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Putting It Together: Best Practices in Arts Education and Theatrical Education with Neurodivergent Students

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**Putting It Together: Best Practices in Arts Education and Theatrical Education with
Neurodivergent Students**

By Evan Tait

An Action Research Project submitted to Western Oregon University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of:

Masters of Arts, in Teaching

June 2022



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ABSTRACT

**Putting It Together: Best Practices in Arts Education and Theatrical Education with
Neurodivergent Students**

By Evan Tait

Arts education, for many administrations, can be a frustrating course of study. The question of whether or not it is an important skill to have students learn or whether it's frivolous is a constant argument between administrators and teachers. The best practices for arts education in the classroom can lead to improvements in test scores, development in critical thinking skills, and increases in understanding in many non-arts related subjects. Neurodivergent students rely on arts education because, for many, the way that they understand the world is through artistic practices such as music, theater, visual arts, and literature. Many students rely on theatrical education as a way to improve their skills in the classroom, as well as their skills in their development in high school.

This project discusses research and literature that talks about the importance of theater education in school curriculums, the importance of providing neurodivergent students safe, psychologically protected spaces for growth in learning, and how to make a traditionally teacher-centered subject into a mutually beneficial learning-centered subject.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

“Bit by bit, putting it together. Piece by piece, only way to make a work of art. Every moment needs a contribution. Every little detail plays a part. Having just a vision’s no solution. Everything depends on execution. Putting it together, that’s what counts”, sings George, the main character in Stephen Sondheim’s musical *Sunday in the Park with George*. Before George sings about the importance of art, the other characters in this musical discuss whether his art “worked” for them. One character says that the “state of the art” is combining different trends and that “You can’t divide art today into categories neatly” (Sondheim, 1984). After differing viewpoints from each character, George sings the aforementioned line as a mantra to himself.

The irony of discussing *Sunday in the Park with George* and its relationship to art is that this is the first show after a humiliating failure for Stephen Sondheim. He wrote the music and lyrics to the 1981 musical comedy flop *Merrily We Roll Along*, which lasted a total of 16 performances on Broadway. What Sondheim was doing, musically, had been done sparingly on Broadway. The show (*Merrily*) discusses the relationships of three friends, beginning at the end of their friendship and working backwards. For most artists, it would make sense to start the show at their youngest and work their way to the end, but Sondheim wanted to do something new. The music started out as a traditional homage to the musicals of the 1950s, which is where the story truly “began”. As the show continued, the music shifted and took on a more modern tone. Motifs previously established repeated to indicate the passage of time for our three main characters. Suffice it to say, this show did not go over well.

Critics and audiences were not ready for a show that was so complicated. The New York Times were even quoted as saying, about the show, that “...what’s really wasted here is Mr.

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Sondheim's talent. And that's why we watch "Merrily We Roll Along" with an ever-mounting—and finally upsetting—sense of regret." (Rich, 1981, Section C, p.9). The relationships that Sondheim had with his former collaborators were severed, in quite spectacular fashion, because of the failure of this show. Flash forward to 1984 when he was approached by a new director and playwright with the idea to create a musical based on the painting, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. With this opportunity, Sondheim thought of something new. He had lots of things to say--things that he had not already said-- and so he did what he had to do: created art.

I like to think that a lot of what us teachers do is "putting it together", like the aforementioned lyrics say. It is some sort of modern art piece that not a lot of people will understand, but each detail of the art piece we put together is crucial overall. Each student that enters our classroom could be a George: full of imagination and untapped potential, waiting for lightning to strike. It is our job to try to harness the lightning and keep the fire ignited in their eyes. However, despite our best efforts, sometimes harnessing lightning and igniting fire can lead to crashing and burning. As an educator, how we pick ourselves up and go back to the drawing board both affords us new opportunities to explore and provides students with the chance to make art with us. And we put it together one dot at a time.

My Philosophy of Education

While lyrics from a Pulitzer Prize winning musical paired with the history of one of the most epic stumbling blocks of one of the world's best theater composers might seem like a bizarre way to tie in education, I think this reference fits nicely into the overarching question that I have about education: how, as an educator, can I advocate for students with exceptionalities in a performing arts classroom? In *Sunday in the Park with George*, George had to confront

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opinions and the dissension of the people around him, which is what students have to deal with on a regular basis. I believe that every student--no matter their situation in life--is entitled to an education that allows them to explore subjects, bit by bit, and ask the questions they need to find the answers they deserve.

Part of putting it together, as an educator, means that I empower the students to feel safe in the classroom by creating an environment where their ideas and preconceptions can be challenged in an empowering way. Students can learn when they feel safe and they can learn when they are uncomfortable, like when their foreknowledge is examined to illuminate alternative thought processes. Students' ideas and preconceptions should be challenged, but they should be challenged in a way that empowers them to explore further. Sondheim opens *Sunday...* by saying "White, a blank page or canvas. The challenge, bring order to the whole through design. Composition. Tension. Balance. Light. And harmony" (Sondheim, 1984). Students have the freedom to begin on a blank page. Their mission is two-fold. First, they need to bring order to the whole of their idea or their preconceptions. Secondly, I want my students to feel like they are the sculptor of their own education, instead of having someone sculpt their education for them. If they do not feel like they have the liberty to forge their own path, then it is my duty as an educator to provide them with an alternate sculpture and show them that it can be done differently.

Lastly, I believe that students have a wealth of prior knowledge that can, and should, be tapped into on a regular basis. We know what we know, and we don't know what we don't know. By providing a student the opportunity to relate, let's say, fractions to a piece of music, or modern-day government to an episode of Parks and Recreation, we teachers are enabling them with a new hook to get in to the material. My job as educator is to learn about their prior knowledge and add more to it. If the dots that they have on their tapestry of education are based

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solely on movies, what if I give them a dot of music? A line of television? A splash of fiction? How is that going to enrich their educational tapestry?

My Experience, and the Impact on My Philosophy of Education

As a student of the performing arts, I never got the chance to truly put things together. Most of my teachers and I had an unspoken agreement: I do what I do best, and they provide the opportunities for success. The thing that made it so ironic was that in the performing arts, specifically theater, I had the least opportunity for success. I had a teacher who was focused on her ego, and she wanted to make sure that there was no one in her department who knew more than her. That was me. I knew more because I sought out the knowledge to know more. What sticks out most to me is when I was cast in a professional show my junior year of high school. When I got an opportunity to represent the school, her department, and all of the things that this teacher taught me, her response to this wonderful opportunity was one of jealousy and ambivalence. She told me things like “Don’t forget where you came from” and “Remember who taught you all the things you know”. To a young person whose only escape was inside of an auditorium, this was a punch to the gut. Fast forward about ten years, when writing this action research plan, and I talk about this experience openly to my students in my high school play production class. I mention to them that they can pursue any opportunity outside of the walls of the classroom, and that’s what is going to teach them the most about being actors. The reason I mention this is because it’s so important to understand that part of creation is to seek out creativity: creative stories, creative minds, and creative people. Gatekeeping creativity for students has a negative impact on students. A quality arts education, including emotional support can raise students’ abilities to critique themselves, their willingness to experiment, their ability to reflect, and also to learn from

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their mistakes (Robinson, 2013). I make sure that my students in my class can have all of those skills once they leave my room, because I did not have those when I graduated from high school. In regards to prior knowledge, I remember my junior year English teacher, Mrs. Johnson, let me do my thing. I distinctly remember when we were reading *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, every student in the class was struggling with their final essay for her. She loved to do a cumulative final essay about a theme or motif in the book. What did I do? I decided to write a paper comparing the heroism of Randle P. McMurphy (the protagonist of *Cuckoo's Nest*), and Huckleberry Finn. My rationale? Easy. I was in a musicalized version of the story of Huck Finn, and I knew those parallels. *Huckleberry Finn*, to me, was *Cuckoo's Nest*, but set in Civil War-era America. The reason I remember that paper, specifically, was that it was the first time a teacher allowed me to tap into prior knowledge. She allowed me to be inquisitive and try something different. Here, she allowed me to put it together.

As an educator, that's all I want for my students. I want them to be able to write a paper about what they have spent their semester learning. But, I know that since students' minds all work differently. If they feel like a poem is the best way to indicate their knowledge, they're writing a poem. Would it be better for them to write a comic, draw a poster, etc? Great! That's their choice, and that's what got them hooked into what they were reading and learning. I suppose you could call this a "Choose Your Own Adventure" approach.

My Philosophy From Theory to Practice

One of the ways that I would like to incorporate what I think about education, about putting it together, is to add more of a theoretical approach, primarily utilizing the work of Bandura and his social learning theory. One of the tenets of Bandura's theory has to do with observational learning, and in a theater class, Bandura talks about how students will pay attention

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to the people around them, also known as models, and encode that memory. Later on, the ultimate goal is that they are able to imitate those memories that they observed the people having. I can make that happen for them by providing them with access to materials (scripts, improvisation games, question and answer sessions, etc.) that will provide them the opportunities to show something in the world around them and use something that they saw in a scene or theatrical interaction of their own. Most, if not all, of theatrical practice is theft, or so I tell my students. An artist's sole mission is to provide the audience with a take on a role that they may have never seen before or, the inverse, provide them with a comforting take on a role that they hold near and dear to their hearts. At the end of my play production class' year, they give the general public a showcase of Shakespeare scenes, and one of the things I told them is that if they see something that works, utilize it. Justify it, but utilize it. By providing the students with different examples of ways that other performers, actors, technicians, etc. hone their craft is going to be an invaluable resource.

The most important part of my philosophy of cooperative learning is how the students will respond to these observations. Bandura talks about how if the consequences of imitating someone's behavior is rewarding, the student is more likely to continue with that behavior. In my classroom, feedback is paramount, and for a lot of students, feedback can lead to an unsafe classroom environment. Teaching my students how to utilize feedback as a positive and providing verbal feedback to students that will empower them, instead of berate them, is going to be very important. Part of what I can do to encourage this social learning theory is to teach the students how to give constructive feedback that is still positive, and does not tear down the performer. The tendency, as an actor, is that when you give feedback, it's some personal attack on your skills, but that is not what feedback is meant to do for the actor. Being able to model the

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verbal feedback that they should be given and providing them with verbal examples is going to help boost morale in the classroom.

Bandura's theory also discusses how the student is going to discern whether they want to copy an action or not. In a theater classroom, for example, if an actor sees the reaction and hears the reaction of the audience when one person crosses the stage, they might want to incorporate a cross like that in their scene work. I want to enable students to trust their instincts and give them the freedom to utilize their prior knowledge of being a human, being a student, and being an actor, but still adding new skills to their toolbox in a way that will empower, not dismiss.

Another theory that is important for me to incorporate in my teaching is Piaget, and specifically, his theory of play, and what play can do in the classroom. Now, I understand fully that high school students are not kindergarten learners, and "play" for them might seem like a childish construct, but as a teacher, it is my job to teach them how to play. It's a skill that a lot of times, high schoolers forget. They get bogged down with living their lives and they get bombarded with projects, tests, facts and figures. As a teacher, I have to use some of Piaget's theory of play, particularly the idea of symbolic play, to get my students invested in what I am teaching. Symbolic play also allows students to conquer something that might be weighing heavily on them. Something that always stuck out with me about this idea of symbolic play, is when I took an improv course in my first year of undergraduate.

My improvisation teacher told me that improv doesn't need to be funny because life is funny inherently, and I think about that frequently in my teaching of theater. Using Piaget's theory, I can allow my students to explore things that might be on their mind, or reenact an experience they had in their week, or allow them to really explore their identity. As a theater educator, I realized throughout my student teaching that high school is its own improv exercise.

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Many times, my students improvised having a good day, improvised dealing with heartbreak, stress, and the general craziness surrounding their educational experience.

But, as an educator, I learned about the power and importance of identifying those moments and living in them, not hiding from them. Piaget's theory of play works in that sense because part of play means that students are able to follow what drives them and lights their fire, which then allows them to discover and construct their own knowledge. Most of my students are upper-class students, and for a lot of these students, the only time they are able to interact with their real emotions is between the 50 or 80 minutes that they have class with me, and through the material the whole class works on, as a collective. They get to feel heartbreak through a scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, or betrayal through the infamous nunnery scene in *Hamlet*, or the effects of toxic masculinity through the eyes of Katarina and Petruchio in *Taming of the Shrew*, and those experiences are important for their development as well-rounded students of the world.

My Philosophy and the InTASC Standards

My philosophy of education directly correlates with InTASC standards 3, 4, and 8. Standard 3 discusses how “the teacher works with others to create environments that support individual and collaborative learning, and that encourage positive social interaction, active engagement in learning, and self-motivation” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011, p.8). In order to provide students with the blank space and the freedom to explore their craft, they need to feel safe in their space and as the teacher, I need to work on providing students both a

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physical space that allows them to feel safe and an emotional and social space to feel safe as well. I can make that space safe by giving students material that will challenge them and opportunities that will allow them to grow. “Safe space”, or the idea of it at least, has been hotly contested in modern society nowadays. The prevailing narrative in some communities is that a safe space is somehow dangerous, like dancing in the movie *Footloose*, and that has to change. In order to maintain safe spaces in my classroom, part of the creation of that safe environment means that I must not treat hot-button issues that students are

Standard 4 says that “the teacher understands the central concepts, tools of inquiry, and structures of the discipline he or she teaches and creates learning experiences that make the discipline accessible and meaningful for learners to assure mastery of the content” (Council of Chief State Schools Officers, 2011, p.8). The reason this works with my philosophy is that a lot of students in my class come from various theatrical backgrounds. I have a lot of students who have a very pedestrian knowledge of theater and theater terminology. By knowing different ways for students to get involved in the theater, that is going to allow them to try new things and continue to add to the safety of the classroom. I have students who are on an IEP plan, and they do not have a lot of theater knowledge, but by giving them tasks that are attainable to their exceptionalities, they are thriving in the class. Part of that is in direct correlation with my understanding of theater and relaying that to my students.

Lastly, Standard 8 states that “the teacher understands and uses a variety of instructional strategies to encourage learners to develop deep understanding of content areas and their connections, and to build skills to apply knowledge in meaningful ways” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2011, p. 9). This works directly with my philosophy because for a lot of my students, they learn best by doing. Starting classes with an improvisation exercise can help them feel safe and feel independent because with improvisation, students who might be more

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emerging or beginner in their theater skills have opportunities to grow. Students who are more advanced, for example, have the opportunity to hone their creativity and explore more complex theatrical terminology like characterization, given circumstances, and theatrical relation.

Additionally, Standard 8 works with my philosophy because the standard allows, quite nicely, for students to learn how to work with different people of different skill sets,. It will allow them to start providing feedback that will strengthen their performance and provide them more opportunities to grow, as well as start a dialogue between myself and them so we can all collaborate together.

Conclusion

My philosophy of education is based on the overarching idea that students are able to work together and create together. They're putting it all together, which is what the art of making art is. My philosophy allows for students to explore different ideas by creating lessons that give students more autonomy, and allow them to explore themes, motifs, and other theories of theatrical practice, giving them a diverse portfolio of skills and knowledge to draw on as they start their theatrical journeys. As a teacher, they can explore this by using their bodies, using technology, and watching theater happen in the real world, which they can utilize in any facet of their time in my class. My philosophy also provides different evidence based practices that will allow students to perform and create at a high level. Many of the practices are also utilized in the professional theater community worldwide, and they can be made accessible to all students, no matter their proficiency.

Lastly, my philosophy of education's core tenet is that students are able to feel safe and confident in the classroom and in their knowledge of theater, and I can do that for the students by direct exposure to their art. They spend their days already getting material in other classes like

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worksheets, note taking sheets, PowerPoints, etc. In my class, they are able to put what they are learning into real, tangible action. They also provide them the unique task of learning that they get out of theater what they put in to it, and they learn quite quickly that the best that they can do, is in fact the best that they can do, and no one is going to judge them, belittle them, or make them feel unworthy, which is a unique opportunity in a classroom.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Purposes and Objectives for the Literature Review

My purpose in this review of the research was to discover how teachers and researchers have looked at effective teaching and teacher growth in their discipline. I searched for research on best practices for teaching neurodivergent students in the performing arts because for many neurodivergent students, performance such as theater, music, dance, etc. have a profound effect on the rest of their educational journey, and can set them up for success in subjects that are far beyond performance. I also searched for studies on the impact of theater education in a school

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setting because the impact that a performance class has on students will benefit them when they leave their educational institutions for the real world, and having some sort of theatrical foundation sets students up for most success. Additionally, because I would be studying my own practice and focusing on these ideas in my endorsement area, I looked for studies that indicated the kinds of instruction that are effective for whole-class engagement in a theater classroom. This literature review addresses my knowledge of these concepts as a foundation for my understanding to set goals and grow from in my own teaching. I especially looked for research that described effective strategies for each area and gave examples of how it might work in a classroom. Application of this research was an essential part in building my own knowledge base for this project.

Procedures for the Literature Review

I selected literature for this review based on several specific criteria. Research on best practices for theater was included if it contained the following descriptors: best practices, theater education, neurodivergence. This search yielded 33,500,000 relevant articles. In order to narrow my findings and make them more specific to this research project, I then focused my review efforts on articles that discussed neurodivergent students. From there, I looked for articles that supported sub-themes that emerged from the major articles in my literature review. These sub-themes are: 1) what the best practices are for theater education, 2) how a socially responsible and comprehensive arts education can benefit neurodivergent students, and 3) why the study of

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theater is so important for students, particularly in high school. For these sub-sections, I initially searched Google for articles that met the keyword criteria listed above, along with a conducting a search for books in the database of the Hamersly Library at Western Oregon University. After finding these books and articles, I hand-searched their reference lists as sources to find additional related articles and books.

In order to integrate the literature review, I developed a coding protocol and corresponding separation of research into the major themes: the best practices for a comprehensive theater arts education, neurodivergence and theater education, and access to theater education. I read each article to determine how it fit within these broad thematic categories, and then, through a process of reading and rereading for salient features of each study, I determined the subheadings in the literature review. My intent was to start with a broad treatment of each theme and then to systematically reduce broad understandings of both theater education and neurodivergence to specific understanding of how these themes are present in research about the best practices for teaching neurodiverse students in a theater classroom.

Part 1: Best Practices for Theater Education

I wanted to examine what some of the most up to date best practices were for arts education. Since arts education covers theater, music, film, and other fine arts, each discipline has different best practices. With arts programs being one of the first things cut in modern curriculums, it's important to understand what the best practices are and how that can translate into non-arts courses.

Teacher-Centered Versus Learner-Centered Theater Education

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Theater education, for a long time, has been teacher-centered. For many teacher-centered theater programs, the focus is primarily on production of plays and musicals that are popular regionally and on Broadway (Lazarus 2013) and most of the productions being put on in the community of the students do not focus on “the lives of the majority of the students in the school community” (Lazarus 2013, 31). For most theater education programs, the predominant reason that there is such a sharp decrease in participation in and study of theater is because “theater work is undervalued, fragmented, and accessible only after school and mostly to white, middle-class, able-bodied students” (Lazarus 2000, 38).

The practice of learner-centered theater education, which is a relatively new development in arts education, according to Lazarus 2013 and her book, *Signs of Change*, “involves the design and implementation of comprehensive, integrated curricula. It includes programs in which students are engaged in the exploration of social, historical, and educational issues through the study and production of theater” (Lazarus 2013, 32). Learner-centered education gives voice to young people’s concerns and ideas while “connecting them to real and fictional figures throughout time”, as well as the education “socially responsible, provocative, and connected to the world in which students live” (Lazarus 2013, 32).

Characteristics of Best Practice in Theater Education

Lazarus (2013) mentions in her book, *Signs of Change*, that there are three main tenets to what the best practices of theater education are. The first one is a learning centered classroom and production work, where the students’ contributions to the work they are putting on a stage is nurtured and valued. Part of that also includes when both teachers and students engage in discourse about the work being presented and both parties concerned ask questions and investigate from multiple perspectives. The reason why learning-centered theater education is

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most effective is because there is mutual decision making and action between teacher and student.

One way that learning-centered theater education can be beneficial is that it can draw on their prior knowledge. Harvey (2010) says that if students know that their decisions are useful, then they are more apt to keep offering those decisions. Rapport with students is also an important factor of learning-centered education. Vera (2011), who is a teacher near the Dallas area starts each class with a normal conversation and discusses subject matter that the students find interesting or relevant to their lives, which helps link pre-established objectives and standards to what is currently on a student's mind and hearts.

The approach of Vera's works to keep a student-centered classroom because by bringing in "hot topics" or topics that are weighing on a student, the teacher learns a little bit more about what is important to the whole and can benefit the teaching of the theater work that the students are engaging in. A concrete example of this is what is happening right now with legislation against the rights of people in the LGBTQ community. I mentioned what is happening with this legislation to my class and the play that they are working on, a revision and reimagining of *Romeo and Juliet*. Because most of my class identify strongly as members of the LGBTQ community, a play that mentions female-identifying individual's rights was something that the students really wanted to talk about and as an educator, I learned a lot about what they were engaging with as well.

Process-Centered Education and Product-Centered Education

Part of engaging in theatrical best practices is to utilize process-centered education and activities in the classroom and product-centered education and activities. There has to be a fine line of blending the two practices to truly accommodate students' diverse learning styles, and

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that means there has to be constant adjustment to continue to keep the focus learner-centered.

The simple fact of the matter that Lazarus (2013) mentions is that it is impossible to invite every single student in the classroom to make every decision about their role in a production or in a classroom setting. Lazarus (2013) mentions the process of limiting the “number and nature of decisions” each student has to make (Lazarus 2013, 76), which makes the work safer for the student, in the long run.

A version of process-centered theater education relies on a relatively new, but incredibly important, practice: theatrical consent. As a theater educator, it is my job to rely on the process of checking in with my actors and in return, my actors checking in with their scene partners. Consent in the rehearsal room can take many forms, but the reason that it’s important to the process is because it relies heavily on trust and autonomy. According to Elizabeth Brendel Horn in the *Youth Theater Journal*, we live in a time that is gaining awareness of the need for consent and bodily autonomy (Horn 2020). Horn also mentions that “...adults are not always mindful of consent and bodily autonomy with the young people with whom they are most trusted” (Horn 2020).

Differences in Instruction in Learning-Centered Theater Education

Something that is very important, according to the literature, is to design learning that is “based on assessment of individual students’ needs and abilities” (Lazarus 2013, 68). By changing up the instruction, there is a certain amount of give and take. Students are able to prioritize what part of the process works for them. If students might be more technically focused, provide them opportunities to create technical works in the play you are analyzing and allow them to create their own choices, but provide the teacher the ability to step in when it looks like the student is struggling.

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Differentiation in instruction also means changing the dialogue around teaching and how one considers the opinions and abilities of students in a learning-centered theatrical environment. The language that is predominantly used in classrooms are “I” statements, such as “I need you to grab the cup when the character says...” or “I want you to cross center stage on...”. What this can do is undermine a student’s sense of exploration. If a teacher utilizes language that is good for the entirety of the group, such as “Let’s all move our hands on the downbeat” or “Please review your lines for scene 3” has intentionality behind it, and it “makes clear that the teacher is making instructional decisions for the good of the group and not for his or her own convenience or need” (Lazarus 2013, 61). This can lead to reflection on both the part of the theater maker (student) and the theater professional (teacher).

Reflection as a Tool in Learning-Centered Theater Education

Reflection is one of the most powerful tools a theatrical practitioner has. In a study conducted by Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (2005), they all say that there has to be a balance between immersion and expression. By providing students the opportunity to get on their feet and explore, and then after they’ve done said exploration, reflecting on that, they say that students can “reflect, debrief, and abstract from their experiences what they have felt and thought and learned” (Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde 2005, 11). Reflection can be both written and oral, but it needs to be given in a timely manner so when a student delves back into the work, they’re able to take what they reflected on and either add or subtract to that.

The second tenant is socially responsible practice, and that is the practice that I subscribe to the most in my classroom. Simply put, Lazarus (2013) says that students “learn in, through, and about theater as members of society and citizens of the school and the world” (Lazarus 2013, 35). A lot of times with a theater education curriculum, what the focus is is on accepted,

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canonical texts, usually without thought of diverse casting and lived experiences of the performers. Most of the time, with a socially irresponsible practice of theater education, the texts that students are performing and engaging with are not developmentally appropriate or relevant to the community they are in (Lazarus 2013).

For many students, their first interaction with theater is usually either with Shakespeare or with a commonly acceptable White male theater maker, such as Arthur Miller, Neil Simon, Eugene O'Neill, etc. While those writers are important to study, absolutely, the best practices of theater education are to work with collaborating with students on how to make the material translatable to their experience.

Finally, best practice in theater education means that there is a comprehensive theater education. The direct instruction in a theater classroom has to be holistic, it has to be coming from a place of authenticity, there has to be a level of experience (or experiential learning) and it has to provide students the opportunity to collaborate in roles that are not just “actor”, such as directing, playwriting, technical design, criticism, research, and how to be an effective audience member (Lazarus 2013).

Criticism As A Best Practice in Theatrical Education

One process that actors go through in their education that can be rather unnerving is the process of both receiving and providing feedback to and from peers. Liz Lerman, founder of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, has a multi-step process of providing and receiving feedback in the arts: inviting statements of meaning from responders, focused questions about the work posed by the artists themselves, and sharing opinions by permission (Lerman and Borstel, 2003, 19-20). The first step, inviting statements of meaning from responders, works particularly well with high school students because it puts the focus back on what the performer just presented,

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such as “What was surprising for you (about the scene)?” or “What was meaningful about the scene?” (Lerman and Borstel 2003, 19-20).

The second step, focused questions about the work posed by the artists themselves, “enables the responder to recognize and acknowledge the personal values at play” (Lerman and Borstel 20-21). By making the questions about the scene or work presented less opinion based, such as “It’s too long” or “Why did you make that choice?”, the artist in the classroom feels more empowered and they are able to justify their choices without the fear of scrutiny.

The last step, sharing opinions by permission, allows the artist to accept or reject the opinion being presented. The reason this is so important in a classroom setting is because many times, an opinion presented might not be of the utmost importance to the scene or the work itself.

Combining all three of these steps can make the process of feedback less cutthroat, or bloodthirsty, as it can be, or has been portrayed to be in popular media. Critical feedback can lead to a culture of respect, better art, and better insight into others’ artistic process (Lazarus 2013)

Part II: Socially Responsible Practice and Comprehensive Theater Education

An important aspect to implementation of best practices in a theater classroom is to emphasize social responsibility in theatrical practice. Combining best practices with social responsibility leads to a more comprehensive theater education, and a comprehensive theater education can provide students with success in fields that are not directly related to the performing arts.

Dependent on the practitioner you talk to, the terminology “socially responsible theater” can produce different answers. In my opinion, and the opinion of Joan Lazarus’ book *Signs of Change: New Directions in Theater Education*, socially responsible theater is centered around five questions: “Whose program is this?”, “What connections are made to students’ lived

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experiences?”, “What is the nature of my learning community?”, “How am I using the implicit political nature of theatre to engage students in the community?”, and “What material do we study, develop, and produce?” (Lazarus 2013, 123-124). Socially responsible theater practice is ever-changing and ongoing, and as a theater educator, it is something that must be on the forefront of our teaching.

Theater and Gender and Sexuality

The most important thing to remember about making a socially responsible theater program is to understand that there are multiple factors that can lead to a re-examination of what to teach and what practices to uphold in the classroom. A theatrical practitioner has to think about, according to Sharon Grady’s book *Drama and Diversity*, the differences that social class, race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and ability can play in a child’s healthy or thwarted development (Grady 2000). It’s important to understand what the impact of all of these thoughts are in a classroom, and more acutely, in the materials selected for the class. Ethical, socially responsible theater teachers must “think deeply about how popular culture and performing arts themselves applaud and reward the “sexy babe” and the “hot stud” images while imposing adult behaviors on young people” (Lazarus, 2013, 144).

Looking back at my high school experience in theater, one thing that I realized that I wanted to prevent for my students was doing material that was not artistically appropriate. A lot of times, scores for some musicals can be very hard for students to learn, subject matter might be difficult to access for students, etc. One way that, as educators, we can combat the idea of material being “inappropriate” in the regards of gender or sexuality could be to “discuss these depictions in rehearsals, talk-back sessions, or dramaturgical materials shared with audiences” (Lazarus, 2013, 144). A newer trend in the field of theater education is the idea that theater teaching and curriculum “adequately supports and meets the needs of *both* girls and boys”

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(Bishop, 1992, 7, emphasis added). Teaching theater and material that meet the needs of not just boys and girls, but also students who identify as non-binary, is a theatrical best practice, as well as being part of socially responsible theater education..

Theatre and Disability

It's important for socially engaged teachers to make it abundantly clear that "their programs are for all students in the school, not just those whose performance abilities or other talents have been developed or are even apparent (Lazarus 2013). Many classrooms are not built for students with exceptionalities, and one of the primary exceptionalities that I have seen in my classes are students on the Autism spectrum.

Something that can help with making sure that a socially responsible teacher honors the experiences, lived or otherwise, of students is to use some commonly-used methods for teaching students with ASD, such as visual scheduling and modifications to their environment. I use visual scheduling a lot because my students can see each step of the schedule for the day and they know what to expect; it makes an unpredictable art form a little more manageable, which helps for students with ASD.

Environmental modifications help a lot of students of the theater who have ASD because, again, it reinforces predictability. Each class that I teach, we have a seating chart ready to go and projected frequently, so if students either forget where they are seated or, in true student fashion, try to pull the wool over our eyes and sit with their friends, they have that resource readily available. Having that certain modification to their environment helps because it can benefit both the student with ASD and their teacher (Siper, 2020). Lazarus (2013) also says that pairings of students can help students become leaders in their school, and that can be a direct correlation

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between their environment being modified.

Socially Responsible Theater Education

Socially responsible theater education, simply put, states that “the material produced with students challenges them to think critically, stimulates their imaginations, and encourages them to consider the nature of what it means to be human” (Lazarus, 2013, 170). It can be a really difficult experience, trying to account for the needs of all of the students in your classroom environment when picking new material and choosing what to focus on in a theater curriculum. Many times, my students have come to me talking about the material they are drawn to, and most of the material they are drawn to have a darker bent to them. They ask me all the time when they will do things like *Heathers the Musical*, or *Chicago*, or *Beetlejuice*, etc. because they’ve been exposed to that material in their daily lives and in their research and their natural curiosity. I discovered later in my student teaching, after having more strategies to try and utilize best practices in my theater classroom, that when the students have access to material that truly questions normal societal conventions and stories that they’ve had ingrained in their subconscious for a long time, that’s the most fruitful collaboration.

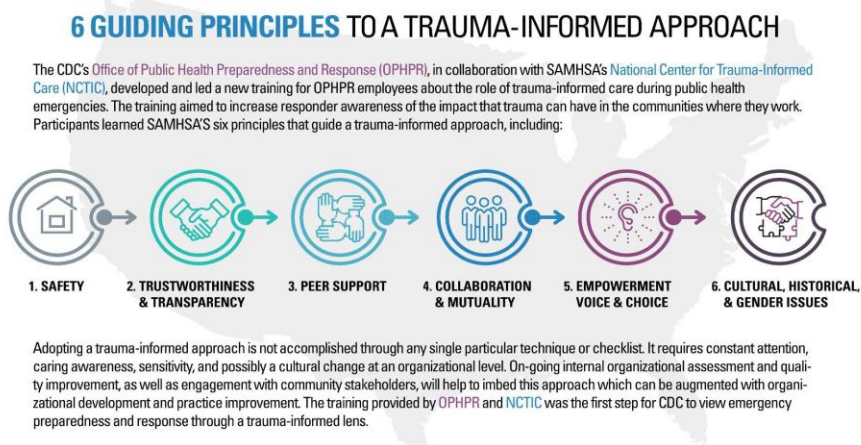
In my play production class, their task was to try and put together a showcase night. It allowed our stronger actors to really stretch their acting skills and it provided our more novice performers with the chance to dabble in genres that they may not have had a lot of experience with. Since the class did not was a re-telling of *Romeo and Juliet*, where Juliet tries to take more of the control of the predominantly male-centric narrative, with varying results, which will be discussed in Chapter 4.

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As a socially responsible theater teacher-director, my job is to look for material with an equivalence for the students, and that “concern for young people’s social, emotional, and developmental well-being—as well as their artistic development—must weigh heavily in script selection” (Lazarus, 2013, 171). It’s also my job, as a socially responsible teacher-director, to allow the students to have an equal say in the material, which goes back to teacher centered learning versus learner centered learning. In Chapter 4, you will find the results of what happens when a piece of material is selected from a teacher centered place of learning and when it flips to a learning centered place.

Theater Education and Trauma-Informed Practices

In education nowadays, a prevailing theory of education is the idea of “trama-informed education”, which means that educators have an acute understanding of trauma and are aware of the impact that various trauma can have on students of any field in any population. According to the Center for Disease Control, or CDC (2018) (Figure 1.1), there are six facets to trauma-informed care.



(Figure 1.1: 6 Guiding Principles To a Trauma-Informed Approach)

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While a high school theater education might not be the most likely place for practicing trauma-informed education, it helps that when a traumatic event happens to a class, there are steps in place to continue learning about their field, while still allowing themselves to live in their trauma and react however they need to to process the event, and once a teacher can go away from a more pathological mindset (such as defining the student by what their diagnosis or their trauma is or could be) and move more toward a mindset of empathy, that will allow students to learn to recognize what strategies they are using to stay safe in the classroom, and either build new or replace old strategies for adaptation or coping. In Chapter 5, for the results, I will share what happens when a classroom is directly impacted by trauma.

Best Practices in Education for Neurodivergent Students

One of the best practices in education for neurodivergent students is establishing some sort of culture in the classroom. Culture, used in the educational sense, “refers to a dynamic system of social values, cognitive codes, behavioral standards, worldviews, and beliefs...” (Delgado-Gaitan and Trueba, 1991). Pai (2001) says that “our society’s predominant worldview and cultural norms are so deeply ingrained in how we educate children that we very seldom think about the possibility that there may be other different but equally legitimate and effective approaches to teaching and learning” (Pai, 2001, 233). The reason this is so important for neurodivergent students is that the culture of the classroom that one is teaching in can be the catalyst for their success. They’ll feel successful if they know that when they walk into the classroom, they are protected and their voices and ideas are honored, and not pushed aside.

Success versus failure is a very important concept when talking about neurodivergent students and their education. Learning derives from a basis of strength and capability, not weakness and failure (Gay, 2000, 32).

Chapter 3: Methodology

Participants:

I am a graduate student at Western Oregon University, in the process of obtaining my Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) for Initial Licensure. Currently, I student teach in a rural school district, in a theater classroom. My students come from a wide variety of different socioeconomic backgrounds. Many of my students come from a lower-middle to upper-middle class background. Two students are on a modified diploma, and a few of them have an IEP or 504 plan. Predominantly, the student makeup is more underclassman than upperclassmen. The district they are in has approximately 36% of their students, district wide, that qualify for free or reduced lunch, and the district itself is below the state standard for grade 12 on time graduation. The state standard is 83%, and the district is reporting 80% for a grade 12 graduation rate. 13% of the students in the district are considered “Students with Disabilities”, as per the reporting via the Oregon Department of Education’s “At-A-Glance District Profile”. 86% of their student body identify as White, with 10% of students identifying as Hispanic or Latino, and 3% identifying as Multiracial.

My three research questions are what are the best practices for education of neurodivergent students, what are the best practices for education of the performing arts in a high school setting, and what are the educational benefits of bolstering the performing arts, particularly in rural areas?

Data Collection

As of the writing of this section, I have collected lesson plans, class instructional materials and data in the form of Jamboards, visual aids, and both student-assessed and teacher-assessed rubrics, observations from my cooperating teacher and from my Western Oregon University supervisor, and books on different instructional methods, with a strong focus in engagement and cooperative learning from Spencer Kagan. I collected the Jamboards during my second term of student teaching, the visual aids mainly from my second term, and the rubrics from both first and second term. The observations from both my cooperating teacher and my university supervisor have been collected in both fall and winter terms, and the Kagan books were given to me by my cooperating teacher at the beginning of winter term. In regards to when I received this data during the point of instruction, most of my student-focused data was collected during a 7 to 10 lesson unit in a play production course.

I collected this particular data because the Jamboards, aids, and rubrics allow me to have insight as to what a comprehensive theater education is providing for my neurodivergent students, and how that differs between the students in the class who are neurotypical. The data from observations allows me to understand how to better tailor my teaching to the students I have, as well as showing me what other resources can be accessed and provided to my students. I received the Kagan strategies text because I expressed interest in trying different ways to engage students in the classroom, and work on more of a collaborative feeling in the classroom, which is especially important in a theater class because theater is all about building an ensemble, and building an ensemble quickly.

Data Analysis

The primary thing I wanted to look for in the data that helped inform the research questions that I had was how my neurodivergent students were responding to different teaching methods. I saw that by using technology such as a Jamboard with a daily question and an end-of-lesson question, I could gather from those informal assessments what the students, neurodivergent or otherwise, were still struggling with, conceptually, and what they really understood. The main way I went about this was varying methods of informal and formal assessments. Some of the informal assessments include digital tools (Jamboards, Google Docs, Google Classroom, Edpuzzle, YouTube), live demonstration (gallery walks, “I Do, You Do, We Do” modelling, examples, question-and-answer sessions), and various visual aids (“survival guides”, final assessment rubrics, self-assessment rubrics, various worksheets and viewing guides).

What I realized with this data analysis is that the students as a whole responded best to arts instruction that was modeled first and then a combination of one-on-one check-ins on their understanding of the material, as well as independent work time. They also responded well to material that was presented in language that was developmentally appropriate and language that was easily recognizable to them, such as using slang and other popular terminology that was trending around their particular peer groups. They did not retain information when the rate of information presented to them was faster paced; they responded best to an even speed and rate of dissemination of information, and they also responded best when they assessed themselves, with a guided rubric, which was a suggestion from my cooperating teacher.

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With my students who are neurodivergent, I noticed that when their emotional lives were front and center in their minds, they had a tendency to retreat from doing things like Jamboards, Edpuzzles, etc., but would respond to the lectures and other presentations because they were more engaged with the visual and auditory demonstration of the lesson, and less engaged with the practical application.

Chapter 4: Findings

Research Questions

Throughout this action research plan, the three questions I wanted to seek answers to were listed in Chapter 3, which were what are the best practices for education of neurodivergent students, what are the best practices for education of the performing arts in a high school setting, and what are the educational benefits of bolstering the performing arts, particularly in rural areas? By answering these questions using lesson plans, observations, and student/teacher feedback, I will be able to find a correlation between the importance of a comprehensive arts education and how a comprehensive arts education provides neurodivergent students with more opportunities to succeed, as opposed to having little to no arts education represented in their curriculum.

Data Analysis of Question 1

In the first semester of my teaching, we worked on acting technique and some of the classic theatrical practices, such as the work of noted theatrical practitioners Konstantin Stanislavski and Uta Hagen. One of the best practices for education of neurodivergent students is creating a psychologically safe environment in the classroom (Delizonna 2017). Simply put, that means that students feel safe to ask clarifying questions or seek more understanding for complex topics. It can also manifest in students to engage in “moderate risk-taking, speaking your mind,

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creativity, and sticking your neck out..." (Delizonna 2017). Knowing that, I noticed an increase in student engagement and asking of questions from first semester scene study to second semester play production, particularly in my students with IEPs or 504s. For those students, what they crave most is structure, so being able to recognize a structure and execute said structure every day provides them a feeling of safety. According to Armstrong (2012), he says that "learners in psychologically protected classroom environments have better well-being and self confidence" (Armstrong, 2012, 117). I witnessed that first hand, particularly in the second semester when we delved deep into the works of William Shakespeare.

When we first started the unit on Shakespeare's life, my cooperating teacher and I decided to give the students the task of creating their own gallery walk exhibit. Each student was responsible for either part of a Google Slide or PowerPoint presentation, and they all had to work together on an interactive portion. Part of my job as the teacher was to provide them with the research and information that they needed so they could use it in their presentation. Utilizing the Jamboards during those research classes, which are an online sticky-note program, provided me with information and concrete data about how having this psychologically protected classroom directly increased participation. For my neurotypical students, every day they filled out a pre-lesson, a mid-lesson, and a post-lesson Jamboard. For my neurodivergent students, they filled out one or two of them, but not all three. I noticed that at the beginning of the unit on research, my neurodivergent students' attendance was poor, and their Jamboards were not well thought out. They were full of one word or two word answers, and they did not read or understand the question I asked of them.

Something changed, however, when the research started. I had made a Shakespeare survival guide, with the names of all the plays, a brief overview of what each genre was about, a synopsis of the plays of said genre in 15 words or less, and then, they played a game where they tried to

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guess the title of the play (utilizing their survival guide) from a meme shown. The memes used were from the popular American version of *The Office*, which is a show that I know my students respond to, as we have talked a lot about that show during class checkins and as I have gotten to know those students. My neurodivergent students responded and did incredibly well with the game portion because each day, the routine was the same, and they felt like they could ask clarifying questions and have their voices heard. According to Quantz & Magolda (1997), “teachers follow patterned action sequences that work because both teachers and students have learned exactly what to expect of each other”. When I would stick with the routine of “Guess the Meme” and then having them look at their survival guide for the answer, discussing their answer, and allowing for questions, the questions they answered got more and more detailed and specific.

Another best practice for neurodivergent students, particularly in a theater classroom, is the concept of positive niche construction, which simply put, is a strengths-based approach to how we educate students with exceptionalities. (Armstrong, 2012, 14). For my students, the reason I used memes and other references to popular culture, like *The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*, *The Lion King*, *West Side Story*, and so on when learning about Shakespeare, is because their strengths are communication and their strengths are the utilization of humor and referencing, which Shakespeare was a master of. So, when we had our research class lessons, I noticed that when I incorporated more popular cultural references that most high school students would understand, their engagement changed. The students who struggled with attendance were in every class and participated to the best of their ability. The length and specificity of their pre-, mid-, and post-class assessments changed as well. But, the most important thing that changed was that they positively associated research with humor and enjoyment, so giving them assignments where they had to do a bit more research and higher-level thinking wasn't as daunting to them as it was.

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In regard to the data about comprehension, what I noticed in my classroom environment and the student's participation is that as they started to engage more with the material, they were more willing to take risks in regards to performance assessments. I usually start my classes with an improvisation game that has something to do with the lesson that they are going to be working on later in the day. Most of the time, those games have to do with character building and relationships. These improvisation games, as a data point, worked to answer the question of best practices for neurodivergent students because while theatre, and improvisational theatre at that, is very much unpredictable, the routine of playing the games at the start of class helped with that psychological protection in the classroom because it taught them that they could fail, and it would be okay, and when it succeeds, the reaction of the crowd is an important measure for participation.

Many of the students in my classroom come from low social-emotional households, meaning that emotions, feelings, and self-esteem are either not often discussed, or never discussed, so their exteriors have hardened, which makes it difficult for them to really delve into emotional lives of characters or engage in more emotional or thought-provoking activities. For a lot of my students, the thought of making something up on the spot in front of their peers scares them, so using a daily improvisation game as a means of boosting participation also worked, from a data standpoint, to increase resiliency and confidence in performance. As an assessment tool, improvisation games work well as a best practice for neurodivergent students because those students understood that the content of the improvisation game wasn't what was assessed; it was the simple act of participation. For the students that I had who are on 504 plans or IEPs, the reason that improvisation helped increased their social-emotional learning is because it required them to directly work with their peers and were able to see the reactions of the audience to a well thought out idea or a strong acting choice and could adapt their performance accordingly.

Data Analysis for Question 2

The second question discusses what the best practices are for comprehensive theater education, particularly in a rural school environment. According to the Journal of Aesthetic Education, “American high school students involved in theater are more proficient readers than non-theater students, and their reading skills grow more during the high school years than those of students not involved in theater” (Podlozny 2000, p239). In my classroom, I noticed that when it came to reading scenes and writing about theater and their experience creating theater, there was a difference between the students who just started theater and did not know how to analyze or interpret scenes versus the students who had been a part of theater for a long time during their education, which is expected. With my findings, I saw that when I assigned students more writing and reading projects, such as an actor/director portfolio, or a script analysis worksheet, there was less fear and trepidation because the environment of the classroom was conducive to focus and learning. For example, starting every Friday with a writing check-in with some sort of character building question such as “If you could be a popsicle for an hour, what would you be and why?” or “If your life, at this moment, was a shoe, what kind of shoe would it be and why?” encourages the students to think more critically. I noticed that the hesitation to share decreased the more I modeled how to answer these questions and the more we got to share and grow and bond.

A comprehensive theater education program in schools also has shown to increase students’ reasoning and morality (Basourakos, 1998), which is important especially in a high school setting. Using the works of William Shakespeare, my students showed an increase in their discussion of real-world issues, and their empathy changed. There is no official measure of

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empathy, but I decided to incorporate games and team building activities in our day-to-day instruction, the rationale being that if they felt comfortable working as a team, when something like a stressful rehearsal or a tricky scene happened, they could rely on the trust and the confidence of the other people in their cast.

The one-act play that play production is putting on is entitled *Drop Dead, Juliet*, which is a re-imagining of *Romeo and Juliet*. A lot of the play has to do with agency, identity, and gender, and those are very important issues that really require a depth of understanding and consideration. When we first got started analyzing the play, many comments that were made were things like “This is whack” or “Why would anyone ever write this?” or “These ideas seem stupid”. As we continued to rehearse the play, my cooperating teacher and I incorporated scenes from Shakespeare’s canon. We picked scenes from *Hamlet*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. Each scene that we picked were scenes that involved subversion of expectations and non-traditional casting, such as two non-binary students playing *Romeo and Juliet*, or having two female-identifying students conquer the infamous *Katarina and Petruchio* scene in *The Taming of the Shrew*. By utilizing non-traditional casting techniques, those students were able to use their lived experiences as part of the rehearsal process, and I was able to utilize the psychological safety of the classroom that I developed with them from the beginning of the year until now.

The reason that the play and these scenes went so well in the rehearsal process was because students were not afraid to have complex conversations around character building and the world of the play, and specifically, the desire to have these conversations increased because of their theater education training. Having these conversations also increased their critical listening. Since a lot of them do not have a comprehensive training in acting and interpreting Shakespeare, language and word choice are important for these young actors to discover how to mine

interpretation in a piece of published theatrical work.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In order to effectively utilize the best practices for theater education, one has to take into consideration what the goal of the program is: teacher centered education versus learning centered education. In my practices, what I have found is that students respond best to a learning-centered theater experience, one where the social, emotional, and cultural lives of the students are most prominently featured. The other best practice that works the best, in my experience as a theater educator, has been to focus on the process of creating theater and not what the end product is.

Reflection is another best practice, and an important tool that students are going to need to have in a classroom setting, not just a theater class. What reflection can do for a student is that it can teach them about true empathy and teaches them to be a more socially well-rounded student, by incorporating prior knowledge of things outside their field as a connector to the world of the play. Theatrical education has to come from a place of authenticity and collaboration and students have to learn more about the art they want to create and take responsibility for things such as technical elements, directorial elements, and behind-the-scenes creation.

When working with neurodivergent students, the thing that is most important in a classroom environment is routine. The details in the routine can change, but if they know that they're going to go from A to B to C, then there is going to be a direct correlation between participation and understanding. Students respond best in a theater classroom by modeling the teaching instruction first, and then letting them loose and on their own.

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Something else that helps with neurodivergent students is to recognize their emotional lives. Many of them participate in classes when they feel like they are being recognized and valued, and not as if their emotional lives are some sort of inconvenience, which is an unconscious thing that educators can do.

Finally, why study theater? I could write an entire emotional essay about it, but there would be too much language and too much incendiary takes. The most important thing in the data that I have found is that a theater education has benefits in every other subject in school and outside of school. It can do everything from teaching how to effectively speak in front of a crowd for an English class, to creative thinking in regards to those pesky word problems in a math course. The biggest reason that it is cut, in my opinion, is due to a misunderstanding of the benefits of a theater education course, and the cost of trying to maintain a working theater space.

The common misunderstanding is that theater is inaccessible to the modern person, and that can be true, absolutely. I had a lot of students that did not have a clear understanding of basic theatrical styles like Hagen and Stanislavski, and some who had that, but had never seen or been in a play, so the marriage of the students who knew so much versus the students who had limited access was shocking. Throughout the year, however, they had experiences outside of the classroom to see theater be made and to see that all theater is people telling stories on a stage, and that it is something that even they, from their rural towns, could do. One of the most formative experiences for these students was seeing the musical *Rent*. *Rent*, for a teenager, talked about artists and the bond that artists have as a family, and how artists react to struggle and to tragedy.

Tragedy is an interesting word to think about in art. Artists try so hard to mask the pain of abject tragedy throughout art, and sometimes, art cannot mask the pain of a cataclysmic event, no matter how old you are. As educators, we never expect to prepare for tragedy, no matter who the

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student is. Many of my students in play production are neurodivergent learners, so the best practices of safety and routine are extra important when the unexpected happens. In the middle of May, one of my senior play production students committed suicide, unexpectedly. To reflect on the best practices of this action research plan, I feel it necessary to tell you about how my artists in training reacted to the loss of their classmate, their theater colleague, and their friend. The week after, we had another high school student, whose sister was a part of their schools production, commit suicide. Two losses back to back are unthinkable. Then, in Uvalde, Texas, there was a school shooting, which had an impact on my already grieving students. Grief was all over.

The day after the theater staff found out that we had lost one of our students was one of the hardest days I've ever had in education. I was told by trusted people in my life to "be the adult that those kids need", and that was the hardest role I have ever played. I had to take on the role of adult to not just my students, but for the benefit and sanity of my cooperating teacher. No amount of action research, lesson planning, formal instruction, anything that the walls of an educational institution can teach you, ever prepares a teacher for something like this.

When I first got to the high school, my cooperating teacher and I decided that we would be the theater kids' first points of contact for whatever they needed. With a sweet, but ineffective, licensed mental health professional, we opened up our theater classroom as a room for these students to process their grief, which changed minute by minute. What we found throughout the day was what most students needed were myself and my cooperating teacher. Yes, snacks were a welcome distraction, and sure, fidget toys helped a lot, but they needed two human people to grieve with them, to cry with them, to try and make sense of what the hell just happened to them.

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Throughout the day, the students “calmed down” a little bit more because they felt safe. The psychologically protected classroom environment that they had cultivated pre-suicide suddenly seemed like ground zero, so being able to have access to things that provided them comfort was incredibly important post-suicide. Many of the students in my play production class had the added stressor of opening their school’s musical that same day. If this experience has taught me anything about the best practices of education, it’s to always trust a student’s resilience. They truly exemplified the adage of “the show must go on”, even when the show felt like an impossible task.

Friday, though. Friday was the hardest. Friday felt more business as usual, but the air was still palpable with sadness, grief, confusion, misunderstanding. Their small theater family lost a member, rather unexpectedly, and they did not know that by the start of next week, they’d lose another. While my cooperating teacher got things prepared for the second day of their school’s musical, I was the one in the room with the students. This is not a verifiable best practice, but I decided to engage in distraction therapy with my students. Part of the best practices in education is to stick to a routine, and my job was to provide them, at that current microcosm of time, with something “normal”. Something not associated with death, dying, suicide, or the like.

When many of them were middle school students, they contributed to an activity called “Wax Museum”. The premise was simple: dress up like a historical figure and present to a group of people the accomplishments of said figure. My students smiled, genuinely, for the first time in 36 hours. After their experience at Wax Museum, we went back to the classroom and I decided to play a game of “Head’s Up” with them, and there was laughter. While it can be an underrated thing, laughter, it was necessary. It was distraction therapy to the highest degree, and we needed it.

After my students closed their show, they suffered another loss. Another student they

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knew at their high school committed suicide. I got to my site and we repeated the procedure from last week: no concrete plans, just be there for them as an open space. My cooperating teacher decided, at that point, that the thing they needed the least was new instruction. That was difficult for me to comprehend at first, because how could I complete my Master's degree and this action research plan fully if I wasn't teaching them new material? What I realized though is that it was new material. For a lot of these students, these losses were the first time they experienced something of the sort. I was also learning with them about grief, and how to process that grief. It wasn't what Stanislavski talked about, or the works of August Wilson, but it was something they'd come into contact with in their theatrical journey.

I've learned more in the past two weeks about the best practices in education than I have during most of my program, if I am going to be totally honest with you. The best practices in education are, first and foremost, to take care of your students, no matter what they need. That's the ultimate best practice. Yes, routine is important. Yes, protection is important. But, routine and protection go out the window when you have students sobbing in your arms because they lost their best friend, so care for them.

One thing you have to realize, as an educator, is how other people take care of your students. The response to these suicides from administrators, teachers, etc. was asinine. On the first day after the first suicide, there was neither hide nor hair of high school administrators or teachers. No one checked in on our theater kids or on the theater instructors, or the people around us. Teachers emailed frequently and marked students as absent when they were in a safe space, with safe people, trying to regain their lost sense of normalcy. While I can understand the importance of business as usual, what I cannot understand is teachers who negate what a student is feeling during times of crisis. Many of my students who came to me talked about how this teacher or that teacher told them basically to suck it up and deal, which broke my heart, and

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continues to do so. How can we, as educators, impart in our students the importance of family and togetherness, when the times students need family most, they're admonished for it? Being a highly empathetic person, seeing my students get hurt more and more by people who should be healing them made me feel a wide swath of emotions: anger, rejection, heartbreak, hurt.

The real nail in the coffin was when my own administration didn't express any care or concern for the staff members hurting. My employer will give cards and well wishes for anyone: someone's grandfather-in-law who passed, or a sick spouse, what have you. When a teacher who works in their building loses a student? No response. Radio silence. That taught me a lot, as an educator, about who to trust and how much of myself to give to staff, administrators, faculty, etc. who don't deserve all of myself. That helps me, as an educator, because students want reality. They want you to be honest with them, even if the honesty is going to hurt. They want agency, and free thought, and in times of crisis, those are things that we, as humans, naturally want to do in times of great turmoil.

The beginning of this action research plan quotes the late theater composer, Stephen Sondheim. One of his shows, *Into the Woods*, discusses growing up, and I think can better exemplify what I have learned about my student teaching: "sometimes, people leave you. Halfway through the wood. Others may deceive you. You decide what's good. You decide alone. But no one is alone" (Sondheim, 1987, 310-311). Unfortunately, people left us (being our class) halfway through the wood (which is the journey of how these actors learned their craft). Others did deceive them, in regards to admin, students, etc. who did not care for them in their time of need. But, at the end of the day, my theater students decided what was good, in an attempt to make them understand what is good in the world, and that, truly, no one is alone.

When I started this action research plan, I quoted a lyric from *Sunday in the Park with George*. I want to end this action research plan with another *Sunday*... lyric: art isn't easy. Every

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minor detail is a major decision. [We] have to keep things in scale, have to hold on to your vision. As educators, we have to hold on to the vision of what education is about: our students. They are the vision that we need to hold on to. We, as educators, have to respect their minor details in life, no matter how inconsequential. The art of making art is putting it together. Teaching is an art, and the students help us put it all together, bit by bit.

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