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Choice Based Directing: Promoting Inclusivity in Middle School Theatre Programs

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Choice Based Directing: Promoting Inclusivity in Middle School Theatre
Programs

By Brooklyn Riggs

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master
of Arts in Teaching Theatre & Dance K-12.

Hamline University

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This capstone is dedicated to the faculty members of St. Cloud State University Theatre Department who cast doubt upon me. They never thought I would be accepted into a graduate level program, let alone, graduate with a master's degree. This is the result of inaccurate predictions.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In the summer of 2018, I was hired to direct a middle school play for a small town in Wright County, MN. I learned that I would be replacing the woman who had been running the program as essentially a one-woman show with her husband for the past 30 years or so. The program was structured around her system for doing the work. It did not take long for me to discover after her departure, she took all her costumes, sets, props, community contacts, and resources. No matter, I was able to lead the audition process with some help from some of the high school theatre students and the town community ed. As I set up for auditions, I heard whispers and murmurs around me. Students looked at me; some with wonder and excitement, some with hesitation, some in plain distress. Part of me thought to dismiss this because most kids that age, and really anyone in the theatre industry, go through all different emotions through the audition process. An even larger part of me felt something was amiss. Eventually, some parents and students began expressing their thoughts and feelings about the past program to me, many of them not sparkling in review. The past director called students to rehearsal every day, even if their character specifically was not rehearsing that day, making the students feel their time was not valued and their desire to participate was unfulfilled. Students were repeatedly cast in roles without so much as a single line, there were clear favorites among the casting, and the kids were afraid to be reprimanded and “barked at.” Responding to this feedback, I conducted auditions and was as encouraging as possible. I answered the actors’ questions

and allowed them all to read differing roles. I also decided to add some games and pantomimes in groups, and took careful notes throughout the casting process.

It was clear to me the previous director was an example of someone who was burned out or did not enjoy working with children and creating live theatre anymore. I knew immediately I needed to be dynamically different with a cast of kids looking to be reborn on that middle school stage. This was my chance to implement some new practices and turn the hierarchy of theatre director and cast on its head. It was my objective to breathe life into this department again. I decided that my approach needed to be of ingenuity, changing the paradigm from control to collaboration, and that is how my directing style, which I have coined *Choice-Based*, came to be. *How can implementing Choice-Based Directing promote inclusivity in a middle school theatre program?*

Choice-Based Directing

Choice-Based Directing started as a hypothesis, testing theories by making choices that were the exact opposite of what the department had done before. I scheduled certain scenes and characters to be worked with on certain days, so students were still able to enjoy their summer and participate fully when they were at rehearsal. I actively rejected typecasting as I chose students for roles in the show. My lead female role was not your stereotypical “stick-thin blonde” girl, my actor who had behavioral issues played *two* roles, and my “prince” was actually a princess. I also began to give students choices when it came to blocking. For example, I asked them what they thought their character should be doing, where they should be sitting, *if* they should be sitting, and how they

should move through the production. I allowed breakout spaces, supervised by the high school assistants, for students to come up with some of their own choreography, and allowed groups to vote on how a certain scene transition should be executed.

I recall a day when a group of actors came to me and told me they were not a fan of the soundtrack that went with the production. My response was not to become defensive or hostile but rather to say, “Well then, let’s change it!” This resulted in two actresses singing *a capella* for one song between their characters and using different tracks for other song numbers. The final production was so much more upbeat and gave it an overall whimsical feel that it didn’t have before. As an adult, I had the final say but my students were fully engaged. Later one of my seventh-grade students, who played the title character, told the school newspaper how much he enjoyed the show experience and commented on the Choice-Based Directing style. The actor stated, ... “he has appreciated that freedom”. (Delano Eye of the Tiger, 2018, p. 2) He suggested that the outcome of this approach was that it made the show more unique in unexpected ways and overall an enjoyable experience. He encouraged people to come see the show because of how fun the experience was. This positive feedback strongly affirmed that my efforts had paid off and that Choice-Based Directing was the way to create lasting engagement in productions with middle school students.

Career & Background

I am a theatre educator specializing in middle school instruction. I have been in the theatre industry for 18 years, starting when I was in middle school myself. For my previous theatre director, I started working with children in theatre when I was 18 years

old, as an intern and later moving up to assistant director. I went to college at Anoka-Ramsey Community College the following spring and earned my Associates in Fine Arts Theatre. Around this time, I started directing and discovered it was my true passion, even above acting. I arrived at St. Cloud State University the fall after my graduation from Anoka-Ramsey. I earned my Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Arts with an emphasis in Acting & Directing. I took a year off from school to gain some real-world experience in theatre. It was in this gap year, I realized that working with children in theatre was my calling. I enrolled at Hamline University to obtain my Masters in Art of Teaching Theatre & Dance K-12 in the spring of 2017.

I worked with many directors in a variety of venues and styles of theatre. These experiences included community, in schools, and professional level. I carefully analyzed their directing styles, as well as how they went about directing other areas of production such as costumes, casting, stage management, and much more. I took notes of what I could take from them professionally to develop my own skills, and what I wanted to leave with them, traits that I could not see myself emulating in my directing. In some cases, it was not until years later that I realized I was too young and too inexperienced to question these directors at the time.

My Directing Style

Learning from an experience, later down the road, has also been a factor in my cultivation of developing a directing style. Before 2018, I watched the students I was assisting through these productions. I watched them getting yelled at when it wasn't warranted and watched their faces fall. I sometimes saw the same students getting lead

roles, and others being victims of typecasting, telling me they wished they had a chance to play a different kind of character. Always picking a student for a role because of how they look, is type-casting, which is a trap that many directors fall into. I watched some students lose motivation and eventually stop engaging or even asking to go home. When they would ask why they had to do something, their question was met with, “Because I said so!” instead of something constructive or useful. I believe as the actors who ultimately own their production, they deserved insightful explanations and answers.

All of this, plus what my students told me, led me to approach this particular production with my Choice-Based Directing style. Knowing its successes, I also decided that it should be the subject of my research project: *How can implementing Choice-Based Directing promote inclusivity in a middle school theatre program?*

The goal of the project is to create a professional development for middle school theatre department directors. The goal of the professional development is to help directors see how implementing Choice-Based Directing can help promote an inclusive theatre department, keep middle school students engaged, and foster a passion in students. That passion will be able to feed into the high school theatre program where the students have already learned the basics and will have a better advantage of holding their own to such a program’s rigor.

Theories, Beliefs, & Contexts

My past experiences in theatre as an adolescent, theatre director, and theatre educator has taught me that the hierarchy of theatre in relation to the director and the cast has always been one without question and without much thought. You do as the director

says and there is nothing else. This is an issue when it comes to educating children in theatre because it prohibits them from drawing their own conclusions and problem-solving. Furthermore, it directly keeps them less involved in other areas of production and execution of other production operations.

I have pulled from my experiences on both sides of the theatre hierarchy to create a working theory. Struggles I have encountered in this process include differences in directing styles and types of directors, not understanding the psychology of middle school students, and typecasting. These reasons may be why middle school theatre departments are unsuccessful and elitist. In turn, creating an elitist department also dwindles the high school theatre department, as there are not many students to feed into the high school program. Even further down the road, this could potentially close down community theatres due to no one wanting to audition because of how non-inclusive the theatre industry was to these students. They may be reluctant to try again. These issues reflect my desire to create change in middle school theatre education, by practicing inclusivity, applying what I have learned from practice in my field, and continuing to implement Choice-Based Directing.

I hold the educational value that children deserve to not be excluded from artistic opportunities. This is not only applicable to acting, this also includes backstage. I believe that both “left-brained”, “right-brained”, type A, and type B students and people can find a place in the theatre and we can all collaborate in performance art. Everyone can find a place to call home on the stage, whether that is right front and center, backstage, or even in the dressing room or scene shop. Perhaps even before the stage in the front of the

house or outside the theatre all together, for example a producer. One of my main goals is for my students to understand that theatre is not all about acting or dancing on the stage, theatre is multifaceted, and it takes all different kinds of talents to create a production.

Choice-Based Directing carefully plans for actors to be involved in execution of artistic choices and in more ways than what is just *seen*. “Left-brained” individuals tend to be better connected to logic, sequencing, linear thinking, mathematics, facts and thinking in words. For those who may not have been *born* with an artistic bone in their body, there is always an approach to take to eventually have them see they can be a *logical* person who also has a talent in the arts. I may consider having my students learn roles by interest groups. For those simply taking my class as an elective, I might give them the role of working in the scene shop. Scene shop work takes math, measuring, and careful planning. I may also suggest stage managing because it takes a lot of lists, order, and sequencing. Another option is the box office because it involves managing money and calculating capacity and time.

“Right-brained” individuals tend to be better connected with imagination, holistic thinking, intuition, arts, rhythm, nonverbal cues, feelings visualization, and daydreaming. My students who are a bit more outwardly creative may have roles, such as actors, directors, stage makeup artists, costume designers, producers, musicians, choreographers, and set-design painters. They may have a stronger advantage in these roles simply due to their talents and other artistic influences in their life, such as being painters or musicians. Students who share some traits between both might appreciate roles such as dramaturgy, light and sound boards, props managing, and playwriting. I may be categorizing roles but

in no way or matter am I limiting my students. They are free to pursue any theatrical path they like. I believe in pushing the boundaries and going outside of comfort zones as long as it is done in a respectful way and in a safe space.

I believe implementing Choice-Based Directing will help build theatre programs and students themselves in a larger context of society. Students gaining their own voice will help them throughout their lifetime and that value is immeasurable. There will be more prepared and enthusiastic students (and parents, who are a huge help running booster clubs and raising funds), entering the high school theatre programs. It will better retain theatre departments and better educate students in theatre.

Middle school students typically become disengaged when they are not interested in what they are studying or have no choice in how they are learning or what they are learning about. I believe that understanding how middle school students think, and realizing they do better with having choices, will result in a better production. They will have a stake in it and will come to rehearsal with more willingness and feel that their thoughts are considered. Promoting inclusivity, creating a welcoming department, and considering all talents, will better allow for theatre education to continue and for theatre to keep thriving in schools. Directing styles drastically change the dynamics in a show and Choice-Based creates a wonderful balance of student voice and quality production. My research question is, *How can implementing Choice-Based Directing promote inclusivity in a middle school theatre department?*

Summary

This chapter further explores my thoughts and passion for this topic. It also seeks to cultivate this topic within the framework of a professional development and envisions a new pathway for middle school theatre departments everywhere.

In Chapter Two, a review and analysis of research and theory are addressed to give a better context of the interactions with middle schoolers with theatre and how it allows students to execute problem solving skills. It also examines how directing practices have developed over time and common, yet outdated, ways of running theatre departments. Research on identifying directing behaviors and how we have come to direct attention to a better structure for secondary students in theatre is explored.

In Chapter Three, a description of the project is given, including methods and theoretical frameworks used to shift theatre departments in a new direction of inclusivity as well as an understanding of Choice-Based Directing. This project has aimed to shed light on new theories in theatre education and directing. This is important because there are not a lot of professional developments for theatre in schools, specifically middle school. A professional development will serve to give teachers and directors a thoughtful way to adjust the direction of their department or formulate how to build a successful new department.

Chapter Four reviews the lessons learned from this project and investigates areas for further projects, accessibility of the shared resource, and identifies discoveries made during the creation process.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the pertinent research in the fields of theatre, child development and current and best practices in theatre with children. This research includes studies conducted with middle school students, attempting to identify the foundations that secondary students have developed and how theatre can further enhance these skills and attributes.

It investigates theories and concepts from theatre pioneers, many who current theatre educators swear by and still use in practice today. This research examines works by directors in the discipline of directing and carefully observes how time, venue, and audience are the catalyst for the shift in the directing paradigm. It seeks to explore the mindset and attitudes taken on by different directors and their styles.

The literature and research seeks to place modern findings at the center of switching to a new way of operating a middle school theatre department and how to answer the question: *How can implementing Choice-Based Directing promote inclusivity in a middle school theatre program?*

Middle Schoolers & Interactions with Theatre

Middle schoolers and their interactions with theatre will look very different than high school and college students. Middle school students do not have as much experience or as much focus as students in the advanced grades (Brady, 2019). Therefore, the

process becomes just as valuable as the product, even more so in many cases.

Additionally, middle school theatre teachers need to devise lessons with strategies that will empower student participation. Middle school is also around the time when students begin to question authority and desire choices in their learning. One of the most visible ways to provide these kinds of complex learning experiences is in the reimagining of the director/student actor relationship. Directing choice is also critical, because students in this age group will not develop the necessary skill set by simply replicating what others have executed in the past. Piaget (as cited in Falk & Blumenreich, 2005) spoke on this, stating that “education should nurture citizens to be capable of doing new things, not simply repeating what others have done” (p. 2). This section will provide powerful motivations for middle school students as well as identify ways to keep them engaged in theatre. This is extremely important for theatre departments to continue growing and for the middle school level to retain their department and garner interest for classes of students indefinitely.

Understanding the Middle School Mind & the Benefits of Theatrical Interaction

While middle school may seem the least ideal age group to work with, they have great attributes that can make teaching theatre and directing plays with them to be enjoyable. For example, middle schoolers are able to guide themselves to a certain degree and want to have some creative control but at the end of the day, many of those students still desire their teacher/director’s approval. As a middle school educator, I have seen many examples of this behavior. Lazarus states, “Middle school students are self-conscious and completely focused on the opinions of peers” (2012). To avoid

scrutiny by their peers, students may attempt to turn attention to anyone but themselves and also not exhibit their full learning potential. This may impact the class dynamic and in turn create behavior issues that are sometimes undesirable but within the expectation of a middle school classroom. Through intentional preparation, offering students more opportunities to collaborate with each other, allowing them some choice in their learning, and giving them a sense of belonging and trust, students can begin to develop a healthy ensemble amongst themselves. “Middle school drama education lives at the crossroads. It exists where creative drama meets theatre, where childhood meets adolescence, and like all great art, where self meets others” (Lazarus 2012, p. 184).

Student Opportunities

Students need and deserve opportunities to be a part of something bigger than themselves, and at this age, those chances do not present themselves often enough. Studies have been done to show that cooperation and collective structures improve dynamics and relationships among students. One particular study conducted by Nelson, Colby, & McIlrath stated, “The use of cooperative rather than competitive learning structures resulted in improved achievement and improves the quality of interpersonal relationships” (Nelson et al., 2001). Theatre is a great place to really create a strong sense of community and allow students to experiment with risk-taking and trying new things. “Collaboration, co-ownership, risk taking, and experimentation are hallmarks of theatre-making with middle school students” (Lazarus, 2012, p. 71).

Active Participation

Students must be active participants in their learning and interactions within the arts. It is not beneficial to them to simply be a spectator or an inactive participant. “Young people respond best to being taught about the arts when it involves first hand exposure to the art, as opposed to walling off the arts education in classrooms” (Rhine, 2018 p. 75). This population really benefits and learns from role-playing. This approach allows them to use problem solving skills and demonstrate higher order thinking. (Nelson et al., 2001). Theatre allows for creativity, originality, reflection, and organic learning to come into play. As stated previously, the secondary student population does not simply learn by repeating what others have done. “By emphasizing reflection, and critical thinking about student realities, rather than fact-based regurgitation of curriculum, they were empowered as learners” (Nelson et al., 2001). It is simply not in the best interest of students to take a piece which may have been written and directed at the college level and recreate it through secondary school students. “With inexperienced performers, ‘telling the story’ requires acquisition of the most basic information and skills. Most learner-centered teachers feel young people do not effectively learn these by rote or by replicating college or conservatory theatre programs that prescribe certain techniques” (Lazarus, 2012 p. 74). Helping students create works more organically assists with answering the question: *How can implementing Choice-Based Directing promote inclusivity in a middle school theatre program?*

Skillset & Motivation

Theatre games and developing a basic theatrical skillset is critical for adolescents,

and ultimately, a very useful way to develop motivation. “This age group may awkwardly grope for ‘coolness’, but there is still a good deal of childhood innocence within, as well as the gift of goofiness. Middle school students are often faster to plunge into improvisation or silly theatre games than their older counterparts” (Rome & Dillard, 2015, pg. 11). This is where Viola Spolin, the creator of Theatre Games, who had been working with children in theatre since 1924, comes into the spotlight.

Theatre Games

Spolin was the pioneer of problem-solving the ever-arising complex issues in children’s theatre. Spolin is the creator of theatre games that are used in the discipline. Alongside sociologist Boyd, Spolin worked on the craft at the Neva Boyd school of drama (Gammon, 2012) . Spolin would go on to develop the Young Actors Company in Hollywood and become the Director of Workshops at The Second City. When *Improvisation for the Theater* was published, techniques were made accessible to theatre groups and the classroom drama teacher for the first time (Spolin et al., 1986). These games are supplements to classroom curriculum and are great for building an ensemble in productions. Of course, children like games so they are more likely to willfully participate in these activities. The games have a serious intent, as they help students build skills in performance and lead them into understanding what it means to be an artist (Spolin et al., 1986). Boyd also aligned with Spolin in their beliefs in the power of play. Play creates community, teaches social skills, and reinforces the social codes of ethics (Gammon, 2012).

Spolin (1986) goes on to say that playing theatre games not only provides a theatrical experience for students but also, “helps them to become responsive to their fellow players, able to create an environment through behavior, and to transform ordinary objects into extraordinary ones” (Spolin et al., 1986). Spolin et al. (1986) adds even more benefits of this practice by providing more outcomes of the activities. Spolin states students will learn the basics of storytelling (vital to theatre), literary criticism, and character analysis (Spolin et al., 1986). Through these games, students develop improv skills and the ability to project themselves into unfamiliar situations. Spolin refers to their work often as *theatre workshops*. These games are accessible for introductions to theatre as well as for warm-ups in rehearsals and icebreaker activities in the first few weeks of rehearsals in production. As far as classroom use, these games rely on the player’s intuition and their own learned experiences, unlike most classrooms which offer a competitive environment. Moreover, the benefit of adding games can help students have empathy for each others’ differences. Middle school is usually a place rampant with bullying. Gammon (2012) offers the idea that by implementing the integration of theatre games in the classroom, students may learn to respect the individuality of fellow players (p. 37). Bryan Way (1967), another drama educator from the late 1960s, states that theatre and the arts help to manifest individuality: “The differences are often most clearly reflected through the arts, and opportunity for actually ‘doing’ the arts is sometimes the wisest way of developing individuality” (p. 3).

In David Grote’s work *Play Directing in the School*, Spolin’s theatre games are mentioned, specifically labeled an alternative technique for preparing actors for a

performance. Grote states that sometimes theatre educators use the games and improvisations themselves to “develop” the bulk of the play (p. 158). The point of the games is to not only build ensemble, but also to get the actor to “make it real” (p. 158). These games allow students to safely be heard, communicate as a group, and engage in creativity.

Theatre is where students can take risks, collaborate, explore, and discover. “The theatre workshop can become a place where teachers and students meet as fellow players, involved with one another, ready to connect, to communicate, to experience, to respond, and to experiment and discover” (Spolin et al., 1986, p. 2). It is important for children to be given the freedom to interact with their environment and experience and contribute (Spolin et al., 1986).

Students’ voice, choice, and freedom is incredibly important to enhance their experiences and a huge part of the equation when it comes to motivating students.

The Importance of Middle School Voice

Theatre is a place where middle school students can discover who they are and what they believe in, therefore theatre should be about them. Most research I have conducted for this capstone (Lazarus, 2012; Nelson et al., 2001; Spolin, 1986; Brady 2019) echo the same sentiments. Many sources state student voice is the biggest motivation for children to be responsible and an active participant in their learning. In respects to a theatre department, those students are the reason that theatre continues to survive and are the most critical component. “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” (Brady, 2019).

Nelson, Colby, and McIlrath (2000) conducted a dramatic study with low achieving middle school students. In this study, students selected their own roles and interacted with each other while role-playing adults in situations that involved examining problems and thinking critically. They discovered, “students consistently identified having a *voice* or *say* as a critical element of their engagement and participation in the dramas” (p. 64). In this same study, the researchers also found that student and classroom dynamics changed and students were able to show more self control. They were able to demonstrate intelligence and competence, interact with the curriculum, and function better as students (Nelson et al., 2001). Although these findings are 21 years old now, they are still relevant in the world of today. They still show that student voice is considered indispensable when it comes to enticing secondary students. Our goal in the middle grades is to build a life-long appreciation for the theatre and performing arts. This mindset will further help to answer the question: *How can implementing Choice-Based Directing promote inclusivity in a middle school theatre program?*

Retaining Appreciation for Theatre

Historically, the context of theatre and directing suggest that actors do as they are told and worry about themselves. They are usually less involved with the production as a whole and don’t question the status quo. Moreover, the belief has been that if students wish to be in theatre productions, they must prove their worth by subjecting themselves to directorial methods such as yelling, weeding out the weak by holding standards

unnecessarily high, and excessive reprimanding. Some examples of this include: not giving students any say or giving them constructive feedback, “that was terrible” or “you missed your line” without giving them any context or thoughtful suggestions. This type of behavior from directors is not encouraging to students and will only diminish a theatre department over time. It will not build an appreciation for theatre, but the opposite: indifference or avoidance of theatre.

Incorporating student voice will inevitably retain middle school theatre departments. Rome and Dillard (2015) comment on this precedent we set for secondary school students:

In middle and high school, theatre is not a training ground for professionals. It’s about nurturing kids and their appreciation for an art form in which they can participate for the rest of their lives. Theatre without an audience is no theatre at all, and our students are the generation of theatre-goers; the more they can enjoy its fun, richness, and energy, the more they are likely to continue to participate as they mature. (p. 33)

We as directors, producers, and designers are instilling a passion they will carry with them all throughout their lives. This is why it is beneficial to change our practices from traditional methods to more inclusive applications.

The next section will speak on the research of traditional methods of directing theatre and how the practice has carried for generations but catered to adults and applies to those with more experience in theatre.

Theatre Directing Styles & Traditional Methods

In any field, there are various approaches to getting the work done. It is the same in theatre. In the discipline of directing, specifically, there are many types of directors and styles of directing. When it comes to directing, selecting the type of approach is also dependent on the venue, such as a school, a community theatre, or a professional theatre. As a director myself, I have worked in each of these settings. This section will dive into further detail of the various types of director. It will also cover the traditional directorial techniques, and outdated ones such as typecasting, favoritism, and color-blind casting. It will compare the opposing two director types most found in schools, *Director-Centered Practice* and *Learner-Centered Practice* (Lazarus, 2012). It will also include admirable mindsets from differing directors.

Directing Theory and Strategies

The director of a play generally oversees all aspects of the production process. Patterson (2008) gives great example of a job description for a stage director:

The primary responsibility of the director is to organize and unify everything the audience sees and hears through time. The director must have a vision of the play script that can be communicated to the audience through the means of sight, sound, and tempo. The director reads a script and develops a clear response to its emotional impact, meaning, and individuality of expression. (p. 2)

The director must then communicate the overall understanding of the play by leading actors, designers, and techs. Throughout the rehearsal period, the director serves

as the audience for the production company, giving feedback to the actors and designers. On opening night, the work of the director, actors, and designers comes together as a cohesive piece for an audience (Patterson, 2008).

Every director will employ a strategy to go about this work. Recreative directors will usually attempt to keep the play within a certain context, with no stark changes (Patterson, 2008). Cocreative directors see themselves as equal to the playwright; they generally will take a creative license to create a different interpretation of the play, such as setting it in a different time period or in a different place than the script called for (p. 10). With this approach, some shows may not be as equally recognizable to the audience (p. 10). Directors, especially if hired externally, must choose a strategy that best suits their venue. No matter the strategy selected, it must be based on the resources allotted to a specific production in a specific venue (Patterson, 2008).

Text-Centered vs Director-Centered Strategies

The Recreative and Cocreative strategies are tied to the Text-Centered strategy and the Director-Centered strategy (Patterson, 2008). Recreative being Text-Centered and Cocreative being Director-Centered. Text-Centered directors look very closely at the playwright's intent at the time the play was written (Patterson, 2008, p. 8). This approach keeps the production in an authentic manner. If the play is a period piece, the costumes and set will reflect that specific period and time. It is often much more straightforward. "Recreative productions are often staged without cuts, with male roles played by males, and with no attention given to ethnic diversity casting. By choice, the hand of the director is seldom discernible" (Patterson, 2008, p. 8). Putting on a production in this strategy, the

audience will more easily recognize the text. Director-Centered directors, “Use the playwright’s text as a starting point for a new theatre experience” (Patterson, 2008, p.10). The Director-Centered director will often use different interpretations to create scenery that is not exclusive to the script. These kinds of directors will use some spectacle to enhance the audience experience. Productions of this caliber are generally more inclusive as well. “A director-centered production may be characterized by theatrical or textual interpolations, cross-gender and or/color blind casting, and striking visual images that may or may not illuminate the text” (p. 10). Some of these elements tend to make some texts less recognizable to an audience. Most directors will find themselves somewhere in the middle of the continuum when it comes to both of these approaches and are not extreme on either side. For example, generally called the Universal Strategist, directors will take elements from both Text-Centered and Director-Centered interpretations and fit them to their specific audience, resources, venue, and actor population (p. 12).

Style of Director

Directors can choose any strategy on the continuum but the actual style of director depends on their personality and experiences. It is easy to spot and differentiate a professional from an amateur. Usually, directors will more closely align with one of four different styles of directing.; Dictator, Negotiator, Creative Artistic, and Confrontationalist (NA, Styles of Directing). First, is the dictator. The dictator director has a very aggressive and assertive role and is, well, a dictator. Rehearsals with this style of director are typically fully controlled, more predictable, and the actors have little or no say (NA, Styles of Directing). Second is the negotiator. The negotiator type of director

will focus on a more immersive, improvised form of rehearsal. They usually use the ideas of the production team and the actors to shape a theatrical work. These directors will use a more democratic style of control (NA, *Styles of Directing*). The third style is the creative artist director. This director sees “themselves as a creative artist working with the ‘materials’ of dramatic creativity” (NA, *Styles of Directing*, para 3). This could mean they take inspiration from the process, the actors, and designers. Ultimately, they will want to have the final say over the production. They decide what is included and incorporated into a theatrical work (NA, *Styles of Directing*).

Confrontationalist

The final style director is the confrontationalist. This director will be in constant argument with the actors and designers in terms of decisions and interpretations. This director will actively engage in conflict with their actors and are generally very heated (NA, *Styles of Directing*). Patterson (2008) advises that this approach not be used,

An enthusiastic, happy team is productive. The director must use creativity, persuasion, and encouragement to make things happen during rehearsals. So, the director requests, suggests, urges, questions, and advises. He does not demand, threaten, or force. The dictatorial approach is to be avoided (p. 107)

I would hope that a school would not hire this type of director especially, although it happens. Directors who work with this kind of style are typically amateurs and are insecure about their role. To compensate for this, they take on the “in charge” persona and become too busy managing to develop through the creative work, and they suck the

joy out of cultivating a production. As an actor and director, I have worked with these types of fellow directors. Many of these kinds of directors are burnt out and full of ego; they are comparable to a few of the styles mentioned previously. This type of approach no longer suffices as an appropriate or effective directing style and will not keep middle school students engaged in the world of today. Nor is it an appropriate answer to the question of: *How can implementing Choice-Based Directing promote inclusivity in a middle school theatre program?*

There are certain signs that a director has been trained in traditional methods. Much of these directors run their departments by use of antiquated casting techniques, such as typecasting, etc. which is more or less a dated and elitist practice.

Typecasting

Typecasting is usually casting students based on their body types. For example, casting the petite student as the child, and the larger student as an old lady or comic relief. In some schools, it has even been a topic of conversation that students of color are repeatedly cast as villains, which is an extremely harmful message being sent to those students, as I have been witness to this practice. Typecasting is eliminating opportunities and creating disparities in theatre departments, squashing dreams too early before they can participate in high school productions or in their community, I have seen this at play first hand. Even worse, if a student does not fit any “traditional” character body type, they may be excluded from the production entirely. This being said, most actors despise typecasting (Wojcik, 2003). According to Wojcik (2003), typecasting is typically viewed as a sign of an actor’s limitation or putting limits on actors (p. 224). This approach may

allow students who may not be the most skilled or put in the most effort to be cast repeatedly in the same type of role. Typecasting, according to Wojick (2003), has been described as “one of the theatre’s deadly sins” (p. 224). Due to these practices, theatre departments dwindle and eventually there are no actors within the casting pool. Students are also being shown that their learning and experimenting is limited in this capacity. “Type is relatively simple, shallow, and unchanging, whereas character is complex, deep, and developing” (Wojick, 2003 p. 226). Directors are offering students a sub-par experience using this traditional method. Other harmful casting practices used are favoritism and colorblind casting.

Favoritism Casting

Favoritism in theatre typically implies that the students that have spent the most time in the program are the most talented, and favorite students of the director are cast in the lead roles time and time again. This is called *program incest* (Grote, 1997). Running a theatre program in this fashion will guarantee that the department will dwindle once those students graduate. Grote (1997) explains the dangers of this:

The danger in this is that other students will believe that you are so committed to your favorites that there will be no room, or more importantly no parts, for newcomers. Once they begin to believe that, you won’t have any newcomers. (p. 212)

These directors ultimately wield much power in who will be included and excluded from the creative process (Herrera, 2015). In response to Favoritism, Herrera (2015) points out that there are more options for casting in school productions. Directors

in schools and community based programs typically have more autonomy in their casting choices, unlike their professional and film counterparts whose casting procedures are sometimes dictated by marketing, budgets, and scheduling (p. 147). Yet, casting favorites is still a common practice in theatre departments, even though schools need not consider those same aspects. The downside of exclusion is it is a way of gatekeeping the theatre community and in turn creates elitist attitudes. The director will want to be held to the highest of standards, so the cast will need to possess much talent and technique (p. 147). This is harmful to middle school students, since at this level we are trying to instill a sense of appreciation for theatre. If they see theatre directors and educators will not teach them the necessary skills, they will not put themselves out there to audition. In my experience, I have witnessed middle school students become discouraged from participating in theatre productions due to Favoritism. Another kind of traditional casting method that is more-so outdated is Colorblind casting.

Colorblind Casting

Colorblind casting is a term that essentially means the director can use their own discretion to cast roles that should belong to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students but instead cast students who do not have the cultural background that the role is calling for. Apfelbaun (as cited in Moss, 2019) explains Colorblindness as, “an approach to managing diversity in which intergroup distinctions and considerations are deemphasized” (p. 1). Rome and Dillard (2015) even encourage this harmful practice in their book. The passage explains that a student’s race or culture is irrelevant to the role in casting unless the play centers around race, and even then, theatre educators can choose

to use Colorblind casting (p. 40) Moss (2019) describes Colorblind casting exhibited in two ways. First, "... a white actor getting cast in a role meant for a person of color" and secondly, "... a person of color being cast in a role their race exacerbates in the negative perceptions of the character" (p. 1). This is similar to students of minority ethnicities being cast as villains or antagonists. Colorblind casting is seen as harmful because it has the ability to take away roles and representation from the already limited selection for people of color (p. 2). As traditional methods begin to give way for better practices, we start to see a shift in the thinking patterns of directors as we look into the next section for thoughts and advice from commendable directors.

Collaborative

A directing approach taken on by Knopf (2006) sees the director as a collaborator. This counters the works of Ball (1984); Grote (1997); and Patterson (2008) respectively, who put the director as the absolute overall center of the production. Their works serve as guides for how the director should run all aspects of the theatre and every department. This is extremely helpful for directors first starting out. Once the basic directing skill is mastered, the director can begin to work on cohesive approaches. Knopf (2006) tells us that the aim is not to command a precise collaborative process but to help one develop the skill and range of their collaborative skills (p. 15) This approach means the director must accept the feeling of losing control, after establishing their boundaries and clearly stating their responsibilities to the production (Knopf, 2006, pp. 15-16). Using this method allows for the designers and actors to have more creative avenues within the director's interpretation (Knopf, 2006, p.15). Collaboration as a directing method begins to level the

playing field of the theatrical hierarchy and challenges the notion of the director being the only deciding party throughout the whole process. However, within this method many hold the idea that in the overall production, the director makes the final decision. (Ball, 1984; Grote, 1997; Knopf, 2006; & Patterson, 2008).

Collaboration Builds a Better Acting Experience

To allow for a better experience in collaboration, one must have a basic working knowledge of every area of theatre, ultimately making them a better director (Knopf, 2006, p.16). Collaboration goes hand in hand with respect. Knopf (2006) places much importance on respecting others and their ideas. Listening to others' thoughts can create a new perspective on the piece or scene and can be seen as an opportunity to learn something new. "Listening to the ideas of others not only helps the director create an atmosphere of respect, but also displays confidence in the director's own ideas" (p. 18). The director has the ability to be open to other thoughts because they have the final decision-making power (p. 18). Touching on respect, Hauser and Reich (2008) explain how bullying by directors is a common problem and advises against shouting, using sarcasm and or intimidation (p. 42). Another unbecoming trait in any director is the sense of a huge ego.

Keeping Ego in Check

One of the elements of director conduct that needs to be addressed and unfortunately is oftentimes overlooked, is ego. While Ball puts the director as the end all be all, they also agree that egos need to be in check. Ball (1984) explains ego in an example and says it is a sure sign of an amateur director;

I want this. I want that. I see it this way. My entire concept....I need so many people on this side. I want you here ... This is an amateur at work.

He once overheard himself praised as being the director who *knows what he wants*. He uses the rehearsal as an endless opportunity to tell everyone what he wants. He puts the *I* at the beginning of all his sentences, which leads one to believe that he is living in an ego bind. A director in an ego bind should not be given the leadership of a group of creative actors. (p. 51)

Conflicts arise in theatre from time to time, sometimes between actors and directors. Ball (1984) states that a director must never win a battle with an actor (p. 48). The director always surrenders. The reason is sensible: if a director wins a battle with an actor, they lose. If the director takes on a supportive position, the next step is creative (p. 48). It is better to make an ally of the actor, rather than an enemy (p. 49). If a director has an ego problem, it will be difficult for them to navigate issues that arise. If a director cannot handle surrendering, they may need to forego their position and take on something such as stage management until they have realized that their ego, “must be subservient to the art and that he must be graceful in relation to the actor” (p. 48).

F.Hauser & R. Reich (2008) remind directors it is not about them. They explain that ego-reward is a built-in perk and there is no need to seek it out (p. 14.) Instead, directors need to ask themselves whether or not they are “serving the play by serving others, particularly the playwright, the actors, and the audience” (p. 14).

In schools, our job as directors and educators is to first and foremost serve our students and community. Most theatre educators and directors who use best practices tend to rotate between director-centered and learner-centered styles of instruction (Lazarus, 2012). Director-Centered practice is where the director, “has all the answers and tells students what to do, and often how and when” (p. 76). The director in this practice may also ask certain students for feedback, only at selected times (p. 76). Learner-Centered practice is where the director has final say of the show but they include students in the decision making processes or decisions are made collaboratively (p. 76). Some directors are unaware of how to transfer learning-centered practices to the theatre from the classroom. The last section of this literature review looks further into research on developing a more inclusive and learner-centered practice in the world of theatre and directing. It also begins to see ways in which to answer the question: *How can implementing Choice-Based Directing promote inclusivity in a middle school theatre program?*

Paradigm Shifts in Theatre Teaching & Learning

Recently attitudes and practices in the theatre have been shifting, incorporating new understandings of student teaching and learning. Theatre teachers are often tasked with teaching schedules, after-school obligations, and programs to run which can make challenging old habits and creating new ways of engaging students a daunting task (Brady, 2019). Thankfully, many theatre educators and researchers (Grote, 1997; Lazarus, 2012; Rome and Dillard, 2015; Nelson et al. 2001) have constructed guidelines for new

ways of running a theatre department and overall a change in climate, resulting in students becoming more involved in productions and their learning.

Inclusive Practices & Change in Theatre Departments

Commonly, theatre directors run their departments on the grounds of exclusion, rather than inclusion. Typically, auditions are a grueling process for the actors and ultimately a cast list with very few names on it appears, posted publicly in a hallway, resulting in much disappointment and feelings of rejection. Grote (1997) guides theatre department directors in a direction of being encouraging and welcoming. “Develop a program with easy entrance, but difficult advancement” (p. 214). In order to develop committed students, start with welcoming all at the beginning, and gradually weed out those who do not improve or do not put in the work and effort (Grote, 1997, p. 214). By being more inclusive, theatre departments will be more diverse and have more participants. This concept exclusively answers: *How can implementing Choice-Based Directing promote inclusivity in a middle school theatre program?*

Inclusivity

Inclusivity is the continual practice of including those who are commonly excluded and marginalized. In this capstone, inclusivity will also be used as a definition for including new directing practices, incorporating student ideas and choices, and implementing learner-centered practice. To build a diverse actor pool, one must include works by BIPOC and cast those students in roles that are meant for them. If directors must use colorblind casting, it is encouraged that they use a strong level of discretion when selecting material and casting plays. Essentially, if a director does not have the

appropriate bodies of color to cast a role, specific to an already limited opportunity that is presented to actors of color, select another piece (Moss, 2019).

Nelson (2011) conducted a study with an urban middle school population, in a drama class. In the study, the class created a play themselves, bringing in their shared experiences as the basis of their story. Some feedback received from students was affirming the belief that underrepresented populations need to see themselves on stage. “In interview, they talked about the fact that ordinary people, who looked like them, and their family members, came together to make change and that it made it seem more possible for them” (p. 169).

Allowing these kinds of opportunities makes theatre more accessible to a larger audience. Rhine (2018) believes theatre needs to serve a more humanistic need rather than just be a form of entertainment:

It is starting to look like theatre is a way we regulate and balance our intellectual, emotional, and social needs through various stages of life. If that is the case, and theatre is shown to have intrinsic value beyond a shrinking elite, it will be seen as important to our well-being as clean water and fresh air. (p. 75)

Directors are making theatre more accessible to more students with new approaches. Devised theatre is a modern term for engaging students in more abstract ways of creating theatre and performance pieces. Work that is adapted and developed in the moment may also be referred to as Generative (Newton, 2018). Newton talks about the director as a facilitator. Newton discusses how a director may inspire actors to create

pieces. Some examples of inspiration were poetry, current social issues, or an art piece (p. 36). Traditional play texts may not speak to everyone, and generating organic material may be the key to keeping students actively engaged. Patterson (2017) discusses ways to involve students in the planning process as well as the performance process. Some of these ideas are asking for student feedback in decisions regarding play or musical choices, or delegating student directors, choreographers, and designers (p. 110). There are many ways to honor students and put their ideas into the production.

Power in Choice

Choice is an incredible source of power for middle school students. As a middle school educator, I have seen student morale increase when choice is given. Along with being welcoming and accessible, theatre educators must also be considerate of their student body and develop more inclusive practices. Brewer (2018) interviewed Salgado, an actor, storyteller, and co-founder of *Artists Striving to End Poverty*. In the interview, Salgado states,

One thing I learned when it comes to organizing communities of people, to address institutional issues, is the importance of organizing spaces of power-organizing students who seemingly lack power, organizing faculty who have another level of power, and organizing administrators. Success is dependent on having people in every level engaging within their sphere of power. (p. 58)

Students need to feel powerful in order to act. “Power and control, as defined by meaningful decision-making power, voice, and choice, is a physical and psychological

wellness factor for children” (Prilleltensky, Nelson, & Peirson 2001, as cited in Nelson, 2011). Actors can become more confident in themselves if their choices are reflected in works. Nelson discussed in the 2011 study a situation in which student’s choices in song were incorporated into the play. “This early indication that they had real power to make decisions, and that their cultural choices would be reflected in the finished play, increased their commitment and risk-taking substantially” (p. 167). This choice was a technical element but student choice can also be used in blocking.

Lazarus cites Candace Koern (2011), a director and theatre educator. Koern uses organic blocking with secondary student actors,

Organic blocking is king in the early stages [...] just watching where the actor’s instincts take them. Beyond the technical stuff like [the dramatic actions requires that] “you have to come in from this door and cross to that window”, I am always open and watching how the actors can inspire me [...] and they do! [...] A great actor is a thinking actor [...] [and] I encourage them to have ideas (p. 72).

Patterson (2008) has also identified organic blocking or “Actor-Centered Blocking” (p. 142). Blocking is given to the actors as their responsibility. It allows them to use their intuition and internalize dramatic action. Once it has been established, the director may adjust for picturization, composition, and visibility (Patterson, 2008, p. 142). “This approach is time-consuming because blocking becomes a group process. The actors, however, will feel that they have had a major input into the production” (p. 142).

This is an important element in process valued development because the actors will feel that their ideas were valued.

Lazarus closely aligns with learner-centered practices in theatre. Focusing on the process centered rather than the product centered parts of a production is the best way to culminate everything learned in a theatrical experience. Lazarus quotes Spolin (1983) to explain how process centered practice places importance over product centered practices,

It stands to reason that if we direct all our efforts towards reaching a goal, we stand in grave danger of losing everything on which we have based our daily activities. For when a goal is superimposed on an activity instead of evolving out of it, we often feel cheated when we reach it.

When the goal appears easily and naturally and comes from growth rather than forcing, the end result, performance, or whatever, will be no different from the process that achieved the result. [...] How much more certain would knowledge be if it came from and out of the excitement of learning itself. (p. 75)

As we see creative practices among directors and students improve, we have also seen attitudes in casting choices take a more inviting and sensible approach. Typecasting and favoritism in casting has become more scrutinized. They have become toxic practices, compared to newer guidelines further discussed in the next section. They also further align with better practice to answer the question, *How can implementing Choice-Based Directing promote inclusivity in a middle school theatre program?*

Improved Casting Practices

Newer casting practices are less inherent in going for the physical “type” for a role, and are more focused on skill and dedication of the actor. Rome and Dillard (2015) give a list of casting guidelines that place more advantage on the attributes that matter, rather than how the actor looks. “Talent, work ethic, focus, and commitment win the role-as long as the student is right for it (eg. a tenor can’t sing a bass role)” (p. 40). Both Rome and Dillard (2015) and Ball (1984) talk about what to do if things are inexplicably even between two actors and how to cast the role. “If all things are absolutely even, a theatre student gets the role over someone who isn’t officially enrolled in your program, and upperclassmen trump lower classmen” (Rome & Dillard 2015, p. 40). Ball (1984) says to “Always cast the skilled actor” (p. 38). Ball goes on to explain, “Even though he doesn’t seem like the exact type, the skilled actor will always pull you through. If you hire the type, you will spend the entire rehearsal period begging and pleading and pulling teeth, and frustrating everyone else in the cast as well” (p. 38). These casting guidelines will put any theatre department in a better position to thrive and maintain a steady base of student involvement.

Conclusion

The literature review served the purpose of further developing a substantial support for Choice-Based Directing, which is a concept I developed and pioneered. A large part of my research was matching findings to the population it was created for which was secondary education, more specifically middle school. Much of what I found supported what I was already fully aware of, which is theatre is a very useful tool for the

development of adolescents in this age group. It was also useful to compare and contrast the differing directing styles and approaches that I found research on. The research supported my initial bias that certain techniques were harmful, especially the types of directors and casting practices from traditional methods.

I found I most strongly identified with the work *Signs of Change* by Lazarus (2012). This book is a significant factor in the new direction in which theatre education is shifting. Lazarus (2012) identified ways to incorporate Learner-Centered practices into the theatre classroom and into some aspects of production. This is most closely related to Choice-Based Directing. It does differ, however, due to Choice-Based being not only an approach to directing shows but also a formula for change in middle school theatre departments. I found many applicable examples of answering the question, *How can implementing Choice-Based Directing promote inclusivity in a middle school theatre program?* In the next section, the project component of this capstone is further explained. It has detailed implications for how the project will be conducted and the project audience.

CHAPTER THREE

Overview of the Project

My directing approach, Choice-Based Directing, was developed while putting on a production with middle school students. When I was given the green light to select a play, I was made aware that the program usually chose a Disney Jr. piece. I made the decision to be decidedly different and leave my mark by choosing something else (not to mention it was much less expensive, which gave me a larger budget for costumes)! Besides just the economic benefit, I chose a script that included permission to make changes and add roles in the script fees. I chose a script that was more free range, not only to accommodate many children, but to be able to mold it into something representative of my student body.

While conducting auditions, I listened to the feedback given to me from parents, siblings, high school student assistants, and the middle school students themselves. Too many students told me they had been given roles but usually with no lines and they were halfway lit up on stage. Sometimes, they were even in the dark. None of those students who offered their insight showed a lack of talent or effort. I was warned that this program had a history of favorites and program incest (Grote, 1997). Program incest is when the same actors in the casting pool keep being cast repeatedly. I knew with this script, I could give every single one of those kids an opportunity to have their voice heard on stage, and I was so relieved that I went with my instinct when it came to the selection of the show.

These kids were about to be in for a chance to grow and to do something different, and it was going to begin with me.

This capstone and the accompanying project was seeking to refine my approach and techniques into something accessible for other middle school theatre directors and educators. It documents the work that I have already executed using this directing approach. This project intends to answer the question, *How can implementing Choice-Based Directing promote inclusivity in a middle school theatre program?*

This chapter documents my work, which was done two years ago for the Delano community education program with middle school students. First, the chapter will present a description of the project I have developed. Second, it will discuss some theories and research which further shaped the building of this project. Third, it will identify the intended audience of the project and consider the method of project delivery and rationale for the particular delivery. Finally, the chapter provides an anticipated timeline for completion of the project. It also summarizes the main research and theories used to solidify Choice-Based Directing as a useful directing approach and considers a new philosophy for running middle school theatre departments.

Project Description

The objective of this project was to create a professional development program about the Choice-Based Directing process I developed and how it can help better retain theatre departments. Middle school theatre departments are a rare finding and can likely be attributed to bad casting practices as well as undesirable directing and show selections. It is specifically aimed towards middle school theatre department directors and educators.

In the United States, this is generally the population of children from ages 11-14 or so and in grades 6-8. As discussed in chapter two, traditional methods of running a theatre program, e.g. typecasting, colorblind casting, program incest, etc., are regarded as outdated and harmful for students in this age group. From my experience, much of the directing approaches discussed in chapter two are also not the best methods to keeping middle school students motivated in today's society.

I set out to create a professional development to promote Choice-Based Directing approaches in schools and communities. It carefully guides participants through Choice-Based Directing by giving a thorough background to its development and examining the definition of Choice-Based Directing. It also engages adult learners in ways to implement inclusivity by activities, handouts, and fundamental group building techniques. Inclusivity is the continual practice of including those who are commonly excluded and marginalized. In this capstone, I also use inclusivity as a definition for including middle school theatre participants in more than just acting and stage space. More examples are shown through the project along with outlining the previously mentioned harmful traditional methods and the rationale for why they need to cease being implemented in middle school theatre departments. The professional development itself is divided into two sessions. It consists of slide shows, speaker notes, activities and discussions, and handouts with tools and techniques.

The main goal of this professional development focuses on the shift of the director's role and how to apply Choice-Based ideals to different aspects and areas of production when working on plays or any type of staged work. It seeks to answer the

question, *how can implementing Choice-Based Directing promote inclusivity in a middle school theatre program?* The next section will speak on relevant theories and frameworks to support the use of Choice-Based Directing in schools and communities.

Theories and Research Paradigm

As stated in Chapter Two, much of my findings supported my prior knowledge in using best practices. As someone who has a combined 18 years of experience in acting, directing, and teaching theatre, I had already acquired a variety of skills needed to create an engaging experience in production for children. The majority of this project and capstone is being completed in the year 2020 while my *experimenting* and development of Choice-Based Directing occurred during 2018 in my employment with the community education program for Delano.

I found that my philosophy for running a more inclusive theatre department was closest to Grote (1997) and Rome and Dillard (2015). When Choice-Based Directing was conducted, it seemed that I had already followed Grote's advice to get students up on stage as quickly as possible, as students will not consider rehearsal to have started until they are physically up and active (Grote, 1997). Much of my rehearsals included time for ensemble building exercises, such as vocal warm ups and stretches. My students were active right away before going to their bags to collect their scripts.

Instilling a lifelong passion for theatre was another one of my goals in keeping the theatre department at the middle school level engaging and having continuous involvement and support. Knowing that I lacked many resources that a normal department would already have, I took this as an opportunity to drop the *elitist* notion of

theatre and really take the initiative to build something with my cast from the ground up. Rome and Dillard (2015) states that at the middle school level, theatre is for building future fans, not for creating professional thespians, and I still believe in this with utmost certainty.

By the start of my last production with Delano, I had most of my previous students audition again and even five to ten newcomers! Grote (1997) states that a theatre program should be built on the grounds of easy entry, difficult advancement. I believe this is why I had such a lively talent pool going into my next production. Part of enacting that mission was to deconstruct the audition process. I knew how trepidatious these children already were, due to the mistreatment of their last director. I remembered when I was in college that sometimes theatre games were used as part of auditions and I realized that I could use the work of Spolin (1986) to create a different environment for the casting process. I used a combination of theatre games, cold partner reads, and pantomime in my auditions. I strongly feel that because of this approach, the actors were more relaxed and forthcoming of their feelings. I also incorporated theatre games into most of my rehearsals in addition to warm ups and eventually the actors could lead these games on their own (with high school assistant supervision).

The theory that directly correlates most accurately with Choice-Based Directing was found by Lazarus (2012). Described as a Learner-Centered theatre educating and directing approach, it resembles Choice-Based Directing in the fact that it is founded much more on student input and the use of organic blocking. I would often allow my students to make choices on their character and blocking, and would invite them to reflect

on their choice by giving me a reason why or a motivation. If the choice was not appropriate, I would ask them to make another choice following a thoughtful and considerate explanation of why that particular action was not working or if we could adjust it, by offering an adjustment (using upstage hand as to not block their face, etc.). My students found this to be constructive and eventually would make the slightest corrections on their own. This is how I knew they were absorbing blocking and staging knowledge and were fully engaged simultaneously. Further into rehearsals, I asked groups of actors to come up with how to block certain sections of the play and we would all watch and vote which was best. The students felt their choices and feelings were considered, and were even comfortable enough to ask me about changing the soundtrack, which we did! The feedback I received from those in the community was overwhelmingly positive and I have never directed a middle school play using traditional methods since.

Choice of Method

In the discipline of theatre, specifically during my time in the industry, I had not seen many professional development programs or activities catered especially to theatre educators and directors. Just this year, I found that there were many different professional development programs in many areas of theatre, but not as many regarding theatre education and directing in the same experience. Creating a professional development for theatre is unique due to how few there are in the education realm. It is beneficial to adult learners because they have the basic concept of what a professional development is already.

The content of the professional development information can be presented in a number of ways. It can be in written form, online, or through in-person workshops. It can also be an appropriate setting for administrators and other staff to attend and better understand what a theatre department encompasses. Each faculty group will have different ideas and understandings of how theatre fits within the mission of the school and will perceive the benefits of Choice-Based Directing differently. Some content can be presented by speaking, some can be shown in a video or powerpoint, and some can be experienced through hands-on learning as well, such as group brainstorming and activities. A professional development, particularly for theatre, can be so versatile.

Timeline

My initial findings were stumbled upon when I began developing Choice-Based Directing in 2018. I began writing my capstone and gaining ideas for my project in the fall of 2020. I began to create my professional development in February of 2021, when I began my final advanced practicum at Hamline University. While my project is complete as of March of 2021, I am uncertain if education buildings and settings will be back to a more normal state in the following school year. I am hopeful that by the school year of 2021-2022, I will be able to present my powerpoint to a few school districts. Only time will tell. I have also offered it as an online experience with a link on my self-created website, via Google Docs and Google Slides. It includes printable handouts and a link to activities used in the presentation.

CHAPTER FOUR

Introduction

As I come to the final section of my capstone, I am enthralled with the amount of answers I found for my research question: *how can implementing Choice-Based Directing promote inclusivity in middle school theatre programs?* Researching and developing Choice-Based Directing led to the discovery of many ideas and processes into a coherent system of practices. My goal was to reason how inclusivity and choice could be a large part in building and retaining theatre programs that allow choice and more accessibility for more students, welcome all levels of talent, and further develop social-emotional learning needing to be taught through theatre. First, this chapter will provide an explanation of my major learnings from the topic and creating the project. Second, it will highlight pieces of the literature review that were most prominent to my research and it will explain how it is integrated into the development of Choice-Based Directing. Third, it will identify how the original objectives for the project have grown, including implications and objective results of the project, as well as any limitations. Finally, it will present any inspiration for expansion and future projects as well as lay out how the resource will become accessible and the contributions to youth theatre education that it will offer.

Major Learnings

I realized that my techniques and group work fundamentals I developed for middle school students had artistic merit, especially as I compared it with some of the pioneers of change in theatre education (Lazarus, Spolin, Way, etc.). Creating a

systematic way of approaching Choice-Based Directing could provide many benefits to my field. I learned that my directing style had potential and was worthy of being further cultivated and defined.

If I can make this personal, my most sincere learning was that I am capable of research at this level. I have not always been encouraged in my higher education journey, because I have a more unique way of processing and thinking about the world that many on my journey have not understood. I was able to manage a complex academic practical and create a research based project and produce work that was acceptable in the field. My dedication has been a large result of some unfortunate higher education experiences, but from those, I have been given valuable insight of the importance of Choice-Based Directing and valuing each student's contributions, choices and ideas.

I learned how to translate my ideas into a presentation for adult learning. This provided me with a way to transfer my ideas to an accessible method of sharing my ideas for fundamental change in the middle school directing process. When I began to create my professional development on Choice-Based Directing, I paused to reflect on my own times attending various professional development sessions that did not either pertain to me or were extremely un-engaging. Due to those experiences, I put a lot of thought into creating my presentation. I wanted to be mindful of people's time as well as providing content that was valuable to those in my field.

Most Important Research

I feel as though, because I have been part of the theatre industry for almost 20 years at this point and have been working with children in theatre for half of that time, I knew much of my research already, but used it as support for my literature review. The most important pieces of my research I believe, were the essays about the effects of the traditional methods of running theatre departments, specifically casting practices.

Since I was in theatre at the time that these processes of running a department and directing shows were normal, I based much of Choice-Based Directing on how I felt in those moments. I had known that these were harmful, but not to the extent that I later found research to accompany my suspicions. I found criticisms of typecasting by Herrera, B. (2015) and Wojcik, P. R. (2003) were profound and ultimately defining works for my capstone.

Another important author from my research was Joan Lazarus. Lazarus herself is a theatre educator and her book *Signs of Change* was published in 2012. Her work shared many ideals with Choice-Based Directing. Her work is geared toward all secondary students, so her findings are a bit more broad while mine is specific to middle school students. Knowing that someone out there thought so similarly to me was very exciting and a major contribution to my research.

Implications

This particular professional development is important for theatre educators, directors, and administrators because it is helping them to better equip their theatre departments to keep running and continue with participation from the student body. Choice-Based Directing also allows for students to be up to the rigor of whichever high

school theatre program the middle school feeds into. Teachers are able to offer more opportunities to practice inclusivity and extend access to theatre for more students. I created this resource specifically for middle school because this age group tends to have the least amount of opportunities and resources created for them.

Administrators also need to see the benefits of Choice-Based Directing because it may help them to be aware of who they hire to direct shows or come in to provide theatre workshops. It offers them a set of values to base their decisions in the hiring process. Administrators should be on the same page as their theatre department director and the interview process should take space to have applicants reflect on their process and practices before offering a position to them. This will also help to eliminate those who are not in support of inclusivity and new casting practices.

This resource is most important to middle school students because it is entirely rooted in their own experiences. It is an incredible approach to instilling a lifelong passion for theatre and the arts. They have a place that is safe to make creative choices and allows for autonomy while at the same time enabling them to be part of an ensemble.

Limitations

At the present moment, I can think of a few circumstances in which I have some limitations. One of these limitations is that I am currently not with a school district and so I do not have my own classroom or faculty to present my professional development.

The largest limitation would be the state of the world now. We are living through a pandemic caused by the Coronavirus (or COVID-19). Many people are working from home and students are learning through distance learning. For months, restaurants, beauty

salons, movie theaters, and bars were closed down. Household supplies began to be essentially rationed, with limits on how much of certain items one household could purchase. Although in 2021, schools and businesses are slowly reopening (and under heavy restrictions) there are still many activities that cannot resume, including large gatherings of educators for an in-person presentation. Theatres are also not running at full capacity. As of now in Minnesota the Center for Disease Prevention (CDC) only allows for entertainment venues to run at 50% capacity. Fortunately, there are now three different vaccines out. However, only certain individuals are eligible to receive them at this time since there are still not enough vaccines for the general population. It may still be a while before everyone is vaccinated and schools begin to allow external affiliations into their buildings.

Future Projects

Once the pandemic is under control and schools open back up to full capacity, a goal of mine is to travel with my professional development. Since retaining and changing practices in middle school theatre departments is a passion of mine, I would jump at the opportunity to take my professional development to schools with middle school theatre departments (or even those wishing to build one) all over the United States. Perhaps it would garner the attention of more theatre or theatre educational publications and it could be made even more accessible to theatre directors and educators. A goal of mine would be for my findings and my project to be published to theatre publications such as *Youth Theatre Journal* or *Communication and Theater Association of Minnesota*. Besides

building my own middle school theatre department, these are some of my future goals and projects.

Accessibility of the Shared Resource

As stated previously, within my limitations, this will have to wait for opportunities to come back. I am very hopeful that by fall of 2021, I will be able to travel to different school districts to further assist middle school theatre departments, theatre educators, and directors by presenting my professional development. As part of Hamline University's program, it will also be submitted to the Digital Commons and will be accessible from the library via online catalogue. I also have a copy of my presentation for download on my personal teacher website.

Contribution to the Field

Choice Based-Directing is a student-centered theatre production process. Choice-Based Directing empowers students to be equal partners in the process of creating dramatic work. An approach created specifically for middle school students, since resources are not often created for them, this approach is a pivotal resource for gaining engagement from even the most apprehensive students. Choice-Based Directing shifts the traditional role of the director from determining all creative choices for a show to becoming a facilitator of conversations and decisions. Choice-Based Directing focuses on the importance of process in creating a show rather than simply the product.

Choice-Based Directing contributes to the field a new dynamic for student voice and choice in theatre arts. It allows directors to better engage students in sharing the process of choice and decision making that is essential to the creation of new artists and

artistic works. Presenting this directing process to schools all over the country could in turn wave in a new generation of theatre enthusiasts. As theatre artists, we are sometimes told that we are part of a dying industry. With new avenues for students and directors alike to explore, I am determined to play my role in keeping this art form alive and thriving, and this is my way of giving back to a community which gave me my expression, my courage, my growth, my light, my passion, and my humanity.

Conclusion

In Chapter One, I present my origins of the capstone and project by personal narrative and how my interest in my topic came to be. In Chapter Two, I discuss my research, composed of a literature review, and indicate my findings in support of my topic. In Chapter Three, I outline my shared resource project. I explain how I have taken my research collective and made it accessible to others. Finally, in Chapter Four I summarize my final thoughts and major learnings from the capstone process. I am hopeful that Choice-Based Directing can be accessed by many schools. I am optimistic that, if school districts adopt this approach to their theatre departments, it will change views of the arts, gain more support for theatre, and lead to more middle school theatre departments being built and guide students to understand that they are limitless.

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