

OPINION

The Arts, Especially Theater, Can Be Savior for Foster Youth

By **Vivian Dorsett**

Posted on April 16, 2018



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Extracurricular activities and a social life may seem commonplace to most youth growing up in the United States.

However, it is common not to have this privilege while growing up in foster care. There are two issues; one is systemic and the other is the individual in care. Systemically, outside activities for foster youth demand time, money and work, which means the caregiver is responsible for the overseeing this responsibility. Individually, given the opportunity the youth makes the decision to engage or not.



Vivian Dorsett

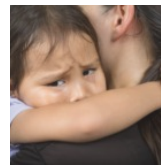
In 2014, Congress passed the **Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act**. One of its priorities was to allow children and youth in foster care to have normalcy in their fostering situation. This normalcy included mandates for each state

to develop a bill of rights within their child welfare state agencies that included allowing youth in foster care to be involved in extracurricular activities. This was a step forward in the rights of youth in personal and social engagement.

“Extracurricular activities, no matter the type, give youth the chance to push themselves, find a passion, and learn leadership traits,” according to Chelsea Favor, a foster care alumni. “Without access to these activities, many youth find themselves missing out on exploring diverse interests, having a chance to set and realize goals, and not experience a sense of pride and accomplishment in their work.”



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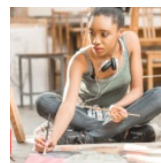
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Research tells us that youth are not graduating high school in comparable rates to the general population. According to one of the largest studies conducted, the [Casey National Alumni Study](#), youth from foster care have graduation rates that vary from 30 to 80 percent, always lower when compared to the general public. Youth in foster care are not always to blame; after all, they are dealing with a major life transition into care, acceptance, social unrest and trying to succeed academically on top of all that.

ARTS HELP WITH SCHOOL

Time, cost and commitment for care providers and children in foster care might be more difficult at a younger age. However, as the child reaches junior high and high school, opportunities broaden for extracurricular involvement as many are supported by the school system and the time commitment can be easier, such as early or late arrival to school.

According to the research database [ArtsEdSearch](#), the arts assist with educational achievement, school engagement and dropout prevention, social civic engagement and activism as well as cognitive/social/behavioral development.

Foster care research solidifies that youth in and from foster care have less chance of success in life. Art programming engages youth and improves educational success as well as personal and social development. Arts support positive outcomes for our youth, not to mention a sense of individual success and achievement; an outlet of positive expression for youth whose personal relationships often crumble; and lastly, an outlet of creativity to express what youth might be holding inside, internal desperation that needs an outlet. Or for a creative youth who has talent not realized, arts provide an opportunity to



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develop and express oneself in a positive supported atmosphere.

Theater is the willing suspension of disbelief, a few hours of creativity and acceptance that brings a collaborative effort of artists and designers together for a common production displaying art as life and life as art. What more exceptional process to be involved in as a youth or young adult, especially for students in and from foster care?

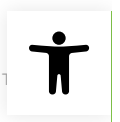
Through my own education and experience I have found that the theater world and foster care world are two of the most accepting populations of people I have been around. These two worlds became my family. I have yet to find any other group of people who are so interdependent on one another and utilize empathy to connect with one another.

THEATER IS HEALTHY ESCAPE

Besides criminal justice and sociology, I have two degrees in theater. Theater is where I found acceptance and creativity. I found I could design and create in costuming and makeup. As a single mother and foster care alumni, with little to no family support, I escaped into the scene shop, costume closet and makeup room on several occasions to create and to put pen to paper in collaborate with other artists.

Not only was creative collaboration happening, but socializing with like-minded individuals. My fellow students and colleagues laughed, cared, created and when the show went up we viewed our talents, passions and audience response with great admiration, pride and accomplishment. A world I needed that I could only get in theater.

Currently I am president of the board of directors for a national organization, [The National Schoolhouse](#)



for **Theatre Arts** (NSTA), which is coordinating a project to open a theater arts high school for children in foster care, to be located in New York. This is an original idea, developing a holistic approach just for youth in foster care to focus on a creative arts curriculum. Not only will this be an educational institution of academics but a family; a place where the community will live, play, learn living skills and support one another. The NSTA has kicked off our satellite outreach program in New York and will add the state of Florida this summer.

Vivian Dorsett, Ph.D., is a private practitioner and an assistant professor in criminal justice and sociology at Texas A&M University-Commerce. She is a foster care alumni, national advocate and mentor and sits on several child-welfare affiliated boards, advisory councils, task forces and policy councils. Email her at vdorsett@tnshta.com.



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Youth Today ISSN: 10896724



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