Urban Education

"I Feel Nervous . . . Very Nervous" Addressing Test Anxiety in Inner City Schools Through Play and Performance

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Carrie Lobman[1]

Abstract

The intense focus on standardized tests has created a culture of anxiety in many inner-city schools. This article presents the findings of a case study of a test anxiety program that helped inner-city students and staffs deal more productively with anxiety through play, performance, and team building. According to the findings, the program created an environment where children and teachers talked about, addressed, and even played with their fears around testing. The program did this by destigmatizing anxiety, using improvisation to transform children's relationship to fear, and by creating new tools for dealing with anxiety and test-taking.

Keywords

Urban, School effectiveness, urban education, student self esteem, urban education, no child left behind, programs

> I feel nervous, very nervous [about taking the English Language Arts test]. 'Cause it has a lot of hard questions and 'cause the ELA is very important and it's, it's very, very important and 'cause you have to pass to the next grade. And probably you might not get nothing or your mom won't give you nothing for Christmas. Stuff like

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that. I feel scared. Because those are the biggest tests in the school . . . in the world. I might get left back or have to go to summer school (Fourth-grade student).

In the past decade the increased focus on standardized tests has created a culture of anxiety in many schools. This is particularly true in inner-city schools where scrutiny is intense (Groves, 2002; Hersezerhon, 2006; Heubert & Hauser, 1999; Kruger, Wandle, & Struzzierio, 2007; Rosenberg, 2005; Tingey, 2009). While the tests can be seen as a positive move to increase accountability and academic rigor, the question for many educators is how to address the culture of fear that is generated in a high stakes testing environment.

This article presents the findings of a case study of a program called *Performing Beyond Fear*.[1] Implemented in two urban elementary schools, the program is designed to help inner-city students and school staff deal more productively with test anxiety and stress by using performance activities, discussions, and stress reduction exercises. Rather than trying to eliminate the anxiety, this program attempts to help students and teachers to collaboratively use the energy stress produces to create a more supportive environment in the classroom and to perform better on tests and other academic tasks. Using a case study methodology, this study explores the mechanisms by which the program directors attempted to change the culture of the classroom and examines the students changing relationships to their anxiety.

Review of the Literature and Theoretical Framework

Test anxiety, a fear of performing poorly on examinations, is a problem for many school-aged children (Beidel, Turner, & Taylor-Ferreira, 1999; MacDonald, 2001; Strumpf & Fodor, 1993; Tingey, 2009). Reviews of the literature (Ergene, 2003; MacDonald, 2001; Strumpf & Fodor, 1993) reveal that 10% to 30% of children fear taking tests (Tingey, 2009). The numbers are even higher for poor and minority children (Hodge, McCormick, & Elliot, 1997). Over a decade of research on standardized testing has shown that factors such as stereotype threat, the experience that one's test scores will confirm negative beliefs about your racial group, produce added anxiety, a negative aversion to testing, and lower test scores among non-White students (Good, Aronson, & Inzlicht, 2003; Steele & Aronson, 1995). These fears have serious ramifications because anxiety is negatively associated with test scores (Hancock, 2001), later school success, and even career choices (Duchesne, Vitaro, Larose, & Tremblay, 2008; Strumpf & Fodor, 1993).

A Culture of Anxiety

While psychologists have identified test anxiety as a disorder for decades (Zeidner, 1998), until recently it was assumed that it affected a relatively small number of children and that the problem was located within the individual child (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). However, the decade-long expansion of high stakes testing has called these assumptions into question. In a national survey, 76% of teachers indicated that they perceived the majority of their students to be extremely anxious about taking high stakes exams (Abrams, 2004). Evidence shows that test-related anxiety affects the teachers as well. Surveys of teachers' emotional health indicate that between 80% and 90% of teachers are feeling "undue pressure" to increase student performance on tests (Abrams, 2004). In a study of school counselors, those traditionally charged with helping children deal with anxiety, the participants stated that 80% of the children and 28% of the teachers in their schools were feeling high stress levels because of testing (Brown, Gallasi, & Akos, 2004).

A growing number of experts are now arguing that the issue is not simply an internal state of anxiety for individual children or teachers but that the current climate of high stakes testing and accountability is changing the culture of many classrooms (Au, 2009; Jones, 2007; Jones, Jones, & Hargrove, 2003; Madaus, Russell, & Higgins, 2009; Nichols & Berliner, 2007). In addition to the highly publicized changes in curriculum, a decade of high stakes testing has produced a change in the social and emotional climate in urban classrooms where increasing amounts of time and energy are spent on preparing for the tests (Nichols & Berliner, 2007), with very little support for the emotional needs of those involved (Cizek & Burg, 2006; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Jones, 2007; Valli & Chambliss, 2007).

This change raises questions about how anxiety is dealt with in inner-city classrooms. Rather than focusing solely on treating the anxiety of individual children, there is a need for tools that address the overall culture of stress that exists during test preparation in many classrooms. However, while there has been a great deal written about the testing culture, there has been very little research on programs that attempt to address the collective anxiety. The purpose of this study was to explore a new approach to this problem—one that makes use of recent research that identifies the value of performance for creating a culture of collaboration, teamwork, and emotional development (Farmer, 2008; Heath, 2000; Holzman, 2006, 2010), and that explores whether performance can be a valuable tool for addressing test anxiety.

Challenging the Dichotomy Between Emotions and Cognition

While test anxiety has been regarded as a disorder for decades, there has not been consensus about what it is or how it should be treated. Among the various approaches are those that see anxiety as a mostly emotional response that is manifested physiologically and treat it with stress reduction techniques such as meditation, breathing exercises, and other relaxation activities (Bradley et al., 2007; Cheek, Bradley, Reynolds, & Coy, 2002; Strumpf & Fodor, 1993). Others approach test anxiety as a mostly cognitive problem and treat it with various forms of rational-behavior therapy (Strumpf & Fodor, 1993). A third set of approaches, which can also be seen as cognitive, do not address the anxiety at all but instead focus on providing students with test-taking strategies, with the assumption that if students can approach the test more effectively their anxiety will be lowered (Strumpf & Fodor, 1993).

However, while most programs whose aim is to alleviate anxiety deal with emotionality (how children feel about the tests) or cognition (how they think about the tests and their ability to use test-taking strategies), research with adults and children has demonstrated that both elements exist in test anxiety, and there is evidence that these kinds of fears and reactions are often interconnected and inseparable (Carter, Williams, & Silverman, 2008). From a sociocultural perspective, these findings make sense.

According to Vygotsky (1986, 1999), the dichotomy between emotions and cognition is artificial and ignores the fact that all learning has an emotional component and that it is therefore necessary to continuously create the emotional conditions for learning to occur (Goldstein, 1999). From this point of view, anxiety would not be considered as either a physiological response or as a purely cognitive one. Instead, affect and cognition are two dialectically connected parts of a whole (Holzman, 2009).

While Vygotsky addressed the dialectic between emotion and cognition, most educators who have made use of his work have tended to focus primarily on the cognitive acquisition of knowledge or skills. While there are multiple interpretations of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) in the writings of Vygotsky (Cole, 1985; Daniels, Cole, & Wertsch, 2007), practice tends to be limited to the dyadic activity of a more adept adult or peer providing just enough support for a less developed child/student to complete tasks that he or she could not do independently (Bodrova & Leong, 1996; Rogoff, 2003; Wells, 1999). In addition, many educators and classroom teachers have simply adopted the term *scaffolding* (Berger, 2009; Berk & Winsler, 1995), which was not initially attributed to Vygotsky, as a metaphor for understanding and operationalizing the ZPD in acquiring new skills.

However, several researchers have recently extended the ZPD to include the ways in which teachers can and should provide an *emotional* ZPD that supports, strengthens, and is inseparable from the more familiar cognitive one (Goldstein, 1999; Mahn & John-Steiner, 2002; Nelmes, 2003; Rosiek, 2003; Newman & Holzman, 1993). Teachers who are able to address students' fears, anxieties, anger, and embarrassment, within the context of the content that is being taught, are able to help students go beyond their initial reactions and learn more effectively. Teaching and learning require a focus on emotion, not at the expense of cognition, but with the recognition that students have emotional relationships to learning and need to be supported to develop emotionally as well as cognitively.

Using data from case studies of teachers' practical knowledge, Rosiek (2003) found that skilled teachers could support students to both recognize their emotional responses to learning different content and help them develop new emotions that are more supportive of their ability to learn. While demonstrating that all learning has an emotional component and that students' emotions are generated from their cultural background, individual histories, and attitudes about schooling, Rosiek (2003) also found that successful teachers create an emotional ZPD with their students. Support for this understanding of the ZPD is found in Newman and Holzman's performance methodology (see Holzman, 2009; Holzman & Newman, 2012; Newman, 2009; Newman & Holzman, 1993). In Social Therapy, one of the practices that have developed from their work, clients seeking help with their emotional problems engage in a process of creating a group ZPD where new emotions can emerge. They found that it is in the process of creating the group that individuals can grow emotionally. Their work introduces a new way to develop a less stressful classroom environment, rather than simply trying to lower an individual child's anxiety level.

In their interdisciplinary work that bridges theory and practice; Newman and Holzman (1993; Holzman, 2009) draw on Vygotsky's (1978) less known writings on how play creates a ZPD for young children. In play, Vygotsky says, children perform "a head taller" than they are (p. 102). When children engage in pretend play, they go beyond their developmental level to be who they are becoming. Newman and Holzman (1993, 1996; Holzman, 2009; Holzman & Newman, 2012) have articulated a theory and developed a methodology that relates to people of all ages as always being in this process of becoming. Becoming, from this perspective, is the dialectic between being who you are and who you are not.

Performance-Based Approaches

Another way of understanding becoming is that human beings are performers. As with actors on the stage, human beings are capable of being not only who they are but also who they are not. For example, when Kevin Kline gets on stage and plays Hamlet, he does not stop being Kline. For Newman and Holzman, the concept that human beings are performers is not a metaphor. Through their work in therapy, youth development, business, medicine, and education, they and others have discovered that theatrical performance is a valuable tool for reinitiating human development and jumpstarting learning (see Farmer, 2008; Feldman & Silverman, 2003; Holzman, 2009, 2010; Massad, 2003).

   In the last two decades, researchers and practitioners from business, psychology, medicine, youth development, and social work have discovered that it is this human capacity to create new performances of our relationships and ourselves that allows for development and creativity. There is a growing body of evidence documenting the developmental and educational value of participating in theatre and performing arts activities (e.g., Arts Education Partnership, 1999; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992; Heath, 2000; Heath, Soep, & Roach, 1998; Jones, 2007; Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005; O'Neill, 2008). One way to characterize the value of performance-based programs is that people learn and develop in environments in which they can choose to perform creatively (Heath, 2000; Holzman, 1997, 2000; Sabo, 2003). By taking on multiple roles, both on and off the stage, young people come to see themselves as "capable of acting outside and beyond the expected" (Heath, 2000, p. 39).

   Another aspect of performance work that has been shown to make it valuable for emotional development is that performance is often done as an ensemble activity. Whether putting on a play, playing in a band, or learning ballet, performing requires people to work as a team. Obviously there are solo performances but even those require a group of people to be produced successfully. In Keith Sawyer's studies of young children engaged in sociodramatic play and adults involved in improvisational jazz and comedy troupes, he found that the level of creativity involved in ensemble-building is supportive of both group and individual learning (Sawyer, 1997, 2003). When groups are working well together, the "group leads each individual to perform at a higher level than he or she would have been capable of alone" (Sawyer, 2003, p. 11). This research supports the need to explore the possibility that the development of strong teams or ensembles in the classroom could support children as they try to handle the stress of high stakes testing.

At the present moment, the strong focus on high stakes testing puts an increased demand on all students to develop new emotional responses and tools to deal with stress and anxiety. Not only does this affect individual students but it has also created a culture of fear in many inner-city schools that cannot be easily addressed one student at a time. Paradoxically, the overemphasis on individual success or failure has made it hard for teachers to focus on the kind of group or ensemble building that might help students support each other more. The current study explores the value of one program that is attempting to address these issues. The premise of the program is that developing a performatory ensemble approach to test preparation will improve teachers and children's ability to handle the emotions associated with high stakes testing.

The Performing Beyond Fear Program

The *Performing Beyond Fear* program was developed during the 2005-2006 school year by educational consultants Ellen Gross and Michael Richards. Ellen's experience is with a performance approach to human development and learning (see Holzman, 2009; Lobman, 2010, 2011; Lobman & Lundquist, 2006; Newman & Holzman, 1996), and she has expertise in using improvisation in the classroom. Michael's background is in the field of emotional intelligence and brain research (see Giedd et al., 1999; Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2006). Ellen, Michael, and Jessica Williams, a former teacher and administrator, implemented the program. The three of them referred to themselves as Performance Directors when working in the schools.

Two of the *Performing Beyond Fear* directors worked in each of the eight participating fourth-grade classrooms once a week for 1 hr in the 10 weeks leading up to the fourth-grade English Language Arts test in January. The classroom teacher was almost always present during these sessions although the extent of her participation varied from class to class. In several cases, the classroom teacher was present in the room but was a reluctant participant in the activities, and in other cases the teacher was active and enthusiastic. One of the findings of the study, although not the focus of this article, was that the level of participation and support from the classroom teacher was critical to the success of the program (see Lobman, 2009). It also was found to be unclear whether or how the directors were training the teachers in the performance methodology of the *Performing Beyond Fear* program.

In the first few weeks of the *Performing Beyond Fear* program, the directors introduced the children and teachers to the concept of performance in everyday life. The program proceeded with three interconnected strands:

ensemble building, improving activities that support emotional development, and performing as test-takers and test-makers. Over several weeks, the members of each class developed a unique set of tools for them to use when they were feeling anxious, including creating their own test questions for each other.

Method

This study employed a mixed methods case study approach to examining the value of the *Performing Beyond Fear* program, the only program available that employs a performance and team-building approach to addressing the stressful environment that exists in many inner-city classrooms. Case studies are particularly effective for program evaluation when the approach examined is unique and where the researcher attempts to get a deep and comprehensive understanding of what happened (Albright, Howard-Pitney, Roberts, & Zicarelli, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002).

Sample

The study was conducted in two public elementary schools in a large metropolitan area during the 2007-2008 school year. All three schools using the *Performing Beyond Fear* program were located in one of the most impoverished neighborhoods of a large municipal area where more than 90% of the children received free or reduced lunch and 97% were African American or Latino. The two treatment schools were purposely selected. Randolph Elementary School was implementing the program for the first time, while McDonald Elementary and Middle School had been utilizing the program since 2005-2006. The nontreatment school (Jefferson Elementary School) was chosen because its demographics with regard to race, ethnicity, SES, and scores on the NYS English Language Arts and Math tests were similar to the treatment schools. In the year prior to the study, between 50% and 60% of the fourth-grade students in all three schools scored below grade level on the ELA tests and between 40% and 50% scored below grade level on the fourth-grade Math tests. The nontreatment school was only used for the purposes of the statistical analysis of the test scores. The classes and teachers in this school did not participate in the qualitative case study.

There were four participating fourth-grade classes in each school and 241 fourth graders took part in the study. At McDonald and Jefferson this was the entire fourth-grade population, while at Randolph School there were four additional classes that did not participate in the study. The four participating

classes at Randolph were chosen because their demographics were a match with the four classes at the other schools.

The children at all of the schools were homogeneously grouped based on their previous school achievement including standardized test scores and teacher assessment. Each of the four classes in each of the three schools was ranked as Top, Average, Low, or Special Education (SE). These designations (which were used by the teachers and administrators as well) do not refer to the children's performance on the fourth-grade achievement tests (a key dependent variable for this study) but to their achievement in previous grades.

Data Collection and Measures

Data sources included weekly classroom observation, the third- and fourth-grade test scores on the New York State English Language Arts and Math tests, and interviews with the *Performing Beyond Fear* directors, all of the teachers, and two children from each of the classes. The children were selected by asking the teacher to identify one student who they believed was likely to do well on the standardized tests and one student that they were concerned might not do well.

Observations. Weekly observations were conducted during the *Performing Beyond Fear* sessions in each classroom by the principal investigator or a research assistant. To ensure interresearcher reliability, for the first 2 weeks of the program the principal investigator and the research assistant did joint observations in all classrooms, shared their fieldnotes, and discussed them afterwards. Once they were in agreement about what to focus on and the level of detail, the primary investigator and the research assistant alternated weeks in each of the schools. Detailed fieldnotes were taken on the activities led by the *Performing Beyond Fear* directors as well as the students' and teachers' participation and responses to these activities. In addition, any other dialogue or activity that went on in the classroom simultaneously to the *Performing Beyond Fear* program was described.

Semistructured interviews were conducted with each of the teachers at three points in the data collection process. The interviews focused on the teachers' concerns about the tests, what they were doing to prepare the children, and their responses to the *Performing Beyond Fear* program. The first interview took place within 2 weeks of the beginning of the program, the second between the 8th and 10th weeks, and the final interview after the standardized tests had been completed. Two children from each class were also interviewed at those three points in the data collection process. These

interviews focused on the children's thoughts and emotional responses to the tests and their thoughts about participating in the *Performing Beyond Fear* program.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the empirical data to construct the case study followed a process of categorical aggregation analysis outlined by Stake (1995). This process began with an examination of the entire data record with the aim of identifying key programmatic elements, methodological and theoretical features of the program, and the impact on the participants. This process included multiple readings of the observational record to identify whether and how the performance and team-building aspects of the program's philosophy were operationalized in the classrooms. A goal of these readings was to identify the process by which *Performing Beyond Fear* implemented its approach. Three elements began to emerge as critical to the implementation of the program—the normalization of anxiety through conversation and performance, the transformation of children's relationship to fear and anxiety through improvised performances, and the creation through performance of new tools for dealing with fear and anxiety, including collective emotional responses and practical test-taking skills.

The data were then chunked into these elements after which these chunks were examined for patterns and themes and then reconstructed into a detailed descriptive portrait of how each of these elements was implemented in the program. Since the purpose of this particular part of the research was the implementation of the program overall, rather than a focus on differences between classrooms,[2] the portrait utilized examples from all of the observed classrooms. Each particular example was chosen because it provided evidence of the validity of a particular theme. Finally, these portraits were examined in relation to the results of the statistical analysis as a way to corroborate and elaborate on those findings and to provide insights into implications for future research and practice.

Findings

There was evidence that the *Performing Beyond Fear* program was able to successfully create an environment in all of the classrooms where children and teachers talked about, addressed, and even played with their fears around testing. Data analysis revealed that there were three primary ways that the program was able to do this: (a) normalizing fear and anxiety through games

that helped children and teachers talk about their feelings, (b) the transformation of children's relationship to fear and anxiety through improvised performances, and (c) the creation through performance of new tools for dealing with fear and anxiety, including collective emotional responses and practical test-taking skills. In the following sections, I will provide data related to each of these themes.

Normalizing Fear and Anxiety

One of the primary ways that the *Performing Beyond Fear* program addressed fear and anxiety was to introduce activities that helped to normalize these emotions by having them become a regular part of classroom conversation. Key entry points into talking about fear and anxiety in all of the classes were group activities, games, and performances that provided a context for children to explore how they felt about taking tests.

One example of this kind of activity was the "Step into the middle if . . ." game that took place in almost all of the classes. In this case, the class stood in a circle, and the *Performing Beyond Fear* director asked everyone to step into the middle if they would "prefer to dig a ditch in 100 degree weather rather than take a test." The purpose of the activity, according to the directors, was to help the children and teachers begin to explore how they felt about tests. Most of the students and all of the teachers chose ditch digging although in a few of the lower performing classes there were more children who responded that they preferred taking the test. The directors proceeded from this point to go around the circle and ask the teachers and children to say in one sentence why they chose ditch digging over test taking or vice versa. Children shared that they worry that they won't pass on to the next grade, are concerned about what other people will think of them and that someone in their family will be angry at them. A few children said that they would start to cry if they found out they had done poorly on the test.

This fast-paced question asking activity exemplified the ways that the directors encouraged the children and teachers to talk about their fears. There were a range of emotions expressed from boredom to fear, and the directors accepted all answers with equal seriousness. They did not try to alleviate the children's fears or further engage the conversation. According to the directors, the point was to create an environment where everyone could participate. This appeared to be successful as every child gave an answer to the question, whether verbal or nonverbal. In addition, since the teacher participated as well, the children were able to hear that their teacher was someone who also was nervous about tests. This appeared to interest the children a

great deal, and many more children shared their fears afterward. The directors did not pursue each individual response but accepted it and moved on to the next person. The children appeared to be more willing to share because they did not feel put on the spot.

> I saw my friends jumping into the middle and saying they were scared and that made me more brave to jump too. No one laughed, and the next time Ellen asked I jumped in too and when I did we all looked at each other and no one laughed. That surprised me and it also made me happy. (9-year-old girl)

The directors did not question the students who said they would rather "take a test" than "dig a ditch" or who said they were "cool as a cucumber." When asked about this they said that they were "more concerned at this point in generating lots of responses, even from children who might not be able to give expression to why." This might have contributed to the conditions whereby more children started to talk about their fears. While it is possible that children who were not actually nervous were expressing fear because they wanted to be able to participate, the evidence from the interviews indicates that for some children these activities allowed them to be more honest about their fears. As one boy in the top class at McDonald said,

> I don't get so scared [about the tests] 'cause I know I am going to get a 3 or a 4, but when we were playing those games I remembered I do get scared that I am not going to finish in time, or that other people are going to do better than me. I am not scared of getting left back but I am scared I won't be in 501 [the top class] next year. (9-year-old boy)

Another apparent result of these activities was that it became fun and even cool for the children to talk about the ways that they were nervous or scared. As one child said, "I liked the games we played where we said if we were scared. They were fun and you got to laugh. Not at other kids, but at all of us." Without being put on the spot or singled out, children were able to expose their fears in an environment that was playful and free of ridicule. This was exemplified by the fact that almost all the children in every class participated in the conversations. They were often sitting on the edge of their seats, and when asked to volunteer everybody's hand went up or they jumped up and joined the circle.

Deepening the conversation. As the *Performing Beyond Fear* program continued, the directors continued to lead conversations about the children's fears about test taking. These conversations went deeper than the initial quick responses that occurred during the games. The directors continued to accept

all answers, and over time the children exposed specifics about their fears and about the ways they perceived pressure from their families and teachers.

In an example from one of the classes at the Randolph school, Ellen asked the children to share "what worries them about taking the tests" and wrote their responses on the whiteboard. When Ellen finished the list, a girl asked if she could share a story.

> Last year in 3rd grade I got a four (top score) on a test and my mom got me a prize and she told me, "to keep it up." Then when I took the next test, I was more nervous because I wanted to get another prize. I was so nervous that I couldn't do so good on the test. (9-year-old girl)

When she stopped talking, a boy raised his hand and said that his mom said, "If he fails, he won't get dinner, lunch, or breakfast for a day." While several children in the class questioned whether the story about being denied meals was "true," Ellen urged them to remember that they "are talking about *their fears* not about what was *true or false*." This statement continued to highlight the directors' approach to creating an environment where children could share their feelings without being contradicted or ridiculed.

In addition to exposing what worried them about their families, some of the children talked about the ways they felt pressure from their teachers and from the school. In the Top class at the Randolph school a girl shared that she becomes nervous when her teacher "tells the class how if they fail they won't move on to fifth grade." Another girl shared that "getting yelled at by the principal stresses her out." A boy said that he "hates not being able to go outside because he has to study." When he said this, several students raised their hands in agreement that this was a real concern of theirs as well. Children shared that if they don't study, their parents and teachers threaten them and they don't get to play anymore.

Through these games and performances, the children became more involved in conversations about their fears and anxiety. These conversations focused on what the children were afraid of, including their own emotional responses (i.e., embarrassment or sadness), and their fears of what the adults in their lives would say and do if they did not do well on the tests. While these conversations did appear to produce an environment in which fear and anxiety were not stigmatized and children began to recognize that many people were afraid, they were only the first step in engaging the children in finding ways to transform their relationship to fear. The following section will explore the elements of the program that provided the children with opportunities to create performances of their fears.

Performing anxiety. The use of the children's expressed fears and anxiety as the material for creative performances was a common occurrence throughout the classes. In these moments, the *Performing Beyond Fear* directors asked the children to go from simply talking about their fears to showing or demonstrating what their fear might look like. By including other children as the audience, and sometimes as coperformers in the scenes, these activities further socialized the children's fears and gave the children an opportunity to be creative and playful with an experience that is often private and painful.

Spontaneous performances. Many of these performances began when the directors responded to the children talking about their fears by directing them to "show us what that looks like" or to do a "performance of what it feels like to be scared." In one instance, Ellen asked the children what it felt like to be afraid during the test and made a list of their responses. Then she asked four children to create performances of their nervousness for the class. One of the girls performed "thinking her answers are wrong" by holding her chin and looking at the ceiling. A second girl performed saying out loud what she is thinking when she is "writing and thinking she's not good at the subject," and a third girl performed, "erasing and erasing answers and feeling like she's going to pass out." The rest of the class appeared very engaged by these performances and clapped at the end of each one.

The children were able to further socialize the experience of being nervous, and some of them began to recognize that the manifestations of their anxiety were recognizable to everyone. As one girl at the McDonald School said,

> When I pretended to be nervous I was really doing what I do when I am taking a test. I was biting my nails and worrying about getting the answers wrong and thinking that I was going to fail. I really got into it and it felt real. But then when everyone clapped and some kids nodded and said, "Hey that's how I feel," I saw that I wasn't by myself and it was fun to do. (10-year-old girl)

There was no special preparation for these performances; the children were asked to spontaneously act out the manifestations of their fear.

In a further example of the socialization of anxiety, the directors asked the children from Ms. Jacobs's third- and fourth-grade special education class to perform each other's responses to test taking. Similar to the first example, this one began when Jessica asked the children who said they got nervous on tests to show what that "looks like." The four children who had said they got nervous began biting their nails and fidgeting in their seats in response to Jessica's request. Jessica then called out, "Cut. OK, now let's see the children who said that they never get nervous show me a performance of what it looks

like to be 'cool as a cucumber.'" Those children sat in a relaxed manner and smiled. Then she asked the children to reverse their roles and had the children who said they were nervous do the "cool as a cucumber" performance and the nonnervous children perform as if they were scared.

In this example, the children demonstrated their own feelings and were also able to perform each other's perspectives. The children who said they were nervous could try on the role of being "cool as a cucumber," and those who said they did not get nervous could experience what it felt like to be nervous. When Jessica was asked about this example she said,

> These performances might give them a starting point for how to perform calm on the test even if they felt scared. On the other hand, having the "cool" children perform nervous could help them to develop compassion for their classmates, as well as be prepared for what anxiety might feel like if they end up feeling it in the future. (Interview with *Performing Beyond Fear* director)

Semiscripted scenes. Another activity that allowed the directors and children to play with anxiety through performances were several semiscripted scenes initiated by the directors. According to the *Performing Beyond Fear* directors, the objective of these skits was to introduce the children to the idea that stress is a normal reaction rather than a sign of a problem. For example in the *Stress Doctor* skit, Ellen played a "very important" doctor who is interrupted by a frantic and clearly anxious Jessica. After some back and forth between Ellen and Jessica, it is discovered that Ellen is a famous Doctor who is too busy to be bothered with patients. Jessica, in character, insists that she has a serious problem and describes many of the symptoms of anxiety (heart racing, "brain" hurting, sweaty palms, can't think). Ellen, as the very arrogant Doctor, makes the statement that Jessica is "completely normal" and that getting nervous is "not a problem."

In the beginning of this scene the children served as an audience. However, at some point in all of the classes the children became characters in the scene. For example in one of the classes at Randolph, when Ellen said that Jessica is "just" nervous and one of the children called out that "nervous and being stressed is just an emotion and not a problem for a doctor to solve," the Doctor responded, "Ah yes, very true, very true. Thank you *Assistant Doctor*." From this point forward, Ellen related to the class as her "Assistant Doctors," and in that role many of them started to share their own experiences of and knowledge about being nervous. For example, when Ellen asked her "assistant doctors" for advice on how to explain to Jessica why she felt this way, many hands immediately went up. One student said that Jessica's heart is beating

fast, "because she is nervous." Ellen responded, "Does this happen to others?" Almost all of the students' hands went up with many saying "Yes!" Another student called out that Jessica is right that, "Being nervous feels like your heart is going to explode." Ellen as the doctor acknowledged the students' help and then went on to say about Jessica, "Her problem is not her stress. Her problem is *she is stressed about her stress*."

It appeared that Jessica's willingness to talk about her own fears in the Stress Doctor performance led to the children openly sharing their anxiety. The scenes were full of humor and the children laughed throughout them. They appeared to enjoy the pretense of the directors being someone other than who they were (the scenes involved costumes and accents) and to relish the opportunity to serve as experts in anxiety and fear management. As was true throughout the rest of the program, the performances that the directors created gave the children a context to voice their own experiences of being afraid without stigma.

The movement from the original games to conversation to performance was a common occurrence through all 10 weeks of the program. In all of these situations, many more children became engaged in the activity when performance was introduced. Having an opportunity to "do a performance" was very popular. In addition, the children began to develop as audience members for each other's and the directors' performances, often clapping loudly and asking questions once a skit was completed.

Creating New Tools for Dealing With Fear and Anxiety

While all of the performances done by the students provided a context for exploring their relationship to fear, some of the activities also helped the students develop new tools for responding to their anxiety. Using improvised and short-rehearsed scenes the children were asked to create new potential responses to their fears and anxieties. In some cases these could be considered the creation of new emotional responses, and in others it involved the students developing as test-taking experts.

Creating new emotional responses. As the program continued, the classes went beyond quick improvisations to engage in more complex performance exercises using anxiety as the material. An analysis of these performances, most of which occurred during the second half of the 10-week sequence, demonstrate the ways that the *Performing Beyond Fear* program created an environment where the children were able to "talk back to" and develop new ways of relating to their fears.

One example of this occurred over the course of Weeks 5 to 8 of the program when Ms. Samuels' class worked on developing a "class voice" that could replace the negative thoughts and feedback the children said they were receiving from those around them. Prior to Week 5 this class, as was described previously, had done many versions of talking about and performing their fears about the tests. At the beginning of the 5th week, Ellen began the class by saying that "the group needs to create a Class 401 voice that they could carry around with them and to think of how they could support each other as a group." When asked about this choice of words, Ellen said that it "was a response to the large number of children who said that their parents and teachers were making them feel negative, afraid, and alone." She then led the class through a process that involved taking the fears of one child and having the class develop a group response. What follows is a more detailed description of that process.

Ellen chose a child to perform her version of what she is afraid of to the class. The girl and her friends performed a story that illustrated the girl's fears and the "voices" she had in her head when she was taking the test. Ellen then asked the class whether they had "Any thoughts on our class 401 response?" In the dialogue that followed, the children began by saying they were upset that the girl's mother would threaten her. A child offered, "Why would you scare your kid like that?" Another said, "Why would you give her stress then punish her too?" A third girl commented, "Parents are crazy." The girl who had told the story said, "This makes me feel terrified of taking tests."

At this point Ellen asked five children to come up and play the "class 401 chorus." Their job, she explained, was to reply in "one voice" to the scene that was performed. The girls reperformed the scene of the mother threatening the girl. Without very much direction as to what it meant to "speak in one voice" or perform as a "chorus," the chosen children collectively "talked back" to the mother in the scene.

> "Stop stressing us out!" "She's doing her best," "We are trying hard," "We will do OK," "We are a team," Then the whole group said in unison, "You are scaring us."

During the chorus' performance the classroom got hushed; then the class broke into cheers at the end. In this example, the directors had the children talk back to some of the voices "in their heads." The collective nature of the activity appeared to provide a context in which children could give strong expression to their experience of being frightened by adults and seemed to gain some strength from giving voice to their feelings. In the final interviews, one child who had been in the audience for this performance said, "During

the tests I would sometimes get negative, you know in my head, but then I listened carefully and I could find the team talking."

Developing as testing experts. In addition to creating an environment where children could talk about, perform, and create new emotional responses, another related theme in the program was the ways in which performance appeared to help the children increase or internalize their repertoire of test-taking skills and anxiety-reduction techniques. This was most clearly demonstrated in the two sessions in which the directors created semiscripted skits that they performed for and with the children. In addition to the previously discussed ways that these scenes played with anxiety, they also provided a context in which the children could discover and share test-taking strategies.

For example, in Mr. Wilson's class at Randolph, Ellen, as the Stress Doctor, transitioned from telling her "patient" Jessica about how stress before a test was normal to asking the children to play the role of "test experts" and "help" Jessica, as the nervous student, think about how to "play the test like a game." This idea appeared to really resonate with the children because they immediately began shouting out ways the tests reminded them of games. A boy commented, "A test could be like a guessing game." Another student built on this by saying it could be like the game "Memory." The class appeared fully engaged with their hands raised. One girl commented that a test is like "Family Feud." Ellen asks her how and the girl replies that "there are categories and you have to figure out what information goes where."

In this class the conversation about "playing the test like a game" was referred to often over the weeks leading up to the tests, and many of the children referenced it when they talked about how they were preparing for the tests. While there are obviously ways in which the test is different than the games the children referenced, having this new understanding seemed to help them approach the test more playfully. In an interview a few weeks after the ELA test one boy said,

> When I sat down to take the test I said to myself, "Play the test like a game." And then I thought about how when I am playing a game. I focus because I want to win. Like when I play a video game I don't get scared 'cause I am too busy trying to get a high score.

There is no way to know the full impact of this way of approaching the test, but it did appear that the children were beginning to be able to see and implement new ways of approaching the testing situations they were in.

Another way these teacher-led performances contributed to the children's practicing their test taking skills was through a discussion of relaxation techniques that could be used while taking the tests. While "helping" Jessica with her anxiety, Michael, as the Stress Doctor, asked the students what they do when they get nervous. One child said, "Breathe and pray." Michael picked up on the breathing part and began to teach the class an exercise called, "Appreciation Breathing." This was a stress reduction technique that was eventually introduced in all of the classes.

> Michael (Stress Dr.): Yes, yes, breathing is very, very important. I make it a habit to breathe everyday. I want to teach you an important exercise that you can do when you are taking a test or anytime you are stressed. Close your eyes.

> (All the children close their eyes and sit very still.)

> Michael: Now think of something you really appreciate. Does everyone appreciate something? What do you appreciate?
> Class (calling out): "I appreciate my mom." "I appreciate my Wiii," or "Ice Cream."
> Michael: Great, OK close your eyes and put your hands over your heart and picture the thing you appreciate and breathe into your heart. Deep breaths, in your nose and out your mouth. Good.

The Appreciation Breathing exercise, and breathing exercises in general, was a skill that the *Performing Beyond Fear* directors taught the children to use when they were nervous during the test. However, rather than being an abstract technique that was taught as part of general test preparation, the breathing exercises emerged out of the students trying to assist the Stress Doctor and provide advice to Jessica's character about her anxiety. Significantly, all of the children who were interviewed after the tests said that they had done the Appreciation Breathing either before or during the test. In another semiscripted performance, Jessica played a character, Denise, who was studying for "an exam." The children were invited to help Denise with her severe test anxiety. In several of the classes, the students became very actively involved in sharing with "Denise" the different test-taking strategies they had been learning in *Performing Beyond Fear* and in their regular test preparation classes. Ellen asked the students if they can coach Denise in what she can do to prepare for the test.

> Student 1: You should take notes when you study so you remember better later.

Student 2: Go back to the passage.

Student 3: Underline details and the main idea.

Student 4: (Whispering) Sing the main idea song.

Ellen: What about when a question is hard and Denise feels like giving up?

Student 1: Don't feel like that because the answer is right there in the passage.

Student 4: Underlining the passage helps.

Student 5: I have an idea. You could make up a song from your notes and sing it in your head at the test.

Student 6: Just remember the important things.

Student 7: Read the questions before the passages.

Ellen encouraged the students to remember that "Denise" said she gets so nervous that she can't remember what she has studied. At this point the students began to give advice on how to handle anxiety and a lack of confidence when taking a test. The answers were a veritable checklist of test-anxiety advice.

Jessica (as Denise): How can I feel less nervous though?

Student 1: Feel confident in yourself and don't say, Oh my God! Oh my God!

Student 2: If you are scared and feel like giving up, get yourself up and try again.

Student 3: Think of something nice while taking the test.

Student 4: Take a deep breath and always try your best.

Throughout this conversation the children were eagerly raising their hands and leaning out of their chairs, and one child even came up and put her hands on Jessica/Denise's shoulders and looked her in the eyes while telling her that she "should take a deep breath and think about something you appreciate like your children." Even when Jessica and Ellen were ready to end the scene, a girl called out that Denise could "contact the testing company" to get practice questions.

In summary, the *Performing Beyond Fear* program provided the students with an opportunity to "teach" test-taking skills to the adult directors of the program. Not surprisingly, many of the children's suggestions about how to take the test or deal with the anxiety came directly from the things their teachers or parents have said to them, but in this case they were teaching it to someone else. The children appeared to have more ownership over the ideas

once they were the ones teaching them. One can hypothesize that by being the ones to teach the test-taking and stress-reduction techniques, the children might be more likely to recall them and make use of them during the tests.

It seems significant that the moments when the children were able to recall the test-taking strategies took place primarily during the director-led performances. While the skits all started out as performances *for* the children, in each case the children quickly became involved as participants. From a theatrical sense, there was no "fourth wall," or separation between the performers (the *Performing Beyond Fear* directors) and the audience (the children and teachers). In this capacity as participants in the director-led performances, the students served as "assistant doctors" or advisors, in other words as experts. Rather than listening to adults talk about test anxiety or stress, they generated their own ideas about how to do well on a test and what to do when they become nervous. *Performing Beyond Fear* and the Standardized Test Scores

The case study of the *Performing Beyond Fear* program did not allow me to draw causality between the implementation of the program and the results of the fourth-grade standardized tests. A limitation of the study was that it was not possible to isolate the effects of *Performing Beyond Fear* on the test scores from other school and classroom factors (i.e., quality of the teacher, other test preparation, etc.). However, there was analysis done on the third- and fourth-grade standardized English Language Arts and Math tests to determine if there was a significant difference between the test scores of the two schools that implemented the *Performing Beyond Fear* program (Randolph for 1 year and McDonald for 3 years) and a neighboring school with matching demographics (Jefferson) that did not implement the program. What follows is a summary of that analysis.

As there were significant Correlations between the third- and fourth-grade English Language Arts (ELA) scores ($p < .001$, $r = .692$), and between the third- and fourth-grade Math scores ($p < .001$, $r = .741$), all subsequent differences between groups were determined using ANCOVAs with third-grade scores as covariates. ANCOVAs were performed to test the hypothesis that the schools where the *Performing Beyond Fear* program was implemented would receive higher test scores on the fourth-grade standardized ELA and Math tests at the end of the program. ANCOVAs were performed separately for ELA and Math scores, with school experimental status as an independent variable, fourth-grade test scores as the dependent measure, and third-grade scores as covariate.

The ANCOVAs revealed significant differences in scores between the three schools for both the Math, $F(2, 215) = 7.165$, $p < .001$, and the ELA,

$F(2, 190) = 3.759$, $p < .003$, tests. Students at McDonald ($M = 678.37$, $SE = 2.81$) scored significantly higher on the fourth-grade Math test than students from either Randolph ($M = 665.69$, $SE = 2.62$) or Jefferson ($M = 664.84$, $SE = 2.81$). Students at McDonald ($M = 660.01$, $SE = 2.95$) also scored significantly higher on the fourth-grade ELA test than students from Randolph ($M = 650.9$, $SE = 2.7$), but there was no significant difference between the fourth-grade ELA scores of McDonald school and Jefferson ($M = 661.35$, $SE = 3.06$).

The results of the analysis of the third- and fourth-grade test scores showed that the students at McDonald, where the program was in its 3rd year of implementation, scored significantly higher on the fourth-grade Math test than at either Jefferson (where the program did not take place) or Randolph, where the program was in its first year and significantly better than Randolph on the ELA test. These results provide potential support to the hypothesis that the *Performing Beyond Fear* program had a positive impact on students' performance on the standardized tests when the program was implemented over time. However, the ELA test scores did not provide the same evidence. Therefore, without further study it is not possible to confirm the value of the program for increasing test scores.

A possible explanation for the low performance of Randolph is that the *Performing Beyond Fear* program might take several years to affect the culture of the classroom and possibly of the school. This is supported by the fact that in two classes at McDonald the student's scores were significantly higher than their peers in McDonald's other two classes and in both higher performing classes the classroom teacher had worked with the *Performing Beyond Fear* staff before. The findings from the case study indicated that these two teachers were more likely to participate in the *Performing Beyond Fear* activities themselves and that they utilized the *Performing Beyond Fear* directors as resources in handling classroom stresses. This finding is in line with the goals of the *Performing Beyond Fear* program, which were to go beyond providing children with skills to handle anxiety to attempting to change how the teachers and schools as a community relate to test preparation.

The fact that the Randolph school, which was in its first year of implementation of the *Performing Beyond Fear* program, had test scores that were significantly lower than the McDonald school in both ELA and Math, and lower than Jefferson in ELA requires some further consideration. This finding could indicate that the *Performing Beyond Fear* program is not able to affect the kind of cultural change that increases test scores in a single year, or that the program does not protect the students from other factors that could negatively affect their scores. One possible mitigating factor that could help

explain the Randolph test scores is that the school experienced a quick rise in enrollment from the 2006-2007 school year to the 2007-2008 school year (the year of the program). In 2006-2007 there were five fourth-grade classes, but in 2007-2008 there were eight. The increase in enrollment meant that many of the fourth-grade teachers were either new to the school or were teaching fourth grade for the first time. It is possible that the drop in test scores was a result of these changes, and that this prevented the *Performing Beyond Fear* program from having a positive effect. However, it is beyond the scope of the current study to examine the impact of increased enrollment on test scores, and for now the evidence points to the conclusion that 1 year of implementation of the program is not sufficient to increase test scores or to prevent a drop in test scores due to other factors.

Discussion

The *Performing Beyond Fear* program was grounded in an approach that highlights the human capacity to perform, pretend, and play as fundamental to creating environments where children can grow emotionally (Holzman, 2000, 2009). The aim of this research was to add to the existing literature on the value of performance for development by studying whether a performance-based program, specifically designed to help students and teachers deal more effectively with anxiety, could impact on the culture of the classroom in urban schools dominated by accountability and testing.

Over the course of the 10 weeks of the *Performing Beyond Fear* program, the directors were able to create an environment where emotions could be discussed and performed in a manner that fostered collaboration rather than competition. Through a combination of dialogue, game-playing, and performances, the directors organized the students to talk about their fears with each other and with supportive adults. Many children opened up about what they were afraid of, and their emotions were not related to as material for the class to play and perform with rather than as problems or private matters that had to be fixed. Through this activity, an emotional ZPD was created in the classroom where children could develop new relationships to their feelings (Goldstein, 1999; Holzman, 2009; Mahn & John-Steiner, 2002; Nelmes, 2003; Rosiek, 2003).

Activities such as those implemented by the *Performing Beyond Fear* directors appear to have the potential to destigmatize fear so that children do not experience their anxieties in isolation. The *Performing Beyond Fear* activities also provided an opportunity for the children to create new responses to being anxious and therefore produced the potential that they would be able

to respond differently in stressful situations in the future. While the children may not have stopped having anxiety, they now had the experience of doing something with their fear—performing a scene, making up a song, telling a story—other than being paralyzed by it. In essence, the children expanded their repertoire of responses to stress.

This study was not designed to evaluate whether the children experienced less anxiety while taking the language arts or math tests. In addition, the purpose of the *Performing Beyond Fear* program was not to eliminate anxiety but to add to the children's repertoire of possible responses. In follow-up interviews done with select children several weeks after the tests, all of them said that they found the program helpful in this regard, and half of them said that they had thought about the program and the directors during the test. One girl talked about looking around the room and thinking about her "team" while she was in the middle of the ELA test.

> After I answered a question, I would look up and see my friends and everyone was taking the test and I remembered that we were all nervous, and everyone was doing the same thing, you know, and then I remembered that we were a team even though we weren't talking to each other. Then I went back to the test. (10-year-old girl)

Additionally, five of the eight teachers reported that they led the class in one of the team-building exercises before the test each morning, and two of them said that they stopped during the test to lead the children in a breathing exercise.

While decreased anxiety levels during the test are hard to judge, this study did produce evidence of a change in how the teachers and children approached test preparation. Given the increased focus on test preparation in so many schools, this is a significant finding and provides potential solutions to a problem that has not been adequately addressed. In the current environment, where testing has come to dominate in many schools, there is a need to find new techniques for helping to mitigate the negative emotional and social effects for teachers and children. The current study makes a contribution to that effort and provides further support for the importance of performance for human development.

The first significant finding of this study is that performance can provide a way to address the environment in the classroom during test preparation. The *Performing Beyond Fear* program was unique in that it did not attempt to identify individual children as anxious or even lay claim to reducing their anxiety. Instead, it successfully approached anxiety as a collective problem that could be normalized. Tests, particularly standardized tests, are often

related to as individual acts where the children are competing with each other. While many teachers make efforts to keep the competition to a minimum, the individuated test-taking environment where each child is concerned about her own success or failure can diminish the feeling of community in a classroom. The *Performing Beyond Fear* program, with its focus on team building, was in many ways an antidote to that environment. By making use of the tools of improvisation (Holzman, 2009; Lobman & Lundquist, 2006), the program was able to provide the children and teachers with a practical way to build their team. Throughout the months leading up to the tests, each of the classes had at least 1 hr a week where the children were supported to work together through team-building games, conversations about their team, and performances that allowed the fear and anxiety to be collectively acknowledged. This research provides further support for the hypothesis that a focus on collaborative group building does not take away from children's individual learning but actually provides a supportive context for it (Holzman, 2009; Sawyer, 2003).

A second significant finding of the study was that performance can be a valuable activity for helping children and teachers handle the stress of test preparation. This study adds to the research from other fields that have shown that performance is useful as a tool for responding to stressful situations (i.e., business decisions, medical conversations; see Holzman, 2009, 2006, 2010; Massad, 2003). Throughout the program, the directors provided children with opportunities to improvise, create skits, and perform as characters other than themselves. In these imaginary situations they were able to talk about, help each other, and come up with strategies for how to handle anxiety.

Emotionality and cognition are often kept separate in schools (Goldstein, 2003; Holzman, 2009), which does a disservice to children and adults. Learning is an emotional activity, and learning in groups of people can raise many emotional issues. However, many children and adults are not skilled in handling their reactions or responses to emotionally challenging situations. Schools emphasize the acquisition of knowledge at the expense of emotional development, and emotional issues are often seen as getting in the way of learning. There are not a lot of opportunities for teachers to learn how to respond to the children's emotions, or their own, except as a problem.

The expansion of children's emotional repertoire is critical to the overall development of the children. Many educators have advocated for classroom environments that support emotional development as inseparable from cognitive learning (Holzman, 2009; Rosiek, 2003). As part of a growing recognition of the importance of human beings ability to perform as other than who

they are, Holzman (2009) and Lobman (2010, 2011) have shown that performance activities, and in particular improvisation, are valuable tools for helping people who are constrained by current educational environments to be creative together. The research on *Performing Beyond Fear* demonstrated that performance activities that are focused on playing and creating with emotions were able to at least temporarily transform these urban classrooms into spaces where emotions could be explored. The data from this study provide further evidence that performance activities are valuable in helping to create emotional ZPDs in the classroom (Holzman, 2009).

In conclusion, with the rise of standardized testing and the increase in time spent on test preparation in many schools, it is important to search for ways to mitigate the negative effects of anxiety and fear among children (and teachers). While there is only minimal data to indicate that the *Performing Beyond Fear* program can impact on test scores, there is further evidence that the program provides a respite from rote test preparation and a mechanism for community building and emotional development in the classroom. This study adds to the growing understanding of the value of utilizing the performance, improvisation, and play to create environments where learning and emotional development are inseparable, and where children and adults can develop as creators of their lives and emotionality.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. The names of the program, program directors, schools, teachers, and students are all pseudonyms.
2. For more on the differences between classrooms see Lobman, 2009.

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