DISCOVERING WHO WE COULD BECOME: CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE AND RIGOROUS RESOURCES FOR MIDDLE-GRADE THEATRE TEACHERS

by

Rachel Brady

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching.

Hamline University
Saint Paul, Minnesota
August 2019

Facilitator: Kelly Killorn-Moravec
Content Reviewer: Rob Thompson
Peer Reviewer: Tania Montgomery
“We must all do theatre to find out who we are, and to discover who we could become.”

- Augusto Boal
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**CHAPTER ONE: Introduction** ................................................................. 4

**CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review** ......................................................... 10

- Introduction ................................................................................. 10
- Culturally Relevant Pedagogical Strategy .................................. 11
- Culturally Responsive, Sustaining Pedagogy in Arts Education ... 16
- Culturally Responsive Written Resources................................. 18
- Curriculum Models ....................................................................... 24
- Rigor .......................................................................................... 30
- In Summary .................................................................................. 33

**CHAPTER THREE: Project Description** ................................................ 35

- Introduction ................................................................................ 35
- Project Description and Design .................................................... 36
- Framework and Theories ............................................................... 37
- Timeline and Analysis ................................................................. 39
- In Summary ................................................................................ 41

**CHAPTER FOUR: Conclusion** ............................................................... 43

- Introduction ................................................................................. 43
- Lessons Learned ......................................................................... 44
- The Implications of the Literature ............................................. 45
- Prevailing Implications and Questions ...................................... 47
- In Summary ................................................................................ 48
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

As I sat, recently, at a state One-Act Play festival – my diverse cast and crew of students beside me – I came to a realization that, as a theatre educator, shook me. Students performing in the festival were from top-qualifying high schools all over the state, and the lack of diversity was striking. Both in the plays that were presented in the festival and in the casts of students who acted in them, students and voices of color were noticeably absent from much of the narrative of the day. As an educator who works with diverse groups of students, this trend at the festival helped articulate a problem that sits at the crux of modern drama education today. That is, how drama and arts educators are, or are not, creating curriculum and programs that speak to the lived experiences of the students we teach. For how can we show students the power of theatre – the opportunity we have, as Boal says, to “find out who we are and to discover who we could become” - if our drama programs are not structured in such a way that meet the needs of diverse learners?

I am a new drama educator, working in arts magnet school environments with grades six through twelve. It has been particularly difficult, when working through curriculum planning for middle school drama courses, to find resources and plays that speak to the diversity of the students in these schools. I have often wondered, in my planning, if this dearth of quality resources that speak to young adolescents in meaningful and challenging ways is a deterrent to middle schoolers finding a passion for drama that carries them into high school. It is important – in fact, essential – for middle-grade drama
educators to reframe the lenses we use to teach middle-grade drama. The lack of
curricular resources makes this reframing more difficult and less intuitive. Therefore,
this project was created to answer the question: *What resources, pedagogical strategies,
and curriculum tools can most successfully be utilized to implement a rigorous but
culturally responsive middle grades theatre curriculum?* The project’s goal was to create
a resource library that helps middle-grade drama teachers *de-colonize* and reinvigorate
their theatre classrooms. Thus chapter further unpacks my passion for, and thinking
about, this topic. It also seeks to frame this topic within the framework of culturally
relevant pedagogy as a means of rationalizing the need for such a resource library.

Google “middle school drama lesson plans” and one is sure to land upon a
treasure trove of theatre games, and poorly-written shows about middle school. While a
good drama game can do wonders for sparking energy, focus, and fun in a theatre
classroom, the problem with rooting a middle school drama classroom in games is that
they lack the rigor and depth that challenges students to discover what they can become.
Furthermore, the problem with so many scripts aimed at middle school performers is that
they lack the depth, literary merit, and diversity to both excite and challenge many middle
schoolers. I have routinely struggled to find scripts that are appropriate for a middle
school actor, while also challenging and relevant in terms of content and character.
Therefore, I am constantly thinking outside the box in terms of what scripts I use and
what curricular structures are going to work best for my students.

As an example, working with a class of primarily ninth-grade students, a
play-reading unit was most successful when students were allowed to raid the classroom
script-library, picking any script they wanted to use for their project. Most students chose a play that featured a character they strongly identified with, and that identification and excitement about the script fueled deeper engagement as the unit progressed. However, when I look at my script library for my middle-grade learners, I am frustrated by the lack of breadth. That is, I would be hard-pressed to repeat a similar unit with a middle school drama class and find the same success in matching each student with a script they are thrilled about.

In terms of curricular structures, if it is our goal to help students find themselves within the theatre – to discover that theatre is, and should be, for them – then the way to do that is to create structures rooted in student voice. With this belief in mind, I spend much time creating and seeking out resources to help me plan units and lessons, both rooted in the theatre standards and in student creation. I seek to develop learning opportunities that allow my students to discover and use theatre as a means of telling and investigating personal narrative and as a means of speaking one’s truth. Creating and executing successful student-devised-based unit plans is time and effort consuming, especially for the middle grades when attention spans and theatre knowledge is more limited than in the high school setting. I have often wished I could uncover an appropriate planning resource for student-devised theatre suitable for the middle-grade context. No such resource have I found. This is troubling, because as theatre teachers, often with busy teaching schedules and extracurricular obligations and programs to run, a dearth of planning resources can make it more difficult to challenge old habits and try out new ways of engaging students.
Additionally, as an educator working in schools with great racial, cultural, and sexuality and gender diversity, it is constantly on my mind to consider how my teaching and curriculum is culturally responsive. Zaretta Hammond (as cited in Gonzolez, 2017) defined culturally responsive teachers as those who seek out ways to not only honor, but to utilize, the cultural context that students bring with them into the classroom to guide learning. While there is literature exploring how theatre teachers, specifically, can make their teaching more culturally responsive, little exists that is specific to the middle-grade context, as opposed to the high school context. The goal in the creation of the resource library has been to help middle-grade drama teachers envision and utilize curricular structures that are responsive to cultural contexts and stories of their students.

A culturally responsive classroom is one in which student voice is at the center of the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Teaching with this lens in mind reveals the real power of a theatre education - it can empower students to tell their own stories and find strength in that process. For example, one of the most engaged middle school drama classrooms I have witnessed in which we were engaging in a process drama activity that required one student to act as a clerk working at a store, and other students to act as store customers. Even in this simply-framed game, students enacted roles and circumstances that they commonly see and experience in their community. The process drama sparked conversations and lively responses from the audience as students considered how they saw themselves within the action onstage. Such an activity was simple but culturally responsive in its ability to engage students in the drama contact within the framework of their lived experience.
In Summary

In summary, this project has aimed to investigate what resources teachers of middle-grade drama can best use in their classrooms to create a curriculum that is valuable to the learners they teach. The project has attempted to answer the question *what resources, pedagogical strategies, and curriculum tools can most successfully be utilized to implement a rigorous but culturally responsive middle grades theatre curriculum?* A resource library that speaks to these goals is important because theatre educators are often busy, over-booked members of the school community (Price, 2016). A resource guide, then, serves as a way to give teachers a user-friendly way to adjust and plan their curriculum in ways that are continually more culturally responsive to their students. The project has been designed to help teachers create teaching plans that help students in the middle school grades deeply engage in the power of theatre as a means of telling and discovering one’s own story. Additionally, the project works to address the relative dearth of great plays for the context by cultivating a list of middle-grade appropriate plays and texts that are diverse in terms of their content and characters, while also being challenging and engaging texts. The ultimate goal has been to create a place where middle-grade drama teachers can find inspiration and help to create classroom plans that are responsive to the students they teach, and rigorous in content and in relationship to the theatre standards.

In chapter two, a review and analysis of research and theory are addressed to give a better context as to the framework used to develop this resource library. Namely, research around the pedagogy behind culturally responsive teaching, as well as specific
culturally responsive pedagogy related to drama education, is explored. In addition, literature investigating middle school development and literacy is reviewed, as well as existing literature about putting student voice and choice at the center of a theatre classroom. In chapter three, a description of the project is given, including methods and theoretical frameworks used to develop and expand a resource library for middle-grade drama teachers, and the resulting implications such a library has on theatre classrooms. Chapter four reviews the lessons learned from this project and investigates areas for further investigation, research, and theoretical discussion.
CHAPTER TWO

Introduction

When attempting to create a curriculum resource library that is both practical and useful for teachers, it is important to frame the work within the context of both need and foundational research. The former blooms from experience as a middle grades theatre teacher, and a consistent struggle to find curricular support materials that are at the same time relevant, practical, and rigorous. The latter is the focus of this chapter. That is, the pedagogical and curricular research and models that can best serve as a foundation upon which to build a middle grades theatre resource library. The literature and thinking presented in this chapter help answer the question: What resources, pedagogical strategies, and curriculum tools can most successfully be utilized to implement a rigorous but culturally responsive middle grades theatre curriculum?

The chapter works first to investigate a modern, working definition of the term culturally relevant pedagogy and how culturally relevant – or sustaining – pedagogical structures show up in curriculum and classroom design. Such an understanding is helpful in the context of this project to create a resource library that is built to be robust and useful in culturally diverse classrooms. Secondly, the chapter explores the importance and effectiveness of utilizing culturally responsive or relevant written resources in the classroom. As a focus of this project is to create a working list of literature sources relevant in the context of a diverse middle school theatre classroom, it is important to understand the theory and thinking behind what culturally relevant and responsive literature actually looks like in practice. Next, the chapter investigates successful
curricular models used to design curriculum, particularly in the context of middle grades classrooms, and in the context of arts classrooms. Understanding the current thinking and frameworks that education researchers use in terms of curriculum design is an important component of making sure resources included in the curriculum resource library are helpful to middle-grade teachers, and rooted in research. Finally, the chapter seeks to arrive at a working definition of “rigor” and to situate “rigorous instruction” within the framework of a middle school classroom. This, important for rooting curriculum supports cultivated for the library from a place of not only relevance but also rigorousness. Together, the sections of this chapter provide a theoretical groundwork on which the curriculum library can be built.

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogical Strategy**

In an increasingly global, connected, and diverse society, the public-school system and the teachers within it are at the front lines of the work for equity. One of the main structures that has come forward as a means of achieving equity in the schools is a term coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994): culturally relevant pedagogy. Ladson-Billings (2014) defined culturally relevant pedagogy as “practical ways to improve teacher education in order to produce new generations of teachers who would bring an appreciation of their students’ assets to their work in urban classrooms populated with African American students” (p. 74). According to many education researchers like Paris (2012), this pedagogical framework seeks to place the diverse cultural lenses of students at the center of the classroom space in ways that contradict the deficit-model of
homogenized cultural norms and expectations that are so often found at the center of education in the U.S. (p. 95-96).

This section attempts to arrive at a working, post-modern understanding of the term culturally relevant pedagogy in order to provide a framework for a middle-grades theatre resource library that seeks to promote equity and cultural diversity in the classroom. Additionally, the section attempts to situate this culturally relevant pedagogy within the context of an arts classroom by unpacking both the challenges and opportunities to apply this pedagogy in such artistic spaces.

**Troubling Standard Operating Procedure**

Educational researcher Paris argued in 2012 that many structures present in the public school system promote a deficit approach to students who identify as members of cultures outside the dominant, white-Eurocentric culture (p. 96). That is, the current teaching climate in the U.S. continues to stress mono-cultural practice in terms of normalizing and homogenizing dominant U.S. culture and language norms. Schools have sustained practices that lead to marginalized students only being able to achieve in U.S. schools when they lose their connections to their cultural communities in terms of language and mores (Paris, 2012, p. 96). Teachers seeking to dismantle this implicit structure must learn to make visible the various and multiple cultural identities that students occupy.

Borrero and Sanchez (2017) argued that teaching is a political act, and that “teaching for justice must involve an ideology that continually interrogates power,
privilege, and systemic oppression while fostering the stories of those who have been forced to the margins” (p. 280).

One way for teachers to situate their teaching within this goal of creating classrooms that are centered in strengths-based teaching is to adopt a framework of culturally relevant pedagogy. Borrero and Sanchez (2017) further argued that culturally relevant pedagogy is a reciprocal process between teacher and student – a mutual process of relationship building and learning from one another that connects students’ lived experience outside school to their learning inside it (2017, p. 281).

Ladson-Billings and a New Understanding of Cultural Relevancy

In the 1990’s, as Ladson-Billings (1994) created her first working definition of culturally relevant pedagogy, she observed three domains of successful and culturally competent educators – that is, educators who successfully reached African-American students in their classrooms. She argued that such teachers are able to promote academic success, cultural competence, and a sociopolitical consciousness in the minds of their students. These teachers can connect learning in the classroom to a thorough understanding, and reverence for, diverse cultures (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 77). Her definition introduced the idea that classrooms have the potential to be spaces that promote and support the individual cultural competencies of their students and use them as the center of the learning. Her work, at this time, focused on the experiences of African American students because “a literature that tells us what works for middle-class, advantaged students typically fails to reveal the social and cultural advantages that make their success possible. But success among the “least of these” tells us more about what
pedagogical choices can support success” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 76). That is, a pedagogical framework that works and promotes academic success for the most marginalized and underperforming groups of students is one that will then benefit all students.

In a 2014 comment on her original structuring of the term and of its inception as an important framework for modern educators looking to create equity in their classrooms, Ladson-Billings arrived, with the help of other education researchers, at a new definition of the term. She argued that a remix of the notion of culturally relevant pedagogy was necessary to “embrace a more dynamic view of culture” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 75). She argued that culture is an ever-shifting entity, and cites the example of third-generation Hmong students as an example of what this looks like. Unlike their parents who arrived in the U.S. as children, third-generation Hmong students have a specific and unique cultural identity that puts them between the identity of an American student and as members of the Hmong diaspora community (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 75). This example serves to demonstrate Ladson-Billings’ 2014 argument that culture is a shifting, constantly adapting entity, and pedagogy needs to be responsive to that fact.

Thus, Ladson-Billings (2014) arrived at a new definition for her pedagogical thinking – culturally-sustaining pedagogy (p. 82). In her 2012 “remix” article, she referenced Paris and Alim as some education thinkers who have helped codify this new definition as a postmodern understanding of culture. She argued that the thinking of these researchers takes into account the “multiplicities of identities and cultures” and the global identities that are now incorporated into a modern-day youth culture. Instead of
considering just one racial or ethnic group or identity, this thinking forces us to consider
the complexities and fluidity of culture (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 82). This remix of the
term – a transformation of relevant to sustaining – challenges educators to consider the
consistently transitioning and emerging nature of culture, especially in the context of a
globalized, hyper-connected world.

Django Paris (2012) is one education researcher whose post-modern
understandings of culture and its intersection with education has helped Ladson-Billings
clarify this new working pedagogical framework. Paris (2012) discussed the need for
teachers to help students sustain their individual “cultural and linguistic competencies”
(p. 95):

The term culturally sustaining requires that our pedagogies be more than
responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people
- it requires that they support young people in sustaining the cultural and
linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access
to dominant cultural competence. Culturally sustaining pedagogy, then, has as its
explicit goal supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism in practice and
perspective for students and teachers. That is, culturally sustaining pedagogy
seeks to perpetuate and foster - to sustain - linguistic, literate, and cultural
pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling. ( p. 95)

Paris (2012) suggested that students “rehearse” and are connected to both “traditional
versions of ethnic and linguistic difference” as well as to new ones (p. 95). For example,
he referenced African American and Pacific Islander young people in an urban
community who share a youth culture rooted in the Spanish language with Latinx peers (Paris, 2012, p. 95). Educators must be open to sustaining youth cultural practices that are evolved and reflective of the present lived experience of students. It is the job of educators to honor and utilize these multiple literacies, languages, and cultural identities. It is by doing so that educators promote social justice and equity.

**Culturally Responsive, Sustaining Pedagogy in Arts Education**

Many arts-based education researchers and teaching artists have sought to identify in what ways culturally relevant pedagogical structures show up in arts education and to investigate the potential power of this pedagogy in the context of revolutionizing arts education. For example, Acuffis, Boyd, and Nangah (2012) named the Master Narrative as the dominant, hegemonic and Eurocentric lens from which art histories are taught (p. 7). They argued that arts education programs must leave space for students to trouble, or make assertions against, the dominant narrative they see showing up in the work they are studying. By giving students the language to help investigate the stories that are told – and the stories that are left out – of artistic narratives, arts teachers help open up space for students to see themselves in the art they are studying. They argued that giving students spaces to see themselves as “negotiators of history” rewrites dominant ideologies (Acuffis, Boyd, and Nangah, 2012, p. 10). Their research brings up the question of how arts education has the potential to both perpetuate, and dismantle, the homogenous, dominant lens on which the broader education is built.

**Case Studies in Arts Education & Culturally Sustaining Practice**
Howard and Rodriguez-Minkoff (2017) studied an arts in education program in which students learned about the underground railroad by engaging in learning activities surrounding a field trip to see a ballet about the subject. The unit of study showed the possible connections between the arts, social activism, and the learning standards. Their findings argued that it is possible to create a curriculum that is both culturally relevant and tied to the learning standards – “that the reality of assessment and evaluation does not preclude a culturally relevant approach to curriculum design” (Howard and Rodriguez-Minkoff, 2017, p. 73). They found that students engaged in deep and meaningful learning – even via traditional forms of expression like essay writing – and showed a deep understanding of the history and its connection to modern-day social issues (Howard and Rodriguez-Minkoff, 2017, p. 76).

Schroeder-Arce’s 2014 case study and research on cultural relevancy in the world of theatre education came to a working definition of “culturally responsive artistry” (p. 1). That is, “theatre that reflects the cultures and identities of the communities in which it is performed” (Schroeder-Arce, 2014, p. 3). She argued that much of the theatre that students are exposed to does not accurately represent or include the diverse communities and cultural/linguistic cultures from which our students arrive. Thus, she adapted the theories of Geneva Gay (as cited in Schroeder-Arce, 2014) to create a framework about teaching theatre culturally responsively. This framework includes honoring and considering the diverse cultural and ethnic heritages that audience members bring with them when viewing productions, as well as honoring those heritages onstage. Schroeder-Arce (2014) further presented that theatres should seek to understand and to
build “bridges of meaningfulness” between the art and the lived experiences of their communities, and that by employing strategies to engage various and diverse members of the community in the work, the work becomes more relevant (p. 8-9). She used these frameworks to assess the successfulness of a theatre work about a Latina child, presented in Austin, Texas where 60% of students identify as Latinx (Schroeder-Arce, 2014, p. 4). She argued that the successfulness in the production, which was viewed by many students in Austin, was its ability to accurately depict a cultural identity that is often missing from the stage. When theatre arts educators seek out theatre experiences and literature that reflect the lived experiences of their students, Schroeder-Arce (2014) argued, they are increasing inclusion and responding to the negative impacts of Eurocentric theatre (p. 2).

**Culturally Responsive Written Resources**

Theatre arts curriculum is often most closely connected with English language arts curriculum because works of theatrical literature are so central to much of the theatre arts curriculum design. It is relevant, then, to examine the thinking that exists about ways that teachers can most effectively implement relevant and culturally responsive, or sustaining, written resources into classroom spaces. It is through the resources that teachers bring into their classrooms, and the ways in which teachers help students engage with literature in their classrooms, which form a large part of shaping culturally responsive, sustaining pedagogy in the classroom.

Therefore, this section examines the work of education researchers who have used case studies and other research methods to investigate what relevant and culturally responsive resources look like in practice. The section first considers how teachers can
create culturally responsive frameworks to help their students engage meaningfully in written works. The second section examines the importance and effects of implementing multicultural literature in the classroom. The last section troubles the notion of “relevance” to consider the broad definitions and barriers of the term when it comes to students and their engagement.

Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Literature in the Classroom

Bomer (2017) argued that students from marginalized groups and communities often fail to see themselves within the written literature used in classroom spaces (p. 11). Bomer (2017) went on to suggest that the lack of diverse resources, specifically in English Language Arts classrooms, is structurally significant: “There is an inescapable agenda in traditional English Language Arts to replace students’ language patterns, aesthetic tastes, literacy practices, and composing practices with those of a dominating culture” (Bomer, 2017, p. 12). Dyches (2017) highlighted similar patterns in secondary level ELA classrooms, suggesting that marginalized students are disadvantaged in these curriculums because their cultural, social, and linguistic backgrounds are not represented (p. 302). Both scholars considered the ways that teachers of ELA can successfully implement culturally sustaining pedagogy in their classrooms via the resources given to students, and the ways in which teachers help students engage with the curricular resources required (Bomer, 2017 and Dyches, 2017).

Bomer (2017) suggested a framework for teachers of literature closely tied to culturally sustaining pedagogy. Texts read by the whole class should be texts that are purposefully chosen based on their ability to advance disadvantaged groups (Bomer,
2017, p. 13). When it comes to independent reading, teachers should explicitly give students the opportunity to not only see themselves and their communities in the literature, as well as to consider the communities of others based on the work they are reading, which is important. Bomer (2017) further suggested that literacy should be tied to the community, and also to advocacy (p. 13). That is, students should be challenged to examine the ways that language is used as an *instance of power* and the ways that language and stories can be used to shape, build up, and influence communities and advocacy.

Dyches (2017) wrote similar narratives about the importance of teachers helping students view literature through lenses that honor their communities and cultural understandings. He considered a case study of a secondary British literature class, in which students were required to read work from the British cannon. Dyches (2017) named the challenges of this curriculum: “the British literature curriculum functions as a dichotomy to culturally diverse literature—texts that validate students’ personal experiences, provide them with role models, and expand their horizons” (p. 302). The traditional cannon, on which Shakespeare sits as a foundation, is challenging because it is difficult to find diversity and relevance in the text that directly speaks to students from diverse communities.

Dyches (2017) argued that the answer to this curricular challenge is the creation of “canonical counter-curriculum” (p. 314). In the instance of the case study, the teacher consistently found opportunities to help students “restory” the literature they were reading (Dyches, 2017, p. 314). That is, repurposing the narratives read in class as way
to arm students with the ability to “talk talk back to the single story” (Dyches, 2017, p. 317). Students in this classroom were consistently challenged to draw parallels between the written work and their own lived experiences, and modern day political and social problems. It is through this lens that students reading classical literature can find opportunities to reclaim the narratives as issues relevant to their lived experience, and develop a socio-political consciousness (Dyches, 2017, p. 316). The work of Bomer (2017) and Dyches (2017), then, has created an understanding that it is both the specific literature that teachers utilize in the classroom, as well as the way that teachers design curriculum around those resources, that determine relevancy of the content.

**Multicultural Literature**

Many education scholars speak to the importance of multicultural literature in the classroom space. Lopez-Robertson and Haney (2017), for example, argued that “engaging children with multicultural literature increases students’ awareness that there are others like them in the world with stories of greatness to tell, encourages them to know they have stories of their own to share, and shows them doors can open up to anything” (p. 48). Implementing a pattern of multicultural literature in the classroom, then, is supportive of the culturally-responsive framework of asset-based teaching, in which students’ own cultural and community assets are celebrated in the classroom curriculum.

Wurdeman-Thurston and Kaomea (2015) spoke to the power of cultural strengths-based literacy practices in their work about culturally responsive literacy content in classrooms in Hawaii (p. 424). Their work capitalized on the rich story
tradition of “mo’olelo” in native Hawaiian communities (Wurdeman-Thurston and Kaomea, 2015, p. 425) by utilizing stories from the community rather than narratives developed or taking place after colonization. They named the goal of the research as inspiring fellow educators of diverse students bodies to understand and utilize the cultural and literary nuances that are already present in students’ communities (Wurdeman-Thurston and Kaomea, 2015, p. 432). Wurdeman-Thurston and Kaomea (2015) argued that by honoring the stories and voices of the cultural and linguistic communities from which students are born, teachers can inspire deeper and richer engagement in literacy development.

This work is similar to that of Shroeder-Arce (2014), as discussed earlier in this chapter about culturally-responsive artistry in theatre performances. Both Wurdeman-Thurston and Kaomea (2015) and Shroeder-Arce’s (2014) research speak to the power of storytelling. The work suggests that there is great importance in presenting work to students that is indicative of their own cultural and linguistic communities, such as the traditional stories of Hawaiian cultural communities (Wurdeman-Thurston and Kaomea, 2015), or the representation of the Latinx community in a theatre production studied by primarily Latinx students (Shroeder-Arce, 2014). Literature choice matters as teachers work to make their curriculum more relevant.

The Complexities of “Relevance”

Sciruba (2017) troubled the notion of “relevance” in literature, however. Sciruba (2017) argues that is imperative to identify the “complexities of textual relevance,” which
are often as complex as students’ identities, multidimensional and flexible (p. 372). The research focused on a case study of African American identifying male secondary school students. This case study group was chosen because he identified the lack of texts about Black bodies a “pervasive equity problem” in the U.S. Language Arts classroom (Sciruba, 2017, p. 373).

Sciruba (2017) argued that the answer to this problem goes beyond including texts in curriculum based on “superficial understandings” of race, culture, ethnicity, and gender (p. 375). The Black male students in the case study made character-driven connections to the literature they were reading, rather than voicing connections made based specifically on racial or cultural lines (Sciruba, 2017, p. 382). Sciruba (2017) stated that:

Even if the boys did not see their current worlds reflected while reading the stories, they became “active authors” of their own possible worlds or found value in learning about how their current and future worlds (might) evolve. Their “personal and social identities” proved to be multifaceted, too— influenced not only by race/ethnicity and gender but by popular culture and their specific school context. (pg. 389)

This suggests that the linguistic, cultural, and social competencies that students bring into the classroom with them are complex and multilayered. Therefore, multicultural literature and a teacher’s initial assessment of how a specific work of literature might be deemed, or not be deemed, relevant to the lives of their students runs the risk of being
picked on stereotypical or one-dimensional understandings of community and cultural diversity. The complexity of the term *relevancy* and how it relates to literature selection for students should be considered as teachers design curriculum.

**Curriculum Models**

Seeking to create a curriculum resource library that gives middle school theatre teachers access to developmentally appropriate and tested curriculum tools, it is important to examine some of the research that exists regarding curriculum development in the middle-grade context, as well as curriculum design for the theatre classroom. In the case of the latter, little research exists specific to the context of the middle grades. Even so, it is worthwhile to consider how existing theater and arts curricular models can be used to design middle-grade drama classroom curriculum.

This section investigates some of the existing literature, including research about the importance of creating a middle-grade curriculum that gives students voice and choice, process-driven curriculum models, and research examining the merits of thinking about curriculum planning from the lens of co-curricular learning opportunities. Branched throughout these sections are considerations for the context of the middle grades in particular, as well as relevant arts-based or theatre-based curriculum models that are helpful when thinking about creating appropriate and culturally responsive middle grades theatre curriculum.

**Student Voice and Choice**
Many education scholars of middle grades education (Bills et. al 2018; Pennisi 2013; Wilhelm, 2013) have spoken to the importance of creating space for student voice and student choice within the middle school curriculum. An argument can be made for the developmental appropriateness of such a focus, at a time when students are gaining autonomy in terms of their identity. As Bills et. al (2018) suggested, young adolescents thrive when adults acknowledge their burgeoning, individualized skills, interests, and expertise (p. 25). By finding opportunities to place student autonomy and decision making at the center of the curriculum design, scholars like Bills et. al (2018) suggested that student engagement at the middle grades level is increased. Pennisi et. al (2013) discussed the disconnect between typical middle-grade curriculum design and the young adolescent brain, suggesting that as students reach an age where they crave and seek out autonomy, school and typical curriculum design becomes “increasingly teacher-directed” (p. 130). The result is disengagement.

For Wilhelm (2011), placing student voice at the center of the classroom is quite literal. Wilhelm argued that teachers should “teach with our mouths shut” (Wilhelm, 2011, p. 51). That is, teaching is more about supporting students on their individual learning journey than it is about voicing that learning journey for them. Wilhelm (2011) put it this way:

Learning involves thinking, talking, writing, composing, acting, and applying. Teaching involves listening and watching, responding and collaborating in ways that extend students’ continuing impulse and capacity to learn. Teaching is often
about not knowing, but it is about wanting to know and knowing how to proceed (p. 51).

Wilhelm (2011) argued that by empowering middle grades students to think and process their learning metacognitively, teachers help their students learn how to learn. Listening to teach is about collaborating with and supporting students to take ownership and autonomy over their learning.

Pennisi et. al (2013) called this curriculum model *power-sharing* and discussed its effectiveness in their case study about an eighth-grade visual arts class (p. 134). In the context of this classroom, power-sharing meant that student voice was at the center of the classroom, rather than the voice of the teacher. Students were greeted with visual reminders, prompts, and support charts when they entered the classroom each day, and the teacher used other strategies to communicate with individual students that did not involve full-class lecture (Pennisi et. al, 2013, p. 134). This curriculum design took student voice steps further, however, by using critical pedagogy as a method to co-construct the curriculum with students (Pennisi et. al, 2013, p. 128).

In this classroom curriculum design, students and teachers engaged in a continual process of idea-centered, rather than teacher-centered, planning. The success of such a model, Pennisi et. al (2013) suggested, lies in the classroom community to construct a shared understanding of class goals (p. 132). In the context of this art classroom, that meant cultivating a student-created list of *what is art*. That list was then used over the course of the term to decide upon course content. Idea-centered planning meant that students designed project-based units of study that explored ideas of art, rather than skills
(Pennisi et. al, 2013, p. 133-134), and negotiated deadlines, grading terms, and work time. Art skills were taught as needed, when the need arose. In this particular context, this curriculum switch from skills-based design to student-voiced, ideas-based design drastically affected the classroom dynamic and the relationship students created with art. In this model, students became the experts on the content and were at the helm of their creation process rather than attempting to master skills as lectured by the teacher (Pennisi et. al, 2013, p. 133). The asset-model approach promoted by this ideas-based, student-led curriculum design, is noteworthy because, similar to the argument made about the validity of culturally relevant pedagogy, this curriculum design focused on student asset-building rather than a deficit model of skills mastery.

Finally, similar to the arguments suggested by Wilhelm (2011), Pennisi et. al (2013) found in their case study that student autonomy over curriculum content, structure, and presentation opened up opportunities for deeper reflection and metacognitive thinking about their learning as artists (p. 137). They argued that by helping students reflect on, speak about, and collaborate regarding their art-making all term, “students moved beyond surface understandings of art to see artmaking as a thoughtful, meaning-making endeavor” (Pennisi et. al, 2013, p. 137). As a result, student disengagement drastically decreased, and students found a personal voice and identity in themselves as art-makers (Pennisi et. al, 2013, p. 137).

Bills et. al (2018) suggested similar ways of bringing student choice into the middle-grade classroom curriculum. Their case study focused on a middle school language arts classroom in which students engaged in inquiry, project-based learning. In
this curriculum model, students created a question they want to answer – something that interested them – and then engaged in a process of investigation facilitated by the teacher (Bills et. al., 2018, p. 25). In this classroom, the project inquiry work students participated in become the basis for, and root of, prescribed teaching related to the national standards, and in fact enhanced the curriculum because it built problem-solving skills and was better at showing student mastery (Bills et. al., 2018, p. 30).

What the work of these three groups of scholars suggests is that middle grades curriculum that allows students to exist at the center of the classroom space is ideal. Designing a curriculum that supports the growing autonomy that middle-grade adolescents are experiencing and craving can lead to deeper engagement and more robust, even metacognitive learning.

**Process-Driven Curriculum**

Scholars like Pennisi (2013), Bills et. al (2018), Wilhelm (2013) mentioned in their work on student voice and choice in the classroom the importance of helping students consider, process, and reflect on their learning throughout the curriculum structure. Similarly, Wolf (1994) suggested theatre curriculum design that is based upon a framework of investigating and learning from the process (p. 8). He argued that much of theatre curriculum is often based on performance as the main form of assessment. Instead, he suggested theatre educators seek assessment models that allow students to focus on the process of creating theatre – a process that involves many more skills than performance. Wolf (1994) argued that practices like writing, discussion, and debate are at the center of the theatre world and are tools imperative to success outside of it, too (p.
8). He suggested that by adopting a “portfolio culture” into the theatre curriculum, where students are graded on works in progress showings, rehearsal processes, and reflection, the curriculum is then more aligned with the professional world of theatre, which is based on an artistic framework of active discussion, revision, and collaboration (Wolf, 1994, p. 8). This lens harkens to the possibilities of arts curriculum as a curriculum that can be situated amongst, and in helpful relationship to, other core curricula. One such example of a co-curricular model is outlined in the next section.

Co-Curricular Opportunities

McDermott et. al (2017) provided an example of how arts activities can become opportunities for co-curricular learning. In their study, they discussed the application of co-curricular models in terms of creative and digital arts as text. That is, they argued that students can make gains on their close reading, text analysis abilities by analyzing paintings and music videos. They argued that utilizing these artistic mediums to teach an important language arts standard can keep middle school students more engaged in the learning, especially those that tend to struggle in the ELA classroom, and that the cognitive strategies used to close read music videos and paintings are transferable to traditional texts (McDermott et. al., 2017, pg. 32).

The writers cited additional research from scholars like Dewitz and Graves (as cited in McDermott et. al., 2017), who discussed “the importance of teaching students to transfer cognitive strategies and skills from one contextual form to others” (p. 28). Again, like many of the other curriculum structures examined in this section, this structure
implies that finding ways to help middle schoolers think metacognitively about their learning is an effective strategy for both engagement and deep learning.

**Rigor**

In a modern-day education landscape that values academic standards as measurable targets of student learning and teaching effectiveness, it is imperative to think of questions regarding rigor when it comes to designing curriculum resources for teachers. As such, this section attempts to unpack some present understandings of the term “academic rigor.” The section first seeks to come to a working definition of the term, and then investigates how some middle grades education scholars are attempting to situate the idea of academic rigor alongside the themes of community, developmental appropriateness, and student-centered practice.

**A Working Definition**

The Common Core State Standards, according to Maye (2013), serve as a helpful framework when attempting to arrive at a working definition of academic rigor (p. 29). Maye (2013) argued that the standards, designed to be connected to the skills students need to have when they leave the public-school system, must be at the center of teacher pedagogical and curriculum planning. That is, lesson plans, assessments, and activities should be firmly rooted in a measurable standard, and it should be ensured that the standard is being accurately represented within the lesson (May, 2013, p. 33).

Additionally, Maye (2013) referenced the utility in Bloom’s Taxonomy when it comes to creating rigorous learning targets for students. Maye (2013) argues that many
teachers have trouble implementing the taxonomy to create instruction and assessments that encourage the higher-level skills of evaluating, critiquing, and seeking alternate perspectives, for example (p. 29-30). Teachers should utilize the higher-levels of Bloom's Taxonomy – analyzing, evaluating, and creating – when designing lesson plans, and also as they are preparing the questions they will ask of students in a class. Finally, Maye (2013) argued that students have to be given the opportunity to own their learning through “automaticity” – demonstrated skills-based learning that is performed without the prompting of the teacher (May, 2013, p. 35). Maye’s 2013 definition of “rigor” situated the term in the context of the Common Core State Standards and Bloom’s Taxonomy.

Rigor and Middle School Learners

While it is important to consider, at face value, the importance of creating a classroom that promotes academic rigor and pedagogy rooted in standards, it is also valuable to frame the concept of rigor within the unique needs of middle school students. Researchers like Anfara and Waks (2000) and Rothrock (2017) attempted to do just that. Their situating of academic rigor within the broader understandings of middle grades learners is helpful when considering what “rigorous” pedagogy looks like in practice.

Anfara and Waks (2000) troubled the notion that there is a dichotomy between “academic rigor” and “developmental, student-centered” pedagogy and school structure (Anfara and Waks, 2000, p. 47). They argued that middle schools cannot function as mini senior high schools, and that middle-grade learners have specific developmental needs. They recalled the work of Dewey as means of dismantling the dichotomy that says academic rigor cannot exist at the middle school beside student-centered practice:
For the more mature student in the secondary school, school subject matter knowledge is organized in a rigorous disciplinary form - extensive, accurately defined, and logically related. But in order to get to this goal for younger students, we must begin with knowledge as something fluid, partial, and connected through objects and activities in their childhood worlds. This knowledge is hardly unorganized, but it is organized around the lives of children, unified by personal and social interests, rather than those of adults. (Anfara and Waks, 2000, p. 50)

That is, successful middle school programs are those that root learning within the lived-experiences and interests of the students, allowing for interdisciplinary learning, flexibility, and an exploratory curriculum (Anfara and Waks, 2000, p. 50).

The work of Rothrock (2017) took this investigation of successful attempts at academic rigor at the middle school level a step further. The research, using a middle school teacher as a case study, argued for the role of classroom community in creating a new definition of rigor and high expectations. The teacher in question fostered a strong sense of community in her classroom, both through environmental design and pedagogical structure. Situated in teams, students in the classroom were consistently encouraged to collaborate during their learning. Working in these small groups, every member of the group was assigned a specific role, and groups were awarded points when the whole group succeeded at a task or assignment (Rothrock, 2017).

The success of such a communal approach to pedagogical design was seen through mutual ownership that students displayed in their classroom. Classroom norms of teamwork, responsibility, and ownership were nurtured and all members of the
learning community were held accountable via natural consequences (Rothrock, 2017, p. 374). The teacher was able to create a counter-narrative as to the definition of rigor. Instead of promoting the high-stakes, individualized, standardized test-based narratives of academic rigor, the teacher helped her students create a community that re-defined rigor as a communal experience – *we are all in this boat together* (Rothrock, 2017, p. 374). Academic rigor became the act of creating a learning space where each student felt accountable for their learning and the learning of their peers.

**In Summary**

Bomer (2017) argued that “to loosen the paralyzing hold that a dominant culture working through a state-sponsored institution like school can have on the free expression of other cultures, it is crucial that we convince ourselves and our students that the world is unfinished” (Bomer, 2017, p. 15). If we seek to create equity in our schools, it is imperative to create a curriculum that is conscious of the diversity our students bring to the classroom, and of the power that our students hold in becoming change-makers. Creating a relevant, responsive middle grades theatre curriculum resource library, then, requires a firm understanding of theory and thinking behind progressive, postmodern ideas of relevancy and culture.

This chapter investigated an updated understanding of Ladson-Billings’ *culturally relevant pedagogy* that defines *community* as complicated and *culture* as an ever-shifting entity. This thinking suggests a culturally *sustaining pedagogy* that works to acknowledge, lean into, and utilize the many diverse and shifting cultural identities our students bring with them into the room. Second, the chapter examined the importance of
culturally responsive text. That is, the ways that modern education researchers think about relevant and multicultural texts, and the importance, for students, of seeing themselves or their lived experience, somehow, showing up in text they are reading.

Next, the chapter considered middle school and arts-based curriculum structures that are successful in terms of promoting engagement. These models are useful when considering what curricular resources should be included in the library. Finally, the chapter considered a working definition of *rigor* in the context of middle school, including opportunities to reframe *rigor* as a code word for individualized, competitive academic goal setting to a more communal, participatory model. Such an understanding influences the types of resources chosen to be included in the library.

The proceeding chapter details the methodology undertaken to complete this project. In particular, the chapter will consider the audience for the project, as well as the context in which this audience was picked and the project conducted. The chapter also discusses the particular research and curriculum frameworks utilized to complete the resource library project, the method of delivery of the project, and the rationale for that delivery. In summary, chapter three investigates how and why this project seeks to create a web-based resource library for middle grades theatre teachers, and the thinking behind why such a resource is valuable to middle grades theatre educators.
CHAPTER THREE

Introduction

Humans are a story-telling species. We make and seek meaning in everything, and we seek to make connections between things we understand and things we do not. Theatre art, then, is a vehicle by which humans can explore and unpack stories about our shared humanity. It is through this lens that one can view the value of a theatre arts education – it is a vehicle educators can use to help students tell stories, discover and find confidence in their individual voice, and gain empathy for others. As a theatre arts teacher, it is a constant goal to help students discover these powerful roles of theatre. However, this goal can be especially hard to achieve in the context of a middle-grade curriculum. The primary challenges are that there is a dearth of quality middle grades theatre curriculum resources, that much of the resources that are available for the middle-grade context are lacking in both rigor and relevance. Thus, this project exists to answer the question, what resources, pedagogical strategies, and curriculum tools can most successfully be utilized to implement a rigorous but culturally responsive middle grades theatre curriculum?

This chapter seeks to consider the specific need for a curriculum resource library for middle grades theatre teachers, and the intended audience of the project. Additionally, the chapter considers the mode of project delivery and the rationale for that delivery. Finally, the chapter summarizes the main theoretical and curricular structures used as a foundation for building the curriculum library and an anticipated timeline for the
completion of the project. It is important to consider the value of a web-based curriculum library, as well as the frameworks that guide this creation process.

**Project Description and Design**

The goal of this project was to create a curriculum resource library that is accessible and helpful to teachers teaching theatre to the middle grades. Here, the *middle grades* are defined as students in the U.S. school system in grades 6-8 – most commonly housed in a middle school building. As discussed in chapter two, students of middle school age require curriculum design that is both developmentally appropriate, and rigorous. They also require instruction that is designed with cultural relevance and competence in mind.

The goal was to create a user-friendly resource for theatre teachers of this age-group that helps teachers envision and develop unit and lesson structures that are effective in both rigor and relevance. When considering a modern, middle-grade theatre teacher as the intended audience of this project, a web-based resource library seemed the most practical mode of delivery for the work. In our increasingly technology-focused society – and therefore, education space – many educators seem to turn to internet resources as a first point of reference when working to design curriculum and scope and sequencing in their classrooms. It is with this lens that this work was structured as a web-based resource library. It has been filled with resources, unit ideas, and lesson templates that are user-friendly and easily implemented, such that they are appealing and helpful to the educators who find them. The website-based format for sharing this work
is, ideally, the most front-facing, visible, and user-friendly way to share the work and thinking with fellow teaching artists.

This project is aimed at an audience of fellow teachers of theatre – those who are seeking new and innovative ways to meet the needs of our students and also show them the power and the excitement of theatre. The dearth of relevant and rigorous resources for middle school theatre artists makes this job especially difficult. The absence of quality resources makes planning curriculum, designing scope and sequence, and writing unit plans especially tedious and isolating. The goal is that this resource library can become a place for middle-grade theatre teachers to begin to have unifying conversations about middle-grade theatre curriculum and find resources that make planning for culturally relevant instruction easier. The next section seeks to summarize the main theories that create the foundation for this work.

**Frameworks and Theories**

When Ladson-Billings (2014) revised her theory of culturally relevant instruction in 2014, she framed the type of instruction in which teachers celebrate and utilize the diverse cultural perspectives that students bring into the classroom as culturally-sustaining pedagogy (pg. 82). She argued that teachers must design a curriculum that responds to the constantly shifting, globalized nature of culture and by default, multiculturalism. Culturally-sustaining pedagogy is a curriculum design that sees cultural diversity in the classroom as an asset, and actively creates space for students to explore, maintain, and voice perspectives from the various cultural places they occupy. The theory of culturally-sustaining pedagogy is a basis for the theatre curriculum
resource library the library seeks to provide resources that support teachers in this work toward creating culturally relevant and diverse classroom spaces.

Additionally, the resource library will be rooted in the theoretical framework presented by Schroeder-Arce (2014). This framework considers how culturally-responsive curriculum shows up in the context of a theatre arts classroom. Borrowing from the ideas of Gay, Schroeder-Arce (2014) argued that effective theatre arts curriculum should acknowledge the legitimacy, and celebrate the legacy of, diverse ethnic groups by providing opportunities to explore those diverse legacies onstage. Second, the curriculum should create relevance by seeking ways to bridge the gap between the home life of students served and the art form. Finally, a culturally relevant theatre curriculum is one in which teachers use a wide variety of teaching strategies to engage students in the work of creating theatre, and encourage students to both embrace and celebrate their own cultural identity in the art-making and viewing process, but also to celebrate and understand the cultural perspective of others.

The work of Ladson-Billings (2014) and Schroeder-Arce (2014) formed a helpful framework for this work of creating a culturally-sustaining middle grades theatre curriculum because their theories served as guideposts used to evaluate and consider the effectiveness of the curricular resources included and developed for the library. When it comes to finding a guidepost for thinking surrounding rigor in middle school, the work of Anfara and Waks (2000) was considered. They argued that successful middle school programs are those that root learning within the lived-experiences and interests of the students, allowing for interdisciplinary learning, flexibility, and an exploratory
This theoretical relationship between rigor and developmental appropriateness suggests that the curriculum resources included in the library needed to support the notion that middle school students thrive with a curriculum that includes exploration and choice, and is connected to individual interests and other disciplines.

These researchers and their theories together became the basis for the project that works to cultivate and create resources for the web-based library. These theories were helpful guideposts to ensure the resources developed are both rigorous and culturally-responsive. The next section outlines how the idea was turned into reality by unpacking the timeline for the completion of the project.

**Timeline & Analysis**

The timeline for this capstone project is responsive to the schedule of a working professional, in terms of identifying the importance of goals and internal checkpoints. At the same time, it is cognizant of the urgent need for a middle-grade theatre curriculum resource library for teachers and theatre practitioners working in schools. A further breakdown of the timeline is below.

In the spring and early summer of 2019, the goal was first to collect and cultivate available curriculum resources that fit the perspective outlined in the literature review, focusing on resources that promote rigor, culturally responsive teaching, and teaching and learning through process rather than product. Next, original content created -- unit and lesson plans and ideas that enhance the resource library’s focus on these ideas. As the process of sourcing and building great sources for the website, I conversed with
colleagues about supports that they saw themselves using the most in their curriculum design and pedagogy. These conversations further shaped the thinking I did when building the website.

For one, conversations illuminated to me that importance that middle grade theatre colleagues place on artistic and academic rigor when it comes to designing curriculum. Indeed, it was clear that for many of my colleagues, rigor is the number one factor and challenge in their classrooms. These understandings helped me place importance on placing resources in the library that fit this need for age appropriate, rigorous content for middle school theatre students.

Secondly, conversations with colleagues also confirmed my own experience in terms of the challenge of script discovery. That is, it is challenging to find plays to use in our classrooms that are both age appropriate but that show cultural diversity. Thus, this also was a main focus of my resource cultivation process - adding quality plays that can expose students to diverse cultures and ways of being through scripts that work.

After the resources were gathered, I spent the Summer of 2019 building a website that houses them. My goal was to create a website that is incredibly intuitive to use, and easy to find resources and ideas. The website is divided into two parts. The first, a blog, organized into sections, that houses the bulk of the resources presented. The second is a forum. The purpose of the forum is to encourage community and collaboration amongst website visitors. Education does not exist in a vacuum, and, particularly if one is the only theatre teacher in a school building, it is easy to feel like an island. Thus, part of my process was to build a forum, divided into different topics and areas of focus, to
encourage conversation and resource sharing. A link to the online resource library, called Teaching Drama: a middle school theatre teacher community, is available in Appendix A.

Reviewing this timeline, by design importance has been placed not only on the creation and cultivation of resources, but also on the successful delivery of those resources, and on creation of community. Hopefully, these dual focuses have created a project that is nuanced, practical, and intuitive. And, as detailed in this chapter, ideally the theoretical frameworks and timeline upon which this project was completed have created a resource library that begins to answer the question, *what resources, pedagogical strategies, and curriculum tools can most successfully be utilized to implement a rigorous but culturally responsive middle grades theatre curriculum?*

**In Summary and Introduction to Chapter Four**

A middle school class of 22 diverse 6-8 grade students, most of whom identify as African American or Hispanic, had just finished reading the play *Akeelah and the Bee* by Cheryl West. As the class worked to unpack the text, the class considered the cultural and social contexts of Akeelah’s world. Some students made connections between the apartment complex full of people who are “in each other’s business” and the block they live on in St. Paul, Minnesota. Others made connections between the social world of Akeelah’s middle school and the experiences they themselves face in their school community. It is these connections – the opportunity to find meaning and understanding about a character in a play – that is an exciting component to teaching theatre to middle-grade students, and highlights the potential power in the work when it comes to helping students develop cultural empathy and openness.
This chapter put into context not only the specific lens from which this project was approached but also framed the practical need for a theatre resource library for middle-grade theatre teachers to address the general dearth of resources currently available. It also situated the work on the foundation of the theories presented by Ladson-Billings (2014), Schroeder-Arce (2014), and Anfara and Waks (2000), and highlighted the practicality of creating the library on a web-based platform. Finally, the chapter outlined the timeline for the completion of the project and the processes taken to assess the usefulness and effectiveness of the online resource. The next chapter summarizes the work completed to create the curriculum resource library and lessons learned along the way. The chapter seeks to reflect on the effectiveness and implications of the project and to identify areas for development and next steps to create culturally responsive and rigorous learning opportunities for theatre students in the middle grades.
CHAPTER FOUR

Introduction

By investigating the literature, confronting my own experiences, and creating a resource library and forum inspired by both, this project has explored the question what resources, pedagogical strategies, and curriculum tools can most successfully be utilized to implement a rigorous but culturally responsive middle grades theatre curriculum? The project’s intention has been to create an online resource for middle-grade teachers that well-fits their needs toward creating a curriculum design that is both rigorous and relevant to the students they teach. This chapter will unpack lessons learned throughout the process, investigate the key implications of the literature and work, and identify prevailing questions the project has uncovered.

First, the chapter considers the lessons learned from the perspective of researcher examining literature relevant to theatre education, and then of a student synthesizing years of graduate school thinking and learning into a culminating project. Next, the chapter investigates the implications of the literature, particularly the work of researchers considering culturally relevant instruction in the arts. Finally, the chapter considers prevailing implications and questions that the project illuminates. In particular, ideas about the inherent value in theatre education, and the ways in which teacher demographics might be utilized in further research to glean information about disparities across curriculum design.
Lessons Learned

The first lesson learned in this process is related to the amount, or lack thereof, of research related specifically to theatre education. As I read literature to include in the theoretical literature review for this project, I was struck by how difficult it was to find many sources that considered theatre education, directly, as a part or whole of the research. Arguably, this lack of published research identifies several trends. The first is that theatre education is still a fairly underutilized, and therefore under researched, area of K-12 education. In a world where learning standards are important, and funding is tight, theatre classes are not a feasible reality for many public schools. At the same time, a theatre education remains an important component of an arts education - an education that as educators, we know is valuable for students. Thus the lack of research specific to the theatre context also helps illuminate a real need for discourse in this sphere. There exists a need for space and resources that allow theatre educators to critically consider and develop best practices for the profession, especially for the middle-grades context.

In my role as a student during this project process, I learned that there is strength in community. Good scholarship rarely exists in a vacuum. Therefore, collaborating with a variety of peers and mentors serves to give a project more nuance, strength, and perspective. In particular, this project benefited from the review of both theatre and non-theatre educator colleagues, as well as from the perspective of middle-grade theatre teachers from across the U.S. It also is a product of the community cultivated and created throughout my time in the graduate program at Hamline University. I learned that the
perspectives gained during the program, especially in regards to teaching toward equity and justice, permeate how I think about education and my role as an educator.

Because equity and culturally responsive curriculum feels so central to my lens as an educator, it was surprising for me to learn, via the middle-grades theatre teacher survey I conducted, that many other theatre educators do not necessarily rank *cultural relevance* as more important to their planning process as other components, such as rigor. Given the scope of the project and the limitations of the survey design, I cannot further analyze or pinpoint a reason behind this finding. Later in this chapter I propose further research that could help unpack this finding further.

**The Implications of the Literature**

While it was difficult to find a great wealth of literature specific to theatre education, and middle-grade context, the research investigated and unpacked for this project brings forth several important implications when it comes to creating meaningful and rigorous middle-grade theatre curriculum. These implications proved key to the work of creating the web resource, and uncovered some prevailing understandings that impact my personal understanding of middle-grade theatre curriculum design.

First, in the context of 2019, considering Ladson-Billings’ (2014) definition of *culturally-sustaining pedagogy* reinvigorates the discussion about what relevance in the classroom really looks like. This understanding of effective pedagogy identifies the ever-shifting reality of culture, and that in a multicultural society, the students in our classrooms come into them with a variety of cultural frameworks. The implication, then, is that curriculum design in our classroom needs to be responsive to not just to the
cultures of the students within them, but responsive to the changing definitions and nuances of those cultures. Our curriculum must be nimble enough to respond to these changes and complexities in ways that honor our students.

One way that the literature suggests a curriculum can be this for our students is by aligning curriculum to a student voice and choice model. For example, the work of Wilhelm (2011) identified the idea of “teaching with your mouth shut” (p. 51). That is, students are intuitive learners, and the process of that learning involves individualized adventures that allow students to pose questions and make connections. Curriculum that allows students to be a part of designing the process, and focus on the journey of learning rather than the end product, allows for nimble curriculum opportunities that students can tailor themselves. This process is not always intuitive in the theatre classroom, because theatre is in itself end-product based. The implication, then, is that theatre educators will do well to reframe their thinking about how grading and performance are viewed in their classroom in ways that focus on student exploration and process-learning. Resources on the website reflect this approach to curriculum design and pedagogy.

Finally, the work of Schroeder-Arce (2014) highlighted the importance of remembering that theatre is a communal activity. The research advised that relevant theatre seeks to be influenced by the cultural communities that surround it, and to create “bridges of meaningfulness” between the art onstage and the lived experiences of those in the community that surrounds that stage (Schroeder-Arce, 2014, p. 9). This implies that in order to be relevant to the students they teach, theatre teachers must recognize the imperativeness of using and creating theatre experiences for their students that honor or
consider specific cultural identities and lenses of students. Letting those identities inform the theatre created in a classroom creates more meaningful theatre.

**Prevailing Implications and Questions**

In terms of prevailing implications that this project terses up, it is useful to think, again, about the time in life that middle school represents. For Anfara and Waks (2000) their research suggested that time in middle school is developmentally when learning is best structured around individualized interests and socialization. When one considers a theatre classroom, there are real connections to be made for an ideal learning environment for middle schoolers and the inherent nature of theatre. In the theatre, we are asked to work together to create new ways of thinking and being. In the theatre, we are asked to use our own lived experiences to inform our choices, and we are asked to put ourselves in the shoes of others in order to consider their point of view. There is inherent value in these processes for middle schoolers. At a policy level, then, this project helps highlight the benefit of strong funding for arts programs like theatre at the middle school level. It situates theatre education as an area of education to be studied, theorized, and invested in.

The website forum created for this project, then, exists as a place where some of that theoretical and practical discussion surrounding teaching middle schoolers theatre can happen. The design of the online resource is such that it is a place to go to glean inspiration when it comes to curriculum design and resource cultivation. At the same time, it is also designed to be a place that fosters conversation and community. A limitation of this project is that the website, at the time of writing, is still in beta testing in
terms of its operational use and content. A main consideration for further research would be to obtain feedback from users, and to analyze data about what pages on the site are most-visited or commented on. Such information could then be used to edit and add to the site moving forward in ways that are responsive to the needs identified by the community of theatre teachers using it.

Another area of research would be to further unpack the demographics and lived experiences of middle grade theatre teachers, and how those foundations affect curriculum design. In particular, it would be helpful to ascertain how geography, culture, and school climate affect what areas of curriculum design and pedagogy teachers identify as being most-central to their planning process. Such research would be helpful to begin to identify difference and disparity across programs, and the roots of those differences.

**In Summary**

It is finals week, and a group of middle schoolers prepare for performance. They have rehearsed a scene from *Akeelah and the Bee* by Cheryl West, about an African American middle schooler who prepares for, and competes in, the Scripps National Spelling Bee. The room is buzzing with the energy and nerves that only the pre-show excitement of a group of 20 middle schoolers can produce. For weeks the students have prepared. They have read the script, analyzing the characters within the pages and comparing the characters to people they know in their own lives. They have talked about the community Akeelah is a part of, and how they can breathe life into that community in performance by considering the communities they are a part of in their own lives. They have worked together to memorize lines, remember blocking, and plan set pieces and
costumes. And now it is time. As the students move to the wings of the stage - the final moments before the lights come up on their scene to be performed for family and school mates - the stage becomes theirs.

When Augusto Boal said that theatre can help us discover who we are, he meant that in the theatre, the art we create reveals truths about ourselves and our communities we have not seen, or been able to articulate. The power of a theatre education is that it can become a vehicle in which students can take ownership of their voice, their artistry, and their ideas. At the middle school level, this autonomy and power is important. The work of this project has been to discover how an online resource, and existing research, can support teachers of middle grade drama classrooms to do this vital work with more success and with an eye toward equity and rigor. Through community and scholarship, it is possible to advance understandings and best practices related to theatre education in ways that hold a light to the importance of this work - this work that helps adolescents discover who they can become.
References


Appendix A

Teaching Drama: a middle school theatre teacher community is available at the following URL:

https://rachelmariebrady.wixsite.com/teachingdrama