by peers — [found](#) that this improvisational theatre form helped the storyteller explore their own life from a different perspective, while offering actors the opportunity to empathize with a peer's life. Another [qualitative study](#) examining middle school students' experiences in a [process drama](#) program concluded that this teaching method engages participants in an artistic process that builds communication and collaboration skills, as well as trust in their peers.

## Transforms Learning Across Subject Areas

Theatre education offers young people additional creative access points to make meaning through comprehension and interpretation. These creative opportunities improve

students' academic learning and empowers them to look outward and activate change.

## Improves Learning Outcomes Through Creative Thinking

Integrating drama pedagogy into classrooms can build creative and critical thinking skills that foster positive learning outcomes across age groups and student populations. For younger learners, classroom theatre activities can [transform the reading experience](#) from one of merely decoding texts to one of embodied interpretation. In a [two-year case study](#) of a middle school history classroom with drama-integrated instruction, researchers observed that the drama strategies not only actively engaged students in their learning process, but also offered additional pathways to assess learning. In [a study](#) of high school students in a French immersion class, researchers found that the students who received drama-based instruction made better connections to the curricular content. As a result, they developed enhanced literacy skills and increased their emotional intelligence.

## Expands Understanding of Self in Relation to the World

Theatre education's focus on creative thinking fosters awareness of the world beyond self. [One study](#) found that applied drama and theatre directly help students become agents of change in their lives. By building community cohesion and empowerment, plays written, produced and performed by peers offered students a way to conceive of change in the larger world. Similarly, when [theatre](#) becomes a safe space for students to express vulnerability and authenticity, young people can be empowered to value vulnerability as an asset and more actively engage with the community beyond the theatre classroom. While these types of social and emotional learning skills honed through theatre education experiences can benefit all young people, [one study](#) found additional positive social and emotional outcomes for children with autism.

# About the Authors



## Gwynne Middleton

As the communications specialist for the Arts Education Partnership at Education Commission of the States, Gwynne focused on communications strategies that created a relationship-driven brand for the organization. Gwynne believes that access to high-quality arts education positively impacts the lives of young people, and she enjoyed applying a background in writing and visual arts to her role here. Contact Gwynne at [gmiddleton@ecs.org](mailto:gmiddleton@ecs.org).



## Mary Dell'Erba

As a senior project manager for the Arts Education Partnership, Mary oversees project work plans and supports the development of AEP deliverables. Prior to joining Education Commission of the States, she worked for the Arts Education in Maryland Schools Alliance, where she served in a variety of capacities in programming, administration and policy. With over 20 years of dance training, Mary is passionate about the arts and education. Contact Mary at [mdellerba@ecs.org](mailto:mdellerba@ecs.org).

