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LEARNING DIFFERENCE/DISABILITIES AND THEATRE

By

Anna Miller-Sherman

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

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

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Primary Advisor: Vivian Johnson

Content Reviewer: Dan Spriggs

Peer Reviewer: Molly Zupon

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## DEDICATION

To my family and friends for your love and support, especially to my Mother who was always my biggest supporter. A big thank you to my Capstone Committee members, and Professor Vivian for being an amazing mentor and guild. Thank you to the participants of the capstone project, and to all the learners out there who are different.

‘All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.  
They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts.’

-William Shakespeare

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Pre-Show to the Thesis: The What and Why

#### Introduction to the Study

My interest in the capstone question: How do students with learning differences and disabilities enrolled in a theater class describe their affective and cognitive learning during the class? is directly connected to my own experience as a learner. Growing up it was clear to me that I was different from my peers in terms of learning. I was not able to learn the same way they did. For a while this difference made me feel stupid. In fact in second grade, in order to not look stupid or be called dumb for having something spelled wrong, my reaction was to cheat on a spelling test because it was better than being called dumb. Working harder, learning spelling words the same way everyone did, doing more practice did not help me get it, so I cheated. My experience taught me that everyone else learned differently than me.

Other students who learn differently are also being taught in mainstream classrooms. Heasley (2016) writes that

As of 2013, more than 6 in 10 school-age students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act spent at least 80 percent of their day in regular classrooms. By contrast, roughly half of students with disabilities met that threshold in 2004. (§ 2)

Heasley (2016) indicates in his Report: Inclusion On Rise In Nation's Schools, goes on to report that there has been a major increase in the number of mainstream learners. This aligns with my experience as a teacher. It is clear to me that in every classroom there is a student, most likely more than one student, who has a learning disability or multiple disabilities. They could be on the autism spectrum, have a specific learning disability or even a cognitive delay. These students are often the ones who are overlooked or underserved by not receiving adequate accommodations that makes school better for them. It is my own experience and the experiences of students' like me that have resulted in exploring the research question that will help guide this capstone paper - How do students with learning differences and disabilities enrolled in a theater class describe their affective and cognitive learning during the class? My capstone question focused on theater class because of my professional role as a theater teacher. Theater was also an environment where I felt successful as a learner.

Vikas Shah Mbet (2016) writes how theatre is an art form that has been in existence for thousands of years. The author goes on to say that theatre has been used to tell stories or myths, entertain, teach lessons, communicate issues in society and more. Mbet quotes the words of Maya Angelou, who described how

We write for the same reason that we walk, talk, climb mountains or swim the oceans- because we can . . . We have some impulse within us that makes us want to explain ourselves to other human beings . . . That's why we paint, that's why we dare to love someone - because we have the impulse to explain who we are. Not just how tall we are, or thin . . . but who we are internally . . . perhaps even

spiritually. There's something, which impels us to show our inner-souls. The more courageous we are, the more we succeed in explaining what we know. (2016, ¶ 3)

In my experience theatre is words in motion, the mirror to society, and theatre is a way to help express one's own true self. Theatre is our soul and shows us our inner selves. As a theatre teacher, my objective is to have theatre be a learning environment that can be used to teach reading comprehension, creative play, self esteem, social skills, collaboration, self expression, and more. Supporting my thinking is Greene (1995) who reflects by saying, "Art is life; it offers hope; it offers the prospect of discovery; it offers light" (p. 380). The following quote from McMaslin (as cited in Poulsen, 1998) describes how creative drama is an "improvisational, non-exhibitional, process-centered form of drama in which participants are guided by a leader to imagine, enact, and reflect upon human experiences" (p. 17). Through the experience of theatre and creative drama, students are placed in an environment that allows them to learn about their whole selves, even those with learning disabilities, as was the case for me.

With public service work of organizations such as the International Dyslexia Association and The Dyslexia Foundation, learning disabilities and differences are becoming more recognizable and diagnosed. The most recent data available states that,

In 2015–16, the number of students ages 3–21 receiving special education services was 6.7 million, or 13 percent of all public school students. Among students receiving special education services, 34 percent had specific learning

disabilities. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018, Statistics of students in special ed, ¶ 1)

Given that there are a large number of special education students, it is our job as educators to make sure all students get the education they need and deserve. This is not just a moral obligation but a legal one according to the 14th Amendment. The “14 Amendment prohibits any state from denying to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws. The equal protection clause clearly requires that all American citizens must be treated equally by the law” (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 1991, p. 1). The 14th Amendment supports the idea that students with disabilities are entitled to differentiation in learning and new ways or opportunities to show knowledge. It also supports the idea of free and appropriate education for students. These students are not unintelligent, they just need the chance to show what they know, in a way that is right and appropriate for them. They need acknowledgement that they learn differently.

As a society, we have labeled these differences learning “disabilities,” making it sound like it's a bad thing, when in reality they are merely differences in processing, organizing, and sharing information. As stated on the Learning Disabilities Association of New York (2008) website,

Many people prefer to use the terminology "learning differences" or "learning challenges" instead of "learning disabilities". Some are concerned that the term "learning disability" focuses on an individual's cognitive weaknesses and isolates them from other learners while the term "learning differences" highlights the fact that they simply learn differently than others do. (¶ 1)

Throughout this paper I will use both words - learning “difference” and “disability” - with the hope that one day our language will change to frame it as a difference rather than being less than. This chapter will introduce the capstone question and why it is important, the background of the researcher and the start of the story of why this research was sparked, as well as what influenced the author in this research paper and thesis. Lastly, the capstone overview will be presented.

### **Research Question and Purpose**

The aim and purpose of this thesis is to explore how one to three students who are on the autism spectrum or have learning disabilities describe their experience of participating in a theater class. The goal is to understand from their perspective how they experience social learning in a theater class. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica (2019) define social learning as follows.

Social learning, in psychological theory, learning behaviour that is controlled by environmental influences rather than by innate or internal forces. The leading exponent of the concept of social learning, often called modeling, is the American psychologist Albert Bandura, who has undertaken innumerable studies showing that when children watch others they learn many forms of behaviour, such as sharing, aggression, cooperation, social interaction, and delay of gratification.

(Social learning, ¶ 1)

In this capstone the assumption is that social learning to students with a learning difference allows them to see what others are doing and model that behavior. For

example, when one is role playing, such as in a theatre class, all learners can practice that behavior in a safe space.

In my experience as a theater participant and as a theatre teacher, it is a subject that allows situational learning and practice of those social situations in a safe space for those students who struggle with social skills and everyday learning. I will interview one to three students who have participated in a theater class, who are on the spectrum or have learning disabilities, and are willing to share their stories and feelings about their theatre experience. Using a narrative qualitative research approach to understand the question: How do students with learning differences and disabilities enrolled in a theater class describe their affective and cognitive learning during the class? To understand my interest in this research question it is important to revisit my own experiences as a learner. My experience illustrates what can happen when a person with a learning difference is given the opportunity to demonstrate what they know in a way that is appropriate for them.

### **Background of the Researcher**

I believe just taking on and writing this thesis paper is a testament to my own perseverance, ability to adapt, and the fact that over the years I have found ways to support my learning. One of those amazing supports was and is my Mother. As a first grader in [1992] it was my Mother who noticed that my learning was different. She was the one who could see it in my writing, when I would forget to do chores. My mother also found ways to support me such as when she realized that completing chores was not an issue if I have a short list and could cross chores that were completed. By third grade my

mother had me assessed privately because the school refused, thinking an assessment was not necessary. The fact that my school would not assess me is one of the reasons now as a teacher I am such an advocate for students that are struggling. My professional goal is to make sure that someone notices the struggle. So that students don't get to their 12th grade year and are not able to read or write because of a learning difference.

After the private assessment I was diagnosed with two learning disabilities Dyslexia and Dysgraphia. For those unfamiliar with either of those learning disabilities, Dyslexia is:

a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge. (International Dyslexia Association, 2018, Definition of dyslexia, ¶ 1)

Dysgraphia is:

the condition of impaired letter writing by hand, that is, disabled handwriting. Impaired handwriting can interfere with learning to spell words in writing and speed of writing text. Children with dysgraphia may have only impaired handwriting, only impaired spelling (without reading problems), or both impaired

handwriting and impaired spelling. (International Dyslexia Association, 2018,

Definition of dysgraphia, Understanding dysgraphia, What is dysgraphia, ¶ 1)

Both of these learning disabilities/differences are based in writing and processing. Once my mother and I understood the nature of dyslexia and dysgraphia it was easier to get the accommodations needed for me to be successful. Once these accommodations were in place my school experience started to change. But even with accommodations and years of experience in college, teaching and graduate school, writing a Graduate Thesis paper has been a fear. But quelling my fear, this thesis has the potential to demonstrate to others with learning differences that they too can complete a master's degree and more.

The power of fear and anxiety is clear to me as it has been part of my learning at school since a young child. For example, cold readings (out loud) in class, spelling, and more have been and still as an adult makes me nervous. But as a student I always found solace in the performing arts, and theatre just tended to be a natural fit for me. Theatre actually helped me gain skills in reading, memorizing, and socializing. I was not the odd one out in a theatre class or group. No one judged me on my handwriting or the fact that I struggled to read out loud. Participating in a theater allowed me to practice reading, learn to memorize and gain confidence in a safe space.

My interest in doing this research is to see if my own experience is similar to that of students with learning differences/disabilities in theatre classes. At the end of this thesis there will have been interviews of one to three students who will be able to tell the truth of their experiences. This is an opportunity to reflect on the similarity or not of our experiences, with the goal to ensure that educators are facilitating a safe space for



students with learning differences, and giving them opportunities to practice social interactions with character work, readings, and improvisation. Also to insure that we as educators are finding new ways to teach students with learning differences and that they find opportunities in theatre class for developing reading comprehension, creative play, self esteem, social skills, collaboration, and self expression as well as to share with peers how to utilize different methods/ways of letting students “show what they know,” instead of relying solely on tests.

The reasons why this research is potentially significant beyond my local context, important to my students, their families, my colleagues, and policy makers is that it can shine light on the importance of performing arts in the schools as one way of leveling the playing field for students with disabilities. Theatre class or theatre practices could be used as a way to adapt a “normal” classroom. Special Education services and the individualized educational plan (IEP) are tools already attempting to level the playing field, but my goal is to use the experiences of my students to demonstrate to colleagues and parents how their students learn using different and creative methods.

Policy makers need to understand that even though it is a small number in comparison, the 6.7 million students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018) who receive special education services are important and have a civil right to learn. The IEP is a federal document that must be followed by law and gives students rights. Those who make and implement policies that impact the education of our children need to understand that tests and writing essays are not always the best way to assess knowledge for every or all students. Permission needs to be given to teachers and students to explore

other ways of showing skills rather than a standardized test. Students with learning disabilities/ differences learn differently, and the arts, theatre specifically, might be one of the keys to help them in their learning. A long-term goal of writing this thesis is to use it for advocating for transformational change.

### **Capstone Overview**

Chapter One introduced the research question: How do students with learning differences and disabilities enrolled in a theater class describe their affective and cognitive learning during the class? It gave background information and the story of the researcher, the type of quantitative research that I will be using, and the reasons why this research is important to students, colleagues, parents and policy makers. In Chapter Two I will be doing a literature review of topics important to my research. Specifically, I will be looking into research and reviewing information that has to do with learning safe space, affective and cognitive learnings, social skills in theatre, students with learning differences/ disabilities and theatre education. Chapter Three will explain the research design of quantitative research design. Chapter Four includes the stories and information concerning the students I have interviewed over the Spring 2019 semester. Chapter Five is the Capstone reflection of the findings and possible learning applications that could help transform ways of teaching and learning.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Rehearsal: Review of the Literature**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of Chapter Two is to present important literature around my research question: How do students with learning differences and disabilities enrolled in a theater class describe their affective and cognitive learning during the class? In order to help understand this question one must first analyze the work that has been done in the educational fields, research and associations. This literature review will explore four main themes: Learning Safe Space, Affective/Cognitive learnings and social skills, Learning Disabilities/ Difference, and Theatre Education/ Environment.

The chapter begins with exploring the idea of what a learning safe space is, what it should be, and why it is important. The exploration of student safe space and students with learning differences in theatre might shed a light on how these students function in the classroom and how it may or may not help them thrive. The next section of this chapter examines two of the three domains of learning, affective and cognitive, by reflecting on their importance in this thesis. By looking at the domains of learning we

better understand what student needs are for learning and how it affects them. Next is a description of different types of learning disabilities/differences to provide an understanding of how these students learn and the work being done for these students. It is important to understand the learning characteristics and conditions for effective learning to view their responses to the interview. To assess if the capstone thesis can inform the need for additional research and how to better serve our students with learning differences. A summary of key ideas identified in this review of the research literature regarding how and why theatre education is important, not only for mainstream students, but most importantly, students with learning differences/disabilities. There is very little research in this field, therefore a need for the research.

### **Theatre Education**

In this section provided an overview of theatre education. The use of theatre as a whole, using theatre as an instructional strategy for students with learning disabilities, social aspects taught, social skills in theatre, communication skills learned through theatre, and empathy. Theatre is a different way of teaching students the skills that they need to survive in the real world. Skills that could possibly be learned in a theatre class are; oral communication skills, creative problem solving abilities, motivation and commitment, cooperation skills, initiative, promptness, respect for deadlines, flexibility, work under pressure, self discipline, concentration, dedication, responsibility, leadership skills, and self-confidence.

Theatre education utilizes several different intelligences. Howard Gardner developed a theory known as the multiple intelligences, suggesting that each person is

equipped with different levels of eight intelligences (Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences New Horizons*, 2006). His original set of intelligences from the early 1980s, include musical intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, logical- mathematical intelligence, linguistic intelligence, spatial intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, intrapersonal intelligence. Naturalist intelligence was added later to the group (Gardner, *Multiple Intelligences New Horizons*, 2006). Theatre education taps into two of the three domains of learning; Affective “emotions” and Cognitive “thinking.” Poulsen (1998) provides one explanation for how theatre education influences the affective and cognitive domains. As cited in Poulsen;

Researchers suggest that drama can promote many goals of education and that drama's effectiveness in teaching and learning is due to a number of factors including active learning, higher order thinking, imagination, cooperation, and social awareness. (Demo, 1984b; MacGregor, Tate, & Robinson, 1977; Booth & Haine, 1983). (p. 20)

According to Hannah Fox (2007), “telling personal stories becomes a way to explore issues of identity within the self, the community, and the culture” (p. 99). She goes on to say that when sharing personal stories

We identify with different aspects of each other's experiences. An enacted personal narrative is a house of mirrors. The process of sharing life stories reflected in multiple directions: narrator to self, narrator to listener, narrator to society, listener to society, and personal story to historical story. (p. 99)

Learning from each other's stories helps students process, grow, engage and start to tap into the higher level of thinking. Chekhov (1953) states “. . . the realm of art is primarily the realm of feelings” (p. 59).

Poulsen (1998) makes the point, “Emotion is the language of theatre. The form that theatre presents uses words and speaks to the cognitive domain, but it's power lies in the emotional domain” (p. 53). Catterall, Chapleau, and Iwanaga (1999) report that according to National Educational Longitudinal Study, which followed over 25,000 participants, “students who continually participated in theater related activities such as after school drama programs, plays, and acting courses, displayed increases in reading proficiency, improved self-concept, higher levels of academic motivation, and most notably, elevated levels of empathy” (p. 2). Another benefit of participation in drama is described by Vitz (as cited in Poulsen, 1998) who, “suggests that drama can help children make an important connection between the theoretical and practical aspects of learning by facilitating meaningful learning in which the student's involvement increases enjoyment and thereby learning” (p. 1). In addition to increased motivation (Catterall et al., 1999) and meaningful learning described by Vitz (as cited in Poulsen, 1998), McCasline (as cited in Poulsen, 1998) also links participation in drama with development of social skills.

McCasline (as cited in Poulsen, 1998) notes how theatre is one way social skills are learned through creative drama. According to McCasline (as cited in Poulsen, 1998) creative drama is “improvisational, non-exhibitional, process-centered form of drama in which participants are guided by a leader to imagine, enact, and reflect upon human

experiences” (p. 17). Using McCaslin's (as cited in Poulsen, 1998) reasoning it supports the idea that social skills that are practiced and taught are good for those students with learning disabilities, offering a safe space to practice to better themselves before they enter a work environment. Building on McCaslin’s reasoning (as cited in Poulsen, 1998) is Booth (as cited in Poulsen, 1998) who also describes the value of play in the following quote;

Play, which allows children to grow and learn spontaneously, includes dramatic play which is an excellent vehicle through which children can express their thought, develop their imaginations, explore language, and order and make sense of diffuse experiences through their own observations and impressions. (p. 15)

Another advocate for the general value in exposing students to the arts is Eisner (as cited in Castleberry, 2002) who states, ". . . the arts can help students find their individual capacity to feel and imagine" (p. 3). Castelberry (2002) also describes how Eisner (as cited in Castleberry, 2002) maintains the thought that the “arts enhance human development by allowing us to express our personal discoveries about our world and our life”(p. 3). Winston (as cited in Castleberry, 2002) also provides yet another perspective on the value of the arts to learners in the area of moral education.

Winston (as cited in Castleberry, 2002) suggests that there is a widespread assumption that there is a connection between drama and moral education. That the keys to using drama in character education lie in drama's power as enacted narrative, as a communal art form, as well as in role-playing and dialogue. Winston also believes that much power exists in

drama's ability to help us understand our emotions and our reasoning abilities through moral engagement in drama. (p. 3)

The power of theatre is its ability to create community by using role playing and allowing a conversation to be had. The power of theatre is also that we can use theatre to help students with their emotions and reasoning abilities in stressful situations or even everyday social ones. In my research results I anticipate the participants will describe how theater has made a difference and allowed students to find themselves. In order for this work to happen and the community to be created, having an appropriate learning environment that students feel safe in is very important. The next section will talk about learning environments and safe spaces.

### **Learning Environment**

When looking at the thesis question: How do students with learning differences and disabilities enrolled in a theater class describe their affective and cognitive learnings during the class? it is important to look at the learning environment that is created for these students. Baker (as cited in Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015) explains the importance of creating a safe space in the classroom by stating “in an environment that promotes conversational learning, people can transform their collective experiences and differences into new knowledge through the sense they make together” (p. 720). In addition to conversational learning Clapper (2010) states that

. . . learning involves ongoing reflection by the learner as they work to add to or modify the existing frames of reference that they came into the learning environment with. For children, this involves being free to take such risks



without being mocked in the classroom, or even later, outside the classroom. (p.

2)

Being able to take the risks described by Clapper (2010) are important for all students but critical for those who have learning differences because there is already a stigma added to students with differences.

In my experience as a learner and a teacher our society places a negative stigma onto those students who are different from normal. Being able to be in a space free to take a risk and not be mocked or bullied is a big deal for students that have a difference. Given the importance of conversation learning and learners being free to take risks for learning it is clear that creating a safe space is one of the first things that teachers should establish in a classroom. It should be a priority to make sure our students feel safe in the environment because MacGregor and Semler describe (as cited in Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015) how in a safe space there are more possibilities learning can happen. The origin of safe space and the various terms used to explain will be explained next.

The safe space movement was started as a Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) initiative, but can benefit all students. The history of “safe space” largely got its start as educators in the 1980’s noticed students in the LGBTQ community were being bullied verbally and physically, so they turned themselves into advocates for those students. Paraphrased from Sadowski (2017), over time the phrase “safe space” evolved to “safe learning environment” (p. 2).

Today what had been called a safe space is called by different names. Some teachers now called that safe physical space the “learning environment.” Ames (as cited

in Sadowski, 2017) describes the need for a safe space and to consider the “classroom environment” (p. 721) as one. Xu and Yi (as cited in Sadowski, 2017) add a dimension to the definition of safe space by noting how it must be a “psychological safety” (p. 721) space. Debebe (as cited in Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015) acknowledges that “There is no common definition of what comprises a safe classroom space in the education literature, although the notion would appear to underlie related concepts such as ‘safe environment’” (p. 721). One thing is clear, no matter what a safe space is referred to, all students thrive and learn better if the learning environment is safe. For the rest of this capstone, I will use the phrase “safe space” to mean a physical space where learners feel safe to learn.

In the following quote MacGregor and Semler (as cited in Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015) describe how experiential learning, a strategy that can be used in a safe space to learn can result in students who are more willing to participate in activities;

In classroom settings, experiential learning often takes the form of live cases, games, role-plays, simulations, or case studies. Proponents of experiential learning claim that it is second only to direct experience, providing students with opportunities to develop the critical thinking, analytical skills, judgment, insight, and sensitivity necessary to confront the great variety of situations with which they will be faced as managers. (p. 728)

Experiential learning can according to Winnicott (as cited in Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2015), can create a situation “where students can move—in relative safety—from not knowing to knowing, and “play at” managing before moving on to managing in real situations” (p.

722). Holley and Steiner (2005) say that in order to grow students must confront issues and situations that make them uncomfortable which the use of experiential learning can facilitate with learners still feeling safe.

Holley and Steiner (2005) recommend students confront situations that make them uncomfortable because when they do this it allows them to struggle and work on who they are and what they might believe in. In a sense, the impact is that they are working on becoming a well-rounded human. Students confront these uncomfortable situations when they have access to a safe space where the risk will not have permanent damage if the situation does not go well. In my experience students with an individual educational plan (IEP) are often faced with confronting uncomfortable social settings in school and challenging academic tasks.

To support all students but especially this with an IEP it is essential that teachers are mindful of Holley and Steiner (2005) advice regarding learning environments that increase the learner's likelihood of risking self-disclosure. These authors note that, if students are to risk self-disclosure, the rewards (e.g., personal growth and becoming a better . . . must outweigh the penalties (e.g., possible embarrassment or ridicule or fear . . . .Creating a safe classroom space can reduce the negative outcomes experienced by students willing to risk disclosure. (p. 4)

Given the importance of a safe learning environment as I go into every school year and each semester, this is something that I think about: How do I create a safe space for every student? In addition to the importance of creating a safe space in learning it is important to consider other aspects of the learning environment. There are three domains of

learning described by Wilson (2018), affective, cognitive, and psychomotor. This capstone focused on two of the three, affective and cognitive. Wilson (2018) describes how the affective domain deals with emotions and that the cognitive domain addresses thinking. The affective domain is described next.

### **Affective Domain**

Krathwhol, Bloom, and Masia (1964) describe the affective domain in the following quote;

[the affective domain] describes learning objectives that emphasize a feeling tone, an emotion, or a degree of acceptance or rejection. Affective objectives vary from simple attention to selected phenomena to complex but internally consistent qualities of character and conscience. . . a large number of such objectives in the literature expressed an interest, attitudes, appreciations, values, and emotion sets or biases. (p. 166)

Another aspect of the affective domain is highlighted by Wilson (2018) who describes how the domain of affective thinking is concerned with feelings or emotions. According to Wilson (2018), there are five components to this domain: Receiving, Responding, Valuing, Organizing, and Characterization. The domains that will be focused on in this capstone are:

- **Receiving:** This refers to the learner's sensitivity to the existence of stimuli awareness, willingness to receive, or selected attention.
- **Responding:** This refers to the learners' active attention to stimuli and his/her motivation to learn – acquiescence, willing responses, or feelings of satisfaction.

- **Valuing:** This refers to the learner's beliefs and attitudes of worth – acceptance, preference, or commitment. An acceptance, preference, or commitment to a value.

The three domains receiving, responding, valuing are the domains that I am most interested in exploring with the research. The base of social skills are related to receiving, responding and valuing.

Mathur and Rutherford (1996) define social skills as socially acceptable patterns of behavior that allow students to gain social reinforcement and acceptance and avoid aversive social situations. According to the authors "A socially skilled person is capable of managing his or her social environment by understanding and responding to social situations effectively" (p. 21). They also believe that the purpose of training in social skills should not be restricted to teaching a specific social skill in one context but should be to promote overall social functioning that includes a wide repertoire of social skills that produce socially acceptable responses in various social situations. Students that have developed social skills have an easier time navigating our society and school system.

However, according to Johns, Crowley, and Guetzloe (2005) "We can no longer assume that all children come to school knowing how to behave and how to respond appropriately in varying social situations" (p. 3). In this capstone, behaving and responding appropriately in different social situations is the essence of social skills. This social skill also differs in each culture and race. In addition to not assuming all students arrive at school with well developed social skills, Deshler, Ellis, and Lenz (as cited in Johns et al., 2005 ) describe what the lack of them can mean for the classroom environment. Deshler et al. (as cited in Johns et al., 2005) also describe how "Social

skills knowledge is just as important as content knowledge" (p. 371). All of these authors place great importance on social skills knowledge because poor social skills in school can result in (1) limited opportunities to learn; (2) negative academic and social self-concept; and (3) social isolation (Johns, et al., 2005). Another important social skill is self-efficacy.

Bandura (as cited in Carey & Forsyth, 2018) define self-efficacy in the following quote as an;

individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). Self-efficacy reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behavior, and social environment. These cognitive self-evaluations influence all manner of human experience, including the goals for which people strive, the amount of energy expended toward goal achievement, and likelihood of attaining particular levels of behavioral performance . . . (Teaching Tip Self-Efficacy, Important Topic, ¶ 1)

Self-efficacy is important to teach because it ties into the learning of social skills and confidence in oneself. Self-efficacy is also a start in becoming self aware of one's actions and reactions. That a student can have some control over their behavior, motivation and to some extent social skills. But it needs to be taught, not all students have this natural ability of self-efficacy. Students should be taught cognitive thinking alongside social skills and self-efficacy. Next is the cognitive domain.

### **Cognitive Domain**

Cognitive thinking and the theory behind it started with the work of Benjamin Bloom. It is known as Bloom's Taxonomy. According to Wilson (2018) the taxonomy was developed by Bloom and others in 1956 as an attempt "... to define the functions of thought, coming to know, or cognition. This taxonomy is almost 60 years old" (p. 2). The taxonomy has 6 levels: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Wilson (2018) notes that it was created in the 1950's so it has been adapted. The original tax was revised in 2015 - 2018. Table 1 is a summary of the original and adapted taxonomy.

Table 1. Original and Revised Bloom's Taxonomy

Bloom's Taxonomy 1956	Anderson and Krathwohl's Taxonomy 2001
1. Knowledge: Remembering or retrieving previously learned material.	Remembering: Recognizing or recalling knowledge from memory. Remembering is when memory is used to produce or retrieve definitions, facts, or lists, or to recite previously learned information.
2. Comprehension: The ability to grasp or construct meaning from material.	2. Understanding: Constructing meaning from different types of functions be they written or graphic messages or activities like interpreting, exemplifying, classifying, summarizing, inferring, comparing, or explaining.
3. Application: The ability to use learned material, or to implement material in new and concrete situations.	3. Applying: Carrying out or using a procedure through executing, or implementing. Applying relates to or refers to situations where learned material is used through products like models, presentations, interviews or simulations.
4. Analysis: The ability to break down or distinguish the parts of material into its components so that its organizational structure may be better understood.	4. Analyzing: Breaking materials or concepts into parts, determining how the parts relate to one another or how they interrelate, or how the parts relate to an overall structure or purpose. Mental actions included in this function are differentiating, organizing, and attributing, as well as being able to distinguish between the components or parts. When one is analyzing, he/she can illustrate this mental function by creating spreadsheets, surveys, charts, or diagrams, or graphic representations.
5. Synthesis: The ability to put parts together to form a coherent or unique new whole.	5. Evaluating: Making judgments based on criteria and standards through checking and critiquing. Critiques, recommendations, and reports are some of the products that can be created to demonstrate the processes of evaluation. In the newer taxonomy, evaluating comes before creating as it is often a necessary part of the precursory behavior before one creates something.
6. Evaluation: The ability to judge, check, and even critique the value of material for a given purpose.	6. Creating: Putting elements together to form a coherent or functional whole; re-organizing elements into a new pattern or structure through generating, planning, or producing. Creating requires users to put parts together in a new way, or synthesize parts into something new and different creating a new form or product. This process is the most difficult mental function in the new taxonomy.

Note: Table 1 was adapted by the researcher but originally created by Leslie Owen

Wilson, Three Domains of Learning – Cognitive, Affective, Psychomotor. The Second Principle, p. .4.



According to Wilson (2018) one of Bloom's taxonomy that can help focus the development of social skills is "application: The ability to use learned material, or to implement material in new and concrete situations" (p. 4). For learners, Wilson (2018) emphasizes how practicing social skills and applying them in situations that they will encounter in the real world helps the students better understand the skill. The author highlights how having a safe space and learning environment can help students apply Bloom's Taxonomy and that if the learning space is not safe it can be hard for students to learn or there will be reduced learning. The student is not as willing to try or take risks if the learning environment is not a safe space. Learning about different types of learning disabilities and differences is next.

### **Definitions of Learning Disabilities/Difference and Understanding Their Role in this Thesis**

In this section there will be a deep look at what learning disabilities/differences are and the wide arrangement of them. To understand the needs of these students, one must understand how they learn. To look at the official definitions of each learning disability is a good start to understand the condition of the students that one may be teaching. Though it is not the whole child as a teacher one will notice that each child is different and that their learning difference does not define them. Each student's Individual Education Plan (IEP) is what helps that student even the odds of learning successfully. Their learning difference makes school challenging in some way or another, so by understanding each of those differences, one starts to get an understanding of the range of student needs.

I strive to have the knowledge and background information needed to better understand my students. All of the students that I encounter have different learning styles but students with learning differences have factors that hold them back or make their learning extremely different from their peers. I want to shine a light on my academic experiences and highlight my students' experiences growing up with learning differences/disabilities. Specific types of learning disabilities are Autism Spectrum, cognitive delay, Emotional Behavior Disorder, and specific learning disabilities like Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia, and more. This is just a small sampling of the types of learning differences that are present and being diagnosed today.

The Kuwaiti Association for Learning Differences (KALD) (2018) highlights the importance of terminology when discussing learning differences. In the following quote KALD suggest caution when using the term “learning difference,”

Be aware that similar terminology can lead to confusion. For example, the term “Learning Difficulties” is generally applied to people with generalised (as opposed to specific) difficulties who are of low intelligence and often lack mental capacity. Many people with Specific Learning Difficulties tend to refer to themselves as having a Specific Learning Difference (both generally abbreviated to SpLDs), while others regard a label containing the word “Learning” as inappropriate when they are no longer in education. (KALD, LD Adults, Terminology, ¶ 11 -12)

In the next section I will list and give definitions of specific learning disabilities and differences to help give a better understanding of what is possible to have in a classroom at any point.

### **Terms and Definitions of Learning Disabilities/Differences**

#### **Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and Attention deficit disorder**

**(ADHD/ADD):** Disorder includes inattention, restlessness, impulsive, erratic, unpredictable and inappropriate behaviour, blurting out inappropriate comments or interrupting excessively. (British Dyslexia Association, p. 1)

**Dyslexia:** is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge. (International Dyslexia Association, 2018, Definition of dyslexia, ¶ 1)

**Dysgraphia:** is the condition of impaired letter writing by hand, that is, disabled handwriting. Impaired handwriting can interfere with learning to spell words in writing and speed of writing text. Children with dysgraphia may have only impaired handwriting, only impaired spelling (without reading problems), or both

impaired handwriting and impaired spelling. (International Dyslexia Association, 2018, Definition of dysgraphia, ¶ 1)

**Pervasive Developmental Disorders:** The diagnostic category of pervasive developmental disorders (PDD) refers to a group of disorders characterized by delays in the development of socialization and communication skills. Parents may note symptoms as early as infancy, although the typical age of onset is before 3 years of age. Symptoms may include problems with using and understanding language; difficulty relating to people, objects, and events; unusual play with toys and other objects; difficulty with changes in routine or familiar surroundings, and repetitive body movements or behavior patterns. Autism (a developmental brain disorder characterized by impaired social interaction and communication skills, and a limited range of activities and interests) is the most characteristic and best studied PDD. Other types of PDD include Asperger's Syndrome, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, and Rett's Syndrome. (National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, 2019, ¶1)

**Autism spectrum disorder:** (ASD) is a developmental disorder that affects communication and behavior. . .difficulty with communication and interaction with other people. Restricted interests and repetitive behaviors. Symptoms that hurt the person's ability to function properly in school, work, and other areas of life. Autism is known as a "spectrum" disorder because there is wide variation in the type and severity of symptoms people experience. (National Institute of Mental Health, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Overview, 2017, p. 1 )

**Dyscalculia:** is a specific learning disability that affects a person's ability to understand numbers and learn math facts. Individuals with this type of LD may also have poor comprehension of math symbols, may struggle with memorizing and organizing numbers, have difficulty telling time, or have trouble with counting. (International Dyslexia Association, 2018, ¶ 8)

**Emotional/Behavioral Disorders (EBD):** is a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance:

(A) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.

(B) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.

(C) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.

(D) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.

(E) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

As defined by IDEA, emotional disturbance includes schizophrenia but does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disturbance (Council for Exceptional Children, 2018, ¶ 1).

With a better understanding of the types of learning differences and how the children who have them might find theatre as a way to connect their learning from theatre

to other classes. Understanding the child as a whole and seeing all the parts that make them is a part of understanding this capstone's Thesis.

### **Review of Chapter Two**

This literature review began with exploring the idea of what a learning safe space is, what it should be, and why it is important. The review learned about two of the three domains of learning, Affective and Cognitive learnings, and reflected on their importance in this thesis. Different types of learning disabilities/ differences were examined to give a better understanding of how these students learn and the work being done for these students. Lastly, the review looked at theatre education and how/why it is important not only for regular students but students with learning difference/ disability.

Chapter Three will describe the research designed to address my capstone question: How do students with learning differences and disabilities enrolled in a theater class describe their affective and cognitive learning during the class? It includes a description of the research paradigm used to examine my thesis question and an explanation it is appropriate, including my decision to use a qualitative interview to gather data and why it is the appropriate option for this thesis. The chapter elaborates on how the interview protocol was designed, including the number of questions and length of the proposal interview, along with the plan for logistical information and the data analysis plan.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Act One: Research Plan**

#### **Introduction**

Chapter Three will describe the research designed to address my capstone question: How do students with learning differences and disabilities enrolled in a theater class describe their affective and cognitive learning during the class? This chapter will take the research reviewed in Chapter Two into consideration. In this chapter, I describe the research paradigm used to examine my thesis question and provide an explanation for why using a qualitative approach is the appropriate way to address it. Next will be the Rationale and Relevance of the Research Plan. This will describe my decision to use a qualitative interview to gather data and why it is the appropriate option for this thesis. This section elaborates on how the interview protocol was designed, including the number of questions and length of the proposal interview, along with the plan for logistical information.

The description of the design of my interview is followed by a discussion of my research subjects, how the subjects will be recruited, the criterion proposed to select them, the ideal number of participants, and the informed consent process. Some background information will be presented on the participants I plan to interview, so that we can gain an understanding of who they are.

#### **Rationale for the Use of a Qualitative Research Design**

A qualitative approach is an appropriate way for me to explore the research question: How do students with learning differences and disabilities enrolled in a theater class describe their affective and cognitive learning during the class? According to J. W. Creswell and J. D. Creswell (2018) qualitative has its origins in the disciplines of sociology, humanities, and evaluation. These origins of the qualitative paradigm focused on understanding the issue or the perspective of those who experience it. Another aspect of qualitative research is the emphasis on rich description.

Qualitative research emphasis on the perspective of people who have experienced the issue being explored is relevant to this capstone because as a researcher my interests are in understanding the journey and the stories of students with an IEP who have completed a theater class. The rich description nature of a qualitative approach supports using a narrative approach to achieve my long term goal of developing these stories. Reissman (as cited in J. W. Creswell & J. D. Creswell, 2018) notes how narratives research, a type of qualitative research, “. . . is a design of inquiry from the humanities in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives” (p. 13).

In addition to Reissman (as cited in J. W. Creswell & J. D. Creswell, 2018) Clandinin and Connelly (as cited in J. W. Creswell & J. D. Creswell, 2018) also supports the use of a narrative approach to addressing my research question. These authors note how “This information [the research data] is often retold or restoried by the researcher into a narrative chronology. Often, in the end, the narrative combines views from the participants' life with those of the researcher's life in a collaborative narrative” (p. 13).



My decision to represent the data in the form of stories is to allow for participant voice.

My research design is created to produce data that allows a narrative approach.

### **Rationale for Use of a Qualitative Interview and its Design**

My rationale for the use of a qualitative interview rather than surveys, focus groups, and other forms is that this project is about the student experience.

In Qualitative Interviews, the researcher conducts face-to-face interviews with participants, telephone interviews, or engages in focus group interviews with six to eight interviewees in each group. These interviews involve unstructured and generally open -ended questions that are few in number and intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants. (J. W. Creswell & J. D. Creswell, 2018, p. 187)

The focus of this paper is about the student's story and voice.

Interviews may be very structured – a standardised telephone interview comprising closed questions is one example of this. Conversely, they may be very unstructured ('conversational') and interviewee-led, with just a few prompts, where the researcher gains a richer insight into individual perspectives. These are typically carried out in phenomenographic/narrative studies, where participants provide insight into a topic of study by providing their own personal, subjective narratives. An example might be life history research in education. (Dale, 2014, p. 17)

The interview as a method to collect data and do research is the best way for this capstone question.

The qualitative interview in this study will use the oral history interview approach as defined by Edwards and Holland (2013). The authors describe an oral history interview approach as one that is,

designed to elicit a story, their own story from the participants in the research, with particular inflections from the originating stance of the research. . . Oral history draws its methods from history and sociology and emphasizes the importance of time and memory, and people are interviewed about their past experiences. . . From this perspective in oral history approaches the focus of enquiry and the question(s) facilitating talk in the interview could relate to the interviewee's life experiences. (pp. 32-33)

Oral History has an emphasis on the importance of time and memory. The people who are interviewed using this method to talk about their past experiences. This approach also is useful because it gives a voice to the voiceless. People who are marginalized and not given a chance to speak their truth (Edwards & Holland, 2013). The potential participants in this research can be marginalized in the K-12 setting. Marginalized means,

that as a society we put labels on certain people as outside the norm — weird, scary, hateful, or useless — marginalizes those people, edging them out. Native or aboriginal groups often end up in this position, and so do people who are poor, disabled, elderly, or who in other ways are seen as not quite fitting in.

(vocabulary.com, n.d., marginalize)

The participants in this research with their individual educational plans (IEP) can be marginalized because of the connotations that teachers, administrators, peers, and others can associate with the people in special Education or having an IEP or 504Plan.

Interview questions that will be used in this capstone are going to be semi-structured to unstructured open-ended questions. Brinkmann (2013) state's in his book *Qualitative Interviewing*, that "it is quite common to make a distinction between structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews. This distinction, however, should be thought of as a continuum ranging from relatively structured to relatively unstructured formats" (p. 18). He goes on to say,

there is also no such thing as a completely unstructured interview, since the interviewer always has an idea about what should take place in the conversation. Even some of the least structured interviews such as life history interviews that only have one question prepared in advance . . . provide structure to the conversation by framing it in accordance with certain specific conversational norms rather than others. (Brinkmann, 2013, pp. 18-19)

Having questions that are open ended allow the subject an opportunity to speak on their experience. But having enough structure to move the conversation forward if subjects are stuck and do not know what else to say.

The major areas that need to be addressed and talked about by subjects are;  
Why/How they enrolled in a theatre class or afterschool theatre experience? What are positive outcomes to the experience? What are the negative outcomes to the experience? Are they able to describe if learnings from the theater class were transferred to other

contexts in their lives. Prompts will be created and used if needed in a situation of a subject not knowing what else to say. The questions asked may not be done in the same order due to the nature of the interview process and what the subject's answers may lead to other questions or prompts. Questions will be shifted to match participant responses. The questions will be as follows (Table 2).

**Table 2. Interview Question Flow Table**

<p>Instructions: Repeat the purpose of the interview, remind them of their rights start:</p> <p>Some way to start the conversation --- -Introductions/ greeting</p>		
<p><b>Why they enrolled in theater/participated in theater production.</b></p> <p>-I am interested in having you describe why you enrolled in a theater class . . .</p> <p>Prompts: Elaborate on certain aspects, or to re-direct</p> <p>-I heard you say that the reason your enrolled/participated was [fill in the blank]. I would like to learn about about what you thought it would be like?</p> <p>-What are some first impressions of the class and theatre?</p> <p>-Are there other reasons you joined a theatre class? Elaborate on certain aspects/ re-direct</p>		
<p><b>Outcomes or learnings</b></p> <p>I would like to understand what you learned by being enrolled in a theater class or involved in a theater production.</p> <p>By outcomes I mean ---- List a couple things that could have been learned</p> <p>By learned I mean- 2 or 3 examples -What could the teacher done differently?</p> <p>-How could the course curriculum be revised to prevent . . .?</p>		
Positive Outcomes	and/or	Negative Outcomes
<p><b>Transfer to other contexts their learnings from theater class</b></p> <p>I would like to understand if anything from the theater class or theater production supported you in other ways at school or social situations.</p> <p>By other things I mean . . . . List a couple things that could have been learned</p> <p>By support I mean . . . .2 or 3 examples</p>		
<p>We are at the end of the interview, is there anything else you would like to talk about regarding your experience in class or a production? Elaborate on certain aspects.</p>		

The development of the interview tool is a mixture of found questions in the review of the research, to teacher learning tools of understanding student learning and some of my own creation. It is about the participants' stories so if they get sidetracked from some questions and talk about other experiences that is just fine. The interview will be face to face interviews that are around thirty minutes long. The interview will be audio recorded with a partial transcript to be produced by myself. I want to record it because giving my attention to the participant and connecting with them rather than taking notes I think is important.

### **Data Analysis**

For this research thesis I will use the inductive data analysis because I am starting with a research question. The definition of Inductive Analysis:

Inductive content analysis is a qualitative method of content analysis that researchers use to develop theory and identify themes by studying documents, recordings and other printed and verbal material. As the name implies, inductive content analysis relies on inductive reasoning, in which themes emerge from the raw data through repeated examination and comparison” (Hall, 2020, ¶ 1)

By using inductive reasoning which is “a logical process in which multiple premises, all believed true or found true most of the time, are combined to obtain a specific conclusion”(Rouse, M., 2013, p. 6) The research will be analysed.

The data will be composed into a partial transcript using Kent Lofgren’s method and process. The process of Kent Lofgren’s (2013) written transcript is as follows,

1. Read line by line: Initial read through, document first impressions. Read again slowly.
  2. Coding: Label what you believe is relevant. May include: words, phrases, sentences, actions, activities, concepts, differences, opinions, processes, and whatever the author considers important. Be open-minded to find descriptions of what may be superficial, or the readers conceptualization of an underlying pattern. Since the reader is the interpreter and author, phenomena should be highlighted that are considered important. Be unbiased.
  3. After first coding bypass: combine 2 or more codes to create categories or themes. In this manner some codes may be dropped.
  4. Label the categories in order of importance that connects to the main query. Show there is new knowledge from a different perspective.
  5. Ask. Is there a hierarchy among the categories; is one more important than another; consider drawing a graph that could summarize the results.
  6. Do not interpret results, describe how the categories connect using a neutral voice.
- (Lofgren's, 2013)

The data analyses will be included in my final capstone that will be catalogues in Hamline University's Digital Commons a google searchable database. There will be web access on the database for students, faculty, and the public through the Hamline Library.

### **Research Setting**

I will be recruiting participants from a magnet community school District. A community school is full-service meaning it is both a place and a set of partnerships

between the school and other community resources. The main website of the school district describes their “. . . integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development and community engagement leads to improved student learning, stronger families, and healthier communities (T. Wetterlind, personal communication, July 20, 2018).

This school is located in a small suburban school district in the northwest border of a large metropolitan area in the upper midwest. The school staff and administration pride themselves in providing excellent academic programs to a diverse student population in pre-k through grade 12 as explained in the school’s mission statement: “To equip every student with the knowledge, life-skills, and global perspectives to contribute to society and respond to the needs of an ever-changing world” (T. Wetterlind, personal communication, July 20, 2018). Below is the total enrollment broken down into sub groups. Information as of 2017-2018 school year:

Total enrollment: 2028

White: 331 (16%)

Black: 882 (43%)

Hispanic: 456 (22%)

Asian: 335 (17%)

American Indian: 24 (1%)

Special populations

English learner: 431 (21%)

Special education: 261 (13%)



Free/reduced lunch: 1623 (80%) (T. Wetterlind, personal communication, July 20, 2018).

### **Research Participants**

Participation in this research is voluntary and there is no extra incentive to participate, such as a gift card. To be selected for the research, the participant must have a documented learning difference and/or Independent Education Plan (IEP) or 504 plan to be eligible to participate.

In addition to be selected the participants must meet one or both the following one of the following criteria:

- enrolled and participated in a middle or high school theater arts program prior to Spring 2019.
- Involvement in after school theatre. After school theatre is an extracurricular activity. It is a full length play or musical put on by a teacher and student audition and perform in.

The original plan was to locate potential participants for this study via my own contacts and recommendations of w other theatre teachers from surrounding districts, theatre teachers themselves who had IEPs/ 504 growing up or the theatre program at the research recruiting district. None of the above will be identified in the final capstone paper.

However, the recruitment plan was revised when an extensive recruitment effort for one participant was located. With approval of my capstone committee an college age student with an IEP, who expressed interest in the project, was included. I also completed the interview protocol and my responses were compared to those of the other two other

participants. Hamline University's Institutional Review Board (IBR) reviewed and approved this research in [April 2019]. IRB approval was required to protect the rights and the safety of the students in the research thesis.

### **Limitations of the Research Design**

The limitations of this research are small sample size. I am not going to be able to interview a large number of participants. I will not be able to generalize to larger populations. Some of the participants may not be representative of a larger group of students with IEPs or 504 plans. As a first time researcher and not having years of experience could be a limitation.

### **Chapter Summary**

In Chapter Three I describe the research plan designed to address my capstone question: How do students with learning differences and disabilities enrolled in a theater class describe their affective and cognitive learning during the class? In this chapter, I described the research paradigm used to examine my thesis question and provided an explanation for why using a qualitative approach is the appropriate way to address it. It describes my decision to use a qualitative interview to gather data and why it is the appropriate option for this thesis. It also described the interview protocol that was designed, including the number of questions and length of the proposal interview, along with the plan for logistical information. In Chapter Four I will explore the learning of my interviews and breakdown what I have discovered from the research conducted. It will look at each participant and present what was learned from each.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Act Two: Research Discovery

#### Introduction

After creating the transcripts, reading them and listening to the interviews of each participant five times and by carefully reviewing and reflecting upon each of the two participant's interview transcripts, I was glad that the analyses connected directly to my capstone question: How do students with learning differences and disabilities enrolled in a theater class describe their affective and cognitive learning during the class? As a participant myself it was good to hear similar stories and experiences to my own. I had always thought that theatre was a tool that could help some students with learning differences and to hear from students with learning differences that had similar journeys was exciting. Their answers helped the participants' story emerge so that I could understand their journey. My analysis of the interview transcripts provided answers to my capstone question and the confirmation that there should be more research done in this area. All of the data gave voice to the participants stories of how theatre affected their lives. It also confirmed to me as an educator that my work as a theater teacher is important and the general value of teachers seeing their students as a whole learner. Another insight from the data analyses is how there is always something in the learning environment that can help or connect students to their learning and make them passionate and better about their own learning.

In Chapter Four the results of the study will be divided into three sections. The first section is the Presentation of the Research Findings that describes the organization of the data analyses. The next section presents the analysis of responses to the first interview question. This is followed by the analysis of the responses to the second and third interview questions. Each of those three sections is a summary of the participants answers to each of the interview questions, along with what I have learned from the interviews and from each of the participants. There is a final overall findings in the sections of what was derived from the interviews.

### **Presentation of Research Findings**

In exploring my capstone question: How do students with learning differences and disabilities enrolled in a theater class describe their affective and cognitive learning during the class - the following interview questions were asked:

- Why/How they enrolled in a theatre class or afterschool theatre experience?
- What are positive outcomes to the experience?
- What are the negative outcomes to the experience?

In addition to responding to these questions, the interview was designed to provide each participant an opportunity to describe, if there were able, learnings from the theater class that were transferred to other contexts in their lives. There were three participants in this research capstone project. The first of the participants is currently in a high school theatre program. The second is currently in a graduate program to become a theatre teacher and heard about my project and wanted to lend her story to the cause. The third participant is me and my own story. So there are three generations of students with learning differences

and their stories that allowed me to explore my thesis question; How do students with learning differences and disabilities enrolled in a theater class describe their affective and cognitive learning during the class?

Two of the participants will be given an allis, the third is me and I will not be giving myself an allis. My goal in using my own story is to help connect the other participants' stories and the reason why this capstone is important. The first participant will be known as Persephone and the second participant will be known as Athena. These names were selected because both are named after Greek Goddesses and as Greece is where Western Theatre was born, this was a way of honoring my work as a theater teacher.

In each section I will start with Persephone, then move to Athena, and end each section with my own answers to the questions. I am using the partial transcript so that their stories are coming from them and not me interpreting them. I will in a different section talk about common themes and findings from the interviews. The next section presents the analyses of the first interview question - Why the participants enrolled in theater/participated in theater productions?

### **Analyses of Responses to Question One**

In this section I will present the interviews answers to the question: Why did they enroll in theater/participated in theater production? The first interview answers are from Persephone. Persephone answered; "I wanted to, well at first before I joined theatre I was really quiet. This is my first year in this school, well it's my second year now at this

school. And I didn't know anybody." Following Persephone's response the interviewer asked the following clarifying question. What grade was that? Persephone responded,

9th grade was when I first joined the theatre. When my teacher asked me about it, I was like I don't know . . . But when I tried it, I was like ok this is going to be a good idea. This will help build my strength and talk to people. Not be as quiet. And earn leadership. . . . At my other school I did a play. And I enjoyed it and when my teacher told me that we had plays and musicals here I thought that I would try it.

Building off Persephone's response the interviewer probed to deepen their understanding of the source of Persephone's shyness and being scared by asking "You said that you were scared and shy. Were there other influences that helped you in joining and being more comfortable in the after school theatre program?" Persephone responded "Probably the people in the program. The other students and the director."

In Athena's response to this question she started by describing a connection to her learning difference. The first part of Athena's response to the question is: "To be honest a lot of my memory is blocked due to having pervasive developmental disorder, honest to god I don't remember a lot of it because of that taking over my brain. And how I processed." Next she describes her dad's influence in starting her stage career.

My stage career started because of my Dad realizing that I could sing . . . Maybe. . . . At least, [my] Parents think that I do . . . I don't know if I do. My Dad started [it because], My dad loves to perform, he does weddings and is kind of the ex rocker type of Dad. He finds out one of his kids has some artist interest and or

talent. So he starts me on Karaoke. So he buys me this CD of Disney karaoke songs. And we start with that, so we practiced in the living room.

Following performing karaoke in the living room Athena describes the next stage as

. . . eventually he was like alright we are going to go and do this in front of people. I don't, I'm not sure if he ever really had that conversation with me. The only thing I remember was getting up in front of people.

Athena describes how to perform before other people;

My Dad would bring me to bars in southern Minnesota. Karaoke would start at 8 pm and we would have to be out at 10 pm because I was a minor. It progressed to us practicing duets together and that kind of stuff and it was really fun. That was what got me on stage and I don't remember being that particularly nervous at all. Maybe I just could not process being nervous. Honestly. And so he was like this is great, what a good thing.

Another step described by Athena took place following her transition to middle school.

Athena states;

And then I got into middle school and did choir with my friends. And that sorta thing. And one day, to be honest I don't remember this at all, but my mom said I brought home a flyer for the community theatre play. And Mom was like . . . I don't know about this . . . you barely talk. Are you sure you can do this? But I guess your friends are doing it . . . My Dad was like YES! Do the Thing!! So I did. I don't remember how the audition went or anything but I remember my first play. It was called "Twice Upon a Time". . . I had 12 lines and I remember being

just amazed by that. So that is what started it. And I've never ever question going back.

Athena was prompted by the interviewer to elaborate on the difficulty of remembering by asking "I heard you say that you had a hard time remembering. What was the first moment that you do remember?" Athena responded;

I remember being on stage with my cast and rehearsing. I guess one of the big moments that I remember was when we were rehearsing. Apparently I wasn't listening. But it was probably wasn't that I wasn't listening. It was probably that I was having a hard time processing what was going on at that moment. And my theatre director came and picked me up and put me where I needed to be . . .

[Athena Laughs]

Interested in how this situation felt to Athena the interviewer asks her "How did that make you feel?" Athena states;

I was just like ahhh and [she laughs] . . . And didn't let it phase me. Just kept going. So I was like taught under the toughest of the tough. And somehow I managed to be ok with it and in the arts. Just figured that this is what I needed to go through if I wanted to keep doing it. And it made me. . . it taught me well.

Reflecting on the responses of Persephone and Athena, I compare their experiences to my own experiences.

I ask myself the factors or influences that lead me to why I enrolled in a theatre class and participated in theatre productions. My response is that my involvement in theatre class and theatre productions is partially connected to my upbringing. For



example, my mother was raised in a family of musicians and she herself is a singer. My father grew up in a small town where you could be in the school musical but also on the football team and he did both. Given my parents it was not a surprise that from a young age I was singing in the school/church choirs and doing performances with my sister for our parents in the living room.

It was in first grade that my learning difference came into play as people sought an explanation to my low test scores. While my mother requested that the school complete an assessment to determine if a learning difference was present, the school declined indicating that I was not “bad” enough, meaning my lack of academic progress was not large enough to require an assessment. Fortunately, I was lucky enough to have a mother who pushed and a family that had the means to pay for an assessment with a Doctor at a local clinic. The results of this assessment confirmed my being diagnosed with two learning differences: Dyslexia and Dysgraphia. So while officials at my school did not make the decision to do the assessment or provide the academic support I required I was also blessed with a mother who saw fit to get me a tutor to start getting me back on track and at grade level. My third grade teacher also influenced me involvement in theater.

In third grade my teacher was very into plays and musicals. He had us do a class play “Into the Woods.” This was my first real performance experience where I felt like I was a part of something. That I thrived in it. From there my mother put me in a group called the Little Play House. My participation in Little Play House created opportunities for me to be in multiple plays. My experience in these productions grew my confidence

in reading and my reading out loud improved. Another benefit of my being involved with Little Play House was an increased ability to make friends, including long standing ones.

For example, I am still friends with some of the people I met at the Little Play House. From there I was in high school theatre, improv, Chanhassen dinner theatre classes and eventually went to college undergrad to major in theatre. After College I worked for the Missoula Children's Theatre. It was on tour when I decided that I really liked teaching and after returning home would earn my teaching licence and Masters degree. The next section summarizes the responses to the second interview question: What are positive outcomes to the experience? What are the negative outcomes to the experience?

### **Analyses of Responses to Question Two**

In this section I will present the interviewees answers to the question: Outcomes or learnings: What are positive outcomes to the experience? What are the negative outcomes to the experience? Persephone said, "I was scared. I didn't know how to act and I was nervous. But I was willing to try it because it was a new thing." Following Persephone's response the interviewer asked the following, "What do you think are some pros to joining?" Persephone responded;

Confidence. I have more confidence. I have a louder voice. I mean, I used to not talk. I'm not as shy. I got to meet new friends. I learned how to read a script.

Theatre will help you gain your confidence. It will help you get your innervoice out. Not keep it all in. You have to be able to talk loud on stage. You meet new friends. You won't be alone. Everybody is having the same experience as you. I

mean they all have different characters but there in the same play, they are all there for the same reason. And your not alone in it. They can help you with your lines and all that.

The interviewer asked the following clarifying question: “Am I hearing you say it’s like a community?” Persephone responded, “Yah! it's a community it’s like a family in a way.”

The interviewer wanting to make sure that Persephone thought about both the pros and the cons asked: “We have done the positives let’s do negatives. Has there been anything that has pulled you back or hindered you because you have done theatre? Or influenced you in a negative way?” Very quickly and with a laugh Persephone responded, “No. I love theatre. Theatre is like my thing now.” Athena’s responses to the question are presented next.

For Athena the question of what are the negative outcomes to the experience - were related to her program at high school for 9th and 10th grade and her experience in eleventh grade after moving, after enrolling in a performing arts high school. She stated;

That was a wake up call of. . . Wow! I don’t know anything. I wasn't taught much other than to stand on stage, look pretty and talk loud. And there were things that I had no idea what was going on half the time and if you lived more than 28 miles away from campus you had to live there. And I lived 29.8 miles away so I lived on campus and I did not do well. Because I was 16 years old and I was a suburb-ie-ah kid and didn’t grow up as quickly as my city slicker counterparts . . . I ended up leaving that school after a semester. And was then like yeah I'm going to start taking this theatre thing more seriously by my senior year. And then after

high school was when I started helping with little kids in theatre.

Interviewer then followed up by asking “Do you ever feel like it had a negative impact on you being in theatre?” Athena said, “Not particularly. . . Other than people constantly telling me to stop talking so loud (Athena Laughs) I still get it weekly from my mom (She laughs again).” The interviewer then moved the conversation to the next part of Athena’s life. Interviewer then asked “You finished high school and are moving on to other things. You’re exploring the theatre realm but also teaching and learning. Let’s talk about the next process of your life.” Athena answered,

After high school I still wanted to do theatre. So my mom and I looked at community colleges because we decided that with my PDD (Pervasive Developmental Disorders) I was not ready to go off to a University. That I wasn’t prepared to be away from home. It still really affected me, a lot! I tend to notice in my life, with my PDD, I tend to be about two years behind people my age that I know. . . It just takes that amount of time for my brain to understand certain concepts.

Athena then continued to talk about helping a former director with the show, Alice in Wonderland as an aid and she also stepped into being an assistant director. She said it was the best thing. Athena stated, “To be honest not a lot of my life doesn’t revolve around theatre. . . Pretty much everything in my life mirrors theatre. It’s my one constant.”

My own outcomes or learnings of being a part of a theatre program would be that I know that I gained adaptability, community, resilience, working together with people

that I did not always get along with, creativity, and the ability to have a voice/ advocate for myself. I say adaptability because in theatre you have to be able to roll with it. It's happening live, if something goes wrong or someone forgets a line one must be able to adapt and fix it. That also requires creativity to solve a problem when it happens.

Like Persephone the community aspect of theater was important to me, in fact for me, it was the best part. I found some of my best friends in the theatre community. But also there are always going to be people you do not get along with but you still have to get the show done and do it well so you must be able to overcome working with people you do not get along with. Theatre is a collaborative effort where you have a voice in the process no matter what you are doing in that production.

Another positive aspect of my participation in theater was the development of resilience. Resilience develops because you do not always get the part that you want. You hear "No" or "your not right for the part," etc. . . A lot of the time. They teach you that for every 100 auditions you go to 99 of them will be no's. You can not let it get to you or get you down. Theatre teaches you to keep pushing, to get better, to try new things and never give up. There is always something around the corner or new to try or a new skill to learn. I have never had or found a negative outcome because of being a part of theatre. I feel like it has helped me become the person I am today.

### **Transfer to Other Contexts their Learnings from Theater Class**

In this section I will present the interviews answers to the question: Outcomes or learnings: Transfer to other contexts their learnings from theater class. The Interviewer

helping clarify the question in a different way for Persephone asked: “Do you feel like it has helped you in other academics? Other parts in school?” Persephone then responded;

In other classes, when asking for help was not my thing. I just didn't. I don't know why but I just didn't ask for help. When I got into theatre I gained a voice. Now I was able to ask teachers for help. And talk to other students you know in those group activities that they do in other classes. Yah . . .

Wanting Persephone to go further the Interviewer then asked, “Do you think your theatre experiences will help you out in the real world?” Persephone answered,

Yah. Probably. Because, well, I want to be a police officer, so If I haven't been in theatre I wouldn't have gained my voice and you need a voice to be a police officer. You need to do this stuff at calls and all that and speak with the victims and theatre has helped me with that.

The interviewer asked Athena, “Having your learning disability or difference, how did theatre affect you or didn't affect you and your capability at school?” Athena's response to this question she said,

The difference between 6th grade me and 8th grade me was even fantastice.

Instead of having two friends I had twenty. I got to start having an opinion on things. I got to start being expressive. I wasn't this blank slate of a kid anymore.

The interviewer asked the question again but in a different way to see if it could gain more clarity. “Did you ever see the lesson that you did in theatre correlate and help you in the classroom?” Athena said, “My theatre experience started to allow me to get solos in choir. That my peers saw me as the theatre person so then they would have me talk in

class.” The interviewer then confirmed by saying “So then am I hearing you say that it gave you confidence? Is that a true statement?” Athena then responded, “Yeah! It allowed me to be seen. You know in the light that I was meant to as this arts person, outgoing, extraverted individual that I now was.”

For myself to answer the question of, how did theatre transfer to other contexts of my learnings and helped me through school? Theatre is one of the main reasons why I was successful in school. Theatre gave me social skills, a safe place to explore and be myself. The opportunity to practice reading, the confidence in other classes to speak up in group work, and ask for help when I needed it. To be proud of who I was and not ashamed of my learning difference. Now as a teacher with learning differences and teaching theatre my hope is that I can pass that experience on to all my students.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter I looked at the interviews, the analyses of the interview transcripts and connected directly to my capstone question: How do students with learning differences and disabilities enrolled in a theater class describe their affective and cognitive learning during the class? Common themes revealed in the transcripts of the two interviewees and my responses to the interview questions were; Resilience, Confidence, Community, Creativity and more. These findings will be explored more in Chapter Five. In Chapter Five I will synthesize what I have learned in the process of doing my capstone and why this capstone was important for me to do.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Curtain Call: Conclusions and Critique

#### Overview of Chapter Five

In chapter Five I will synthesize what I have learned in the process of researching the capstone question: How do students with learning differences and disabilities enrolled in a theater class describe their affective and cognitive learning during the class? I was interested if there were other students like me who benefited from theatre class and extra curricular theatre. I learned and gained so much from it when I was a student and was better able to manage my own learning differences better because of theatre. I was able to navigate school better because of theatre.

This chapter provides me the opportunity to reflect on the main reason why I have chosen this question. First and foremost my capstone question was and still is directly connected to my own experience as a learner with learning differences. My capstone question focused on theater class because of my professional role as a theater teacher and my own experiences in theatre as a student. Theater was an environment where I felt successful as a learner. I was able to have a safe space with peers that were supportive. A space to gain confidence in myself and to practice skills for theatre class in other classes. Speaking out loud in front of others, cold readings in front of unknown peers. What did I want to know? I wanted to know if there were others out there that may have had the



same shared experience as I did. I wanted to see if there was maybe a larger possibility to do more research if what I found was to be a good thing. I wanted to see how the research could be used as a tool or a resource for my colleagues.

The next section of Chapter Five will return to the literature review and discuss my findings in relation to the research literature. Next there will be a description of possible implications of my findings and how they may have possible implications for theory and practice. Finally, I will relook at the limitations of my findings and then recommend the future research projects concerning my topic.

### **Return to the Literature Review**

In the return to literature review I was reminded that in order to understand the thesis one must first analyze the work that has been done first in the educational fields, research and associations. The literature review that was conducted explored four main themes: Learning Safe Space, Affective/Cognitive learnings and social skills, Learning Disabilities/ Difference, and Theatre Education/ Environment. In this return to the literature review my focus was looking for how the results of this capstone project corroborated and diverged from major findings identified during the review. I also looked to see if the results of this capstone revealed new discoveries.

First, what was corroborated in my findings in other words what aspects of my results were echoed in the literature. When reviewing the analysis of my interview transcripts the following themes were also echoed in the review of the literature. For example, in both the literature review and the data analysis there was evidence of how students with learning differences learned describe feeling safe in their theater

environment that supported them gaining confidence in themselves and skills learned in all classes. The review of the literature and my data analysis also support that students with learning differences can develop self efficacy during the theater experience, grow in being able to respond to peers and teachers, confidence in taking risks and trying something that is new or out of their comfort zone.

When looking back I really did not find anything that disagreed with the literature from the interviews. Though I am wondering what that might have looked like if I had been able to do a larger research project and interviewed more participants. What I found in the interviews that was not mentioned or emphasized in the literature would be that there is the possibility of using theatre as a way to teach social skills. I think that would be something that would be interesting to explore.

### **Considerations**

Considering the possible implications of my findings and the possible implications for theory and practice I will answer the following; What do my findings imply for school curriculum, classroom management, students and/or their parents, school administration, my district, policymakers/society, and my colleagues? If my findings are accurate, then what does this mean for curriculum? The findings of this capstone support the idea of exploring the curriculum of core classes (english, social studies, mathematics, science) to add basic theatre skills to each core class and find ways to create cross curricular units and classes.

Based on the results of my study and what I learned in the review of the research literature for this study I have specific recommendations for classroom management. My

recommendation is that all teachers should take into consideration the team building and learning environment they are creating with their students. The analysis of the interviews for this study provide additional support for the value of creating a learning space where students feel is a safe space. A safe space is not only where learners with learning differences are physically safe but one where they can be creatively safe. My definition of a creative safe space is one where all students, but especially those with learning differences, can try, explore, create and do something new or different and know that they are in an environment for them to flourish.

Combining the results of this capstone, my experience as a learner and a theater teacher, one message I have for parents is how students with learning differences come with many different skills that are not utilized or are mismanaged or overlooked. It is vital that parents need to help their students find the safe learning spaces where their students can identify skills and have opportunities to explore and practice them. The narratives of the participants of this capstone highlight the importance of students being able to help their parents in realizing that though it is something out of the ordinary there “thing” might help them as learners. Theater may be a thing that they can use to help build their confidence and skills. I am not saying it's the only thing but I think it would be something that a student if they wanted to try they should have that opportunity too. To parents I would say that when it comes to students with learning differences you need to help your student find their “thing” or encourage them to try new opportunities. You are a part of their journey in learning and gaining confidence in themselves.

Another recommendation resulting from my completion of this capstone is that

administration and the district should not only support but encourage teachers to teach cross curricular classes. School administration and districts can do this by helping set up school schedules so that those classes could actually exist. For example, create an environment where the theatre teacher and the history teacher could collaboratively teach a class. This capstone also provides additional support for why school administrators should support Arts and Theatre programs in and after school. It could help reverse the decline in funding for theatre and arts programs that has occurred over the years. In addition, school administrators should continue their support for helping teachers create a safe learning environment not just in the classroom but in the school and the district as it benefits students with learning differences but is also important for all students. Supporting and encouraging students with learning differences to enroll in theater programs is an additional way that school administrations can hold up, encourage, highlight and support them.

Based on the results of my study, policymakers and society from my perspective need to start looking at our education system in a different way. Stop teaching to a test. Set as a goal that all of our students will become well rounded thinkers and creators. Both my experience as a learner, as a theatre teacher and the results of this capstone support my sense that participation in theatre and other arts supports students with learning differences in developing:

- good oral communication skills
- creative problem solving abilities
- motivation and commitment

- cooperation skills
- initiative
- promptness
- respect for deadlines
- flexibility
- ability to work under pressure
- self discipline
- concentration
- dedication
- responsibility
- leadership skill
- self-confidence.

Not every student falls into what we would consider a standard education and students with learning differences are definitely ones that fall out of what society considers normal. When policy makers, the public, and teachers connect funding to schools to the test scores of students we are setting some schools and students up for failure. Not every student tests well, not every neurotypical student tests well. My experience participating in theatre and my work as a theatre teacher provide many examples of how there are other ways for students to show mastery of a skill. School without the arts whose funding is based solely on standardized test scores has the potential to prevent us from teaching our students what really is important.

Based on the results of my study some suggestions I would make to my

colleagues would be that as educational professionals we need to find new ways of teaching. For example, I want the opportunity to work together with my peers to create a curriculum that is fresh, creative, and cross curricular. As a result of completing my capstone I have a greater sense of urgency in the importance of pushing back against the old model of schooling and recreating it so that works for all students. As a teacher I am convinced that the traditional way of teaching, i.e. transmission of information to the learner, is not the right way of creating an inclusive learning environment. Therefore it is important for me, my colleagues, and the larger teacher community to push back on our policy makers and government.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

As any research project there were limitations to the research design. Despite a great deal of effort in recruiting the study is based on two participants and myself. While the interviews completed did provide rich data the richness would have been greater if additional individuals could have been included in the process. Having additional participants interviews would have the potential to add even greater insight into my research question. As with any project, time was a limitation. As a working professional earning my master's degree it was necessary to limit the scope of the project and meet deadlines for completing my degree. As this was a master's research project it was also a learning experience, one that gave me the opportunity to practice my research skills, i.e. I am not a professional researcher. Having this research conducted by an experienced researcher, with additional resources, could have increased the size of the project, allowing the time and space to include more participants.

As for recommending future research projects concerning my topic it is clear to me that more research in and around theatre and other arts content is important. In my experience theater is often thought of as extra curricular, however, with additional research increased support might become apparent regarding how it is just as important as the core four. I also think that more research needs to be completed on students with learning differences. I know that there is research out there on how these students learn, grow, what their difference is like and about but I think that it is essential to conduct research on new or different ways to help these students, including that their voices are included in the research literature.

For example conducting research where researchers talk to students with learning differences and find what their “thing” is. For some students like the ones in this project it was theatre but maybe for other students its music, dance, art, running, etc. A few years ago I had a student (This student was not a part of the research) who was diagnosed with Emotional Behavior Disorder (EBD) and discovered band class. That became this student's “thing.” It allowed that student to gain confidence in something that they worked hard at. It gave the student a place to go when they got upset. It gave this student something to connect to their peers. I feel that more research into this idea would be quite interesting.

As a result of my study, what would I like to study next? It’s not a matter of next for me. I would like to see if I can get this topic or question brought to a professional research group to further this research. If I were to do this study again, what would I change? I would try and get even more participants. What worked especially well was the

type of interview process. It is about the students story and the journey they are on. The narrative approach is an excellent strategy to learn from these populations and make changes that benefit them. I think that should be retained in replications of this research if done again.

### **Summary of Capstone Thesis**

Coming to the end of this journey of writing and researching a capstone thesis is bewildering to me. With my learning differences I never thought I would be able to write something like this. But here it is, and the proof is amazing. I plan on this being cataloged in Hamline University's Digital Commons a google searchable database. There will be web access on the database for students, faculty, and the public through the Hamline Library. I also plan on sharing it with my administration.

The impact of doing this research has helped me solidify some of my beliefs in teaching and also gave me more insight on what I need to do to better my own practice. Writing this capstone for me as a learner I proved to myself that I can do it. I hope that with me being able to share my story others will be inspired by it. I want all students with learning differences to know that they are important and can do what they set their minds to.



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