Transition from junior high to high school is culturally one of the most important stages in the life of a student in the U.S. In other countries is not so obviously important, but it is without a doubt a great change in an adolescent’s life, since this is a precursor to choosing a university major and then eventually maturing into an adult. Project SUCCESS, a 501(c)(3) organization whose commitment to middle and high schoolers and theatrical arts spans over twenty years, turned its attention to this jump from eighth to ninth grade and charged Jeffry Lusiak, program manager for musicals at Project SUCCESS, with finding students that would want to be a part of this ambitious project. How did this turn out?

Here are the students selected at auditions from St Paul and Minneapolis public schools: Amudalat Ajasa, Kate Anderson, Alejandro Eduarte, Belem Gomez Vega, Ray Johnson Jensen, Kaaha Kaahiye, Bob Kabeya, Rudy Meyer, Natasha Otiso, Amira Warren, and Lydia Zupanc. They worked hard with Lusiak to fashion their thoughts, anxieties, and expectations into a musical about starting high school right after middle school. Then they reviewed the process after three months as high schoolers, and they finally transformed it into the program “And So I Did”, whose elevated artistic and inspirational qualities have been seen by thousands of Twin Cities high school students. Furthermore, and thanks to the association with Minneapolis Public Schools and Elia Bruggeman as Deputy Education Officer, this play traveled to Cuernavaca (Morelos, Mexico), a sister city of Minneapolis. It was staged live three times for students in different grades with great success, not only in the play’s quality but also regarding the cultural experience of both the teenagers presenting “And So I Did” and their Mexican audience.

The trip to Morelos is the first international tour by a Project SUCCESS program, and it was also a cultural experience for the students involved, since one of this project’s objectives was that these students would get to know the local culture and some important landmarks. In his report, Lusiak mentions that even though it was a short trip and the first for many students outside of the United States, they got to see some major Mexico City attractions such as El Templo, Zócalo, Frida Kahlo’s Casa Azul, etc.

The following day the Project SUCCESS students traveled to Tepoztlán, where they performed for local students from elementary through high-school grades. Later, the North American students were treated to an array of folk dances performed by their hosts. After the presentation, the Mexican students had the opportunity to practice their English, interviewing their North American guests for their classes. The day was full of activities and camaraderie, including performing songs in individual classrooms and participating in outdoor activities. The following day was equally successful and again promoted a spirit of cultural immersion. Many of the Project SUCCESS participants commented that visiting Tepoztlán was a life-changing experience.

During the process of creating this show, Lusiak incorporated themes that the students themselves had suggested, including making friends, fitting in, and avoiding failure, into pop songs.
creating a fluid rhythm between the students’ spoken lines and the melodies they sang—superbly, of course. The music was complemented with agile choreography that featured solos by each of the performers. It’s a treat to watch the video of this show, whether you have teenage relatives and want insight into what they are thinking, or simply to enjoy the talent of these young artists:

https://www.projectsuccess.org/news__events_/2016/02/04/89/our_local_student_musical_goes_global

For the presentation in Morelos, to take into account cultural and language differences related to the theme of the show, Lusiak restructured the performance piece around the question “Who am I in the global context?”, which would center on the common experiences of adolescents. To address possible language issues, Lusiak rewrote sections of the program so that the bilingual students Belem Gómez Vega and Lydia Zupanc had more lines in Spanish, and he provided subtitles in Spanish of the entire program through the use of digital screens. Lusiak also pointed out that English wasn’t a problem for many of the students from Morelos, as many of them had lived for a time in Minnesota and were bilingual, and the majority of them have contact with English through television, music, or school.

In a telephone interview, 10th grader Amudalat Ajasa recounted that her favorite memory from the Morelos tour was seeing the audience’s smiles during the program. “I learned that there is beauty in small things. The fact that we performed for these young children who didn’t know anything about us and in spite of the language barrier were smiling and seemed happy, even though they perhaps didn’t understand what we were saying.” In terms of the presentation in front of primary school students, Lusiak remarked that the Mexican children thought the students who performed “And So I Did” were rock stars and asked them for autographs on slips of paper or even on their own hands; Ajasa mentioned that this experience had been very beautiful and full of tenderness.

So what does Ajasa have to say about high school at this stage of the game, with so many performances of “And So I Did” under her belt? “I feel that high school is not bad, it’s just a stage in the development of who you will potentially become.”

Original Article (in Spanish):

https://issuu.com/stpaulpublishing/docs/lv_april_2016/3?e=1438863/36815825