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Addressing the Elephant on the Stage: Mental Health in Theatre Education

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ADDRESSING THE ELEPHANT ON THE STAGE:

MENTAL HEALTH IN THEATRE EDUCATION

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examined the ways in which present-day 6th through 12th grade theatre educators approach the topic of mental health, both implicitly and explicitly, in theatre education. Through a survey of existing literature, as well as interviews with 6th through 12th grade theatre educators, the researcher examined ways in which theatre educators were aware of the mental health needs of their students in any of the following capacities: explicit discussions regarding mental health, theatre curriculum, show selection, script analysis, and casting choices.

The reveal the educator perception that mental health issues are increasingly relevant to 6th through 12th grade youth, and that some educators have been taking specific and creative steps to incorporate explicit discussions surrounding mental health into their classroom and rehearsal processes. The researcher's intention to conduct this study was to start a conversation about the needs students have for their mental health to be supported in the classroom; moreover, it was the hope of the researcher that this study would bring awareness to how students need more specific education taking place in their classrooms to understand this topic. The researcher specifically analyzed how theatre education spaces provide an opportunity to explore the topic of mental health with students using a unique, arts-based platform.

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INTRODUCTION

I have never considered myself to be a researcher, but I am an artist and teacher. As someone who is aspiring to be a theatre teacher for secondary education, I felt it were only right to learn about the pressing matters in theatre student lives today, in hopes I can learn and prepare before I am a classroom teacher. One of the concerns I have always been curious about is mental health in young students; moreover, how classroom teachers are addressing these issues. As a high school student, I remember being overwhelmed with making life-changing decisions. From deciding where to go for college or what to do with my life, I felt pressure to mature over time without any explicit instruction on how to do so; my mental health was affected because of this. The oasis I went to deal with my challenges was my high school auditorium. That place was where I could escape the homework and problems of my life to step into a new story and character on stage. What I did not realize were the characters I was exploring actually had many similarities to my own real-world circumstances. Through analysis of a fictional character, I was able to learn how to adapt and cope with my own feelings about my situations.

My auditorium always felt like a safe place to grow in. I am not sure if it was the artistic environment that allowed for self-expression or the discussion heavy classes, but I always felt I could grow as an individual in my theatre class, that I had a voice and thoughts worthy of being explored, and that own mental health was able to be dealt with there. As an aspiring theatre teacher now, I want to offer these same opportunities I got to experience to my students, but first I wanted to learn what other teachers are doing to create these environments for their young theatre artists. With that, I chose to research the mental health in theatre education in 9th through 12th grade classes within Orlando, Florida. This is not in hopes of finding some sort of universal solution that resolves how mental health can be addressed with students in theatre classrooms. It

is so a forum can be opened where theatre practitioners begin to challenge our ways of thinking on this topic in hopes of creating a safe environment in which our students can maintain and develop their mental health.

Overview

Theatre as an art form is a way for audiences to experience something immersive and reflective of life, even if the piece being performed is completely unrealistic. As Samuel L. Becker stated, "Ideally, any play provides an opportunity for each member of the audience to interact with the imaginative minds that created it, to explore ideas and beauty, and to discover new ways of looking at the world" (Becker, 1966). Theatre has the capability to create personal experiences for everyone involved in the creation, production, and viewing of the work. The most thrilling part of this is how everyone's experience is unique to that person's interpretation. No one person is going to have the exact same viewpoint or perspective on a piece of theatre. This is important to this study which is analyzing how theatre can be used as a tool for reflection of one's understanding of mental health because we all learn and adapt differently. Theatre is a tool which can be used to deal with mental struggles facing an individual if we allow it to be used in that way.

This study is specifically exploring how and if mental health in students is being addressed through theatre education in 9th through 12th grade levels. This is in hopes that we can grow more socially responsible in how we address this topic through discovering the resources being used, analyzing previous research related to this topic, and learning from educator testimonials recorded in this paper. Students have a need to explore the world and theatre has the capability to do that. Theatre can affect everyone who learns about its multitude of aspects, in some way. Theatre can affect a spectator watching a Broadway show who may not ever have

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thought to be sitting in a theatre in the first place or even a student who is stepping into their school's theatre class for the very first time. I find an intriguing aspect of theatre to be how it can be implemented in an educational setting to allow students the opportunity to grow their own understanding of the world.

Theatre is a subject within education that many high school students get the opportunity to experience and learn about in some form throughout their educational career. According to the National Endowment for the Arts, 48% of public schools in the United States of America offer some form of theatre education, whether through a structured course or extracurricular program (Elpus, p. 45). This means that of the 15.3 million students enrolled in public school as of Fall 2019, 7.3 million of those students could have the opportunity to be introduced to the realm of theatre through schooling if they choose or can participate in the opportunities their schools offer (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Students across the nation are being given the opportunity to dive into new ways of expression and analysis through theatre in safe spaces that may be cultivated by theatre educators.

The term that has been used broadly throughout education is creating "safe spaces" where self-expression is easily attainable because students are in a setting that allows for creativity to run the course. A safe space is a term that is used broadly in different contexts, but the definition is simply this: "a place intended to be free of bias, conflict, criticism, or potentially threatening actions, ideas, or conversations" (Merriam-Webster). Historically speaking, the phrase "safe spaces" has had much debate as it can be referring to an emotional safety for students versus an academic safety where students are safe to learn about various topics in schooling in an environment free of judgement or bias. According to a study done on Norwegian and Swedish classroom research, "the concept of 'safe space' derives from the 1970s women's and LGBT

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movement and was originally used to name physical meeting places where like-minded people could meet and share their experiences in a safe environment" (Flensner, 2019). Now, this term has been criticized as the environments that are labeled as "safe spaces" need to also be places where controversial opinions, debated topics, and academic freedom is offered so that all individuals in that space can feel they have a voice. It is a difficult task to think that a safe space can be a place where no one may be offended. However, making the environment clear aware that individual should not feel marginalized or afflicted while taking risks is a way to begin that daunting task in a classroom. The two versions of safe space that are largely used in academic settings refers to offering students the opportunity to "take intellectual risks" as well as allowing "emotional protection" to take place which happens when "respectfulness and discretion" are emphasized (Ho, 2017). Safe spaces in classrooms must be created by the teacher of that space first and foremost. After this happens, then students may help facilitate and uphold the requirements of keeping that shared space protected for all opinions and point of views to be heard. However, students must first feel safe in order to then feel responsible for upholding the safe space for others.

For theatre classrooms alike, theatre practitioners have the responsibility of creating a safe space for students to be able to express themselves without a fear of being misunderstood, shamed, or judged. For most high school theatre students, a theatre class is a fresh, new taste of this art form. These spaces are where students will have new experience and it is the hope that those new experiences are beneficial so that students grow and understand life, themselves, and others in a valuable way.

As I mentioned earlier, I feel that my own high school auditorium where my theatre classes took place was unique. There was something incredibly special about that space that was

completely different than that of the more traditional classrooms where core classes were taught. In an ideal world, all theatre classrooms offer spaces for students to do more than annotate a text or memorize a script. Rehearsal spaces and theatre teachers can do so much more than teach toward a test or standard. These settings are places where students can create, collaborate, and question important aspects of characters, plot, methods, history, and real-world situations (Benedetti, 1998). It is my hope that through exploring ways mental health is being addressed, theatre teachers can also find creative tools on engaging and teaching students about theatre in a way that is beneficial to a student's life.

Unfortunately, the ideal perspective mentioned may not be reality in all theatre classrooms and rehearsal spaces. The traditional theatre education curriculum may not be serving students today as much as a new form could. This is in part due to the shifts that students are navigating through on an everyday basis, from gun safety, mental health, the opioid crisis, cyber bulling, climate change, and an increasingly partisan political climate. There is a potential for theatre classrooms to adapt in the form of instruction taking place as teachers are calling for innovation due to the rapid shifts taking place in the world. Modernizations of the curriculum being taught offers students options to learn more about what is taking place in the world in a safe manner and environment (Lazarus, 2004; Wooster, 2016). Theatre curriculum can be used in a new form in order to address mental health. For instance, script analysis teaches students to analyze many different points, actions, and choices in a play; moreover, a character's thoughts, actions, emotions, and objectives are also being examined by students. The observations students make through studying these aspects of various characters can then connect and relate to real world understanding that these young minds have on real world people and circumstances. Theatre pieces in some form almost always relate to aspects of social change and mental health,

whether that be through an intention of the playwright to make those topics a prominent theme in character developments or plot line or if it becomes an underlying theme addressed and made aware by audience and directorial interpretation.

With the emotional connections that are made when a student is diving into the words of a script, dramaturgical research that a youth partakes in to better understand a piece of theatre, or drama exercises that challenge choices made by students to perform or act a certain way, students are being exposed to emotional realizations in some form. All these entities correlate to an opportunity for mental health to be a prominent topic discussed in theatre education classrooms and rehearsal spaces; however, there is not much research available when looking at this area of theatre education with a closer lens. Research of applied theatre in non-traditional educational settings provides evidence that supports the claim that theatre can address social needs of participants, which can then be reflected in a classroom setting (Sicket, Seacat, & Nabors, 2019). My study intended to fill the void/gap of addressing mental health in theatre education through my research and discover the various conversations or experiences that theatre educators in high school settings are encountering with students around the topic of mental health.

Statement of Problem

Although in a social setting the topic of mental health may be more easily discussed, in an educational institution, there are limitations that teachers face when bringing up such a topic, as there is a sensitivity toward subject matters that may be considered too mature for young audiences to discuss. Some of these limitations may also be lack of knowledge on such a subject as well as having a lack of resources to learn, discuss, and instruct on the topic of mental health. This is based out of the lack of knowledge available to theatre teachers, unlike someone who

may be a licensed therapist or counselor. When looking specifically at the instruction and training that educators go through about addressing mental health problems with students in their classrooms and schools, the programs offered are limiting and shallow, according to various teachers interviewed for this study.

These limitations are echoed in theatre education courses and rehearsal spaces being that such environments' learning standards do not bring any focus toward the addressing of mental health. Focusing specifically on the Florida State Standards for Theatre Education, it is important to note that of the 102 standards listed, none of them imply that the goal of instruction through such a standard relates to mental health education or discussion. There are specific standards that a theatre teacher could connect to real-world events and have that then be connected to discussing mental health as it applies to what that event is about. However, this is only if theatre educators creatively relate these standards to intentionally address mental health in some fashion. When looking at the National Health Standards for Public Schools, it is a shocking find that these too do not offer any explicit goals for student comprehension of their own mental health. The National Health Standards for Public Schools are as follows:

Standard 1   Students will comprehend concepts related to health promotion and disease prevention to enhance health.

Standard 2   Students will analyze the influence of family, peers, culture, media, technology, and other factors on health behaviors.

Standard 3   Students will demonstrate the ability to access valid information, products, and services to enhance health.

Standard 4   Students will demonstrate the ability to use interpersonal communication

skills to enhance health and avoid or reduce health risks.

Standard 5   Students will demonstrate the ability to use decision-making skills to

enhance health.

Standard 6   Students will demonstrate the ability to use goal-setting skills to enhance

health.

Standard 7   Students will demonstrate the ability to practice health-enhancing

behaviors and avoid or reduce health risks.

Standard 8   Students will demonstrate the ability to advocate for personal, family, and

community health.

(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Health Education Standards).

Now if students are intended to be able to meet all of the standards previously listed to the fullest

of their capability upon graduating from K-12 schooling, the standards of instruction for all areas

of learning should, in some form, teach students about how to do all the health standards that are

being reached. The epidemic of mental health issues for students is increasing, as we will

discover through analyzing related statistics by the World Health Organization. With this,

teachers of all subject matters must come together to create an overall better environment for

students to learn about what mental health is and how they can better their own mental health.

This does not have to be done in an extreme fashion in most cases, although possible. For

instance, teachers can implement simple check ins with students including breathing exercises,

verbal discussion of the high and low points of their days, or even a few moments of meditation.

If classroom teachers are not developing creative ways to teach to their course requirements as

well as ways to teach students about healthy reflective thinking on the real world, then students are in turn being sheltered from a plethora of knowledge on how to handle their own circumstances then and in the future.

In an ideal circumstance, parents are also helping their children understand how to deal with challenges. However, as teachers, it is not helpful to assume this is taking place in student homes because that can cause one to think they can't play a role in guiding a student in these areas, which can be done. To make it clear, no teacher's sole responsibility is to be a mental health professional for students as that is not in their job descriptions nor do they have the right qualifications to do so. Training for educators can be altered and improved in order to properly prepare them for various interactions with students in relation to that pupil's mental health. But teachers can be supplemental support for students to feel they can speak up about their questions, concerns, conditions, and more.

When looking at theatre educators and addressing mental health, there are limitations that cause issues for these explorations to take place. Many theatre educators focus on producing high quality theatre, which may make them feel as if they cannot afford to dedicate time to discussing mental health with their students. Many public schools promote theatre to have arts seen on stage. While producing theatre on a stage for audience entertainment is a value, having this be the sole form of theatre education at a school limits artists in the eyes of the rest of the world as many people who are not involved deeply in theatre work only see the end product as the art to be admired instead of the process of getting to that place as a beautiful master piece in itself. The process students will embark on when learning about character development, cultural diversity in theatre, theatre history, and so much more is enriching as each topic has can allow students to critically examine their own personal opinions of the world in which they live. It could be even

better to provide audiences with a glimpse of the enrichment that took place for students through the learning of those various topics so they too can grow in understanding.

One of the most famous acting methods taught and practiced today was created by Konstantin Stanislavski. Stanislavski believed that acting was about conscious thought which activates psychological processes that can only be woken through the art being experienced (Benedetti, 1998). Every possible play or musical that a student is assigned to addresses in some way and/or implicitly focuses on the mental health of the characters within those scenes; moreover, the acting methods being taught to students are training such young performers to think psychologically about their thoughts and feelings in relation to characters. This, in turn, means that students are being called to annotate the mental health of someone else without ever being able to understand or learn about such a topic if the conversations are not being cultivated by instructors within the classrooms.

Shifts in society can play a role in a student's understanding of the world. When looking at where this study took place, it is important to note some of the local events that may have affected student mental health. This is important as the observations the interviewees of this study may see in their theatre students may be vastly different than that of theatre practitioners in different locations with different current events affecting their students. The research for this study was conducted in Orlando, Florida where the tragic mass shooting at Pulse Night Club took place in 2016; moreover, there was another tragic mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018 in Parkland, Florida that effected the entire Florida school system and its safety guidelines in a large way. Another important note about the circumstances taking place during the time of this research which can directly affect student mental health is the global pandemic of the Coronavirus (COVID-19). This pressing issue is shifting most American

students to remote learning and social distancing which can cause a large, negative impact on their mental health.

It is important to note that research has been conducted over the topic of mental health shifts in relation to traumatic events taking place for students over various locations. One researcher reviewed a sample of 27 individuals affected by 15 various mass shootings occurring at various educational institutions and found "posttraumatic stress symptoms, major depression and other psychiatric disorders, in those exposed to the violence and those living in affected communities" (Druacker, 2019). This is noted as students in the area being studied for this research have lived in a city where a tragic and traumatic event, a mass shooting, has taken place. Also, it is necessary to mention that modern day students are consistently being exposed to various global events that can be traumatizing for someone to observe as well as be a part of in some form. This is in fact due to the growth in technology and social media.

Through investigation, I found that mental health problems spike with students who are affected by traumatic life events. Furthermore, the research found specifically on this topic has stated that

> It is important to provide professional support for the students whose expose to trauma is
> high or who suffer from trauma-related psychological symptoms and have a less
> supportive network. In a study of youths exposed to the suicide of a classmate, there was
> a need for crisis intervention at their school. However, early crisis intervention was not
> enough, and careful screening and follow up was suggested. (Murtonen, Suomalainen
> Haravuori, & Marttunen, 2012).

An individual's mental health is affected when a life change takes place, good or bad. For instance, people may be happy when life events happen such as a baby being born, but those

circumstances can still be stressful which can contribute to pre-existing mental conditions. In another example, people are affected when someone passes away or a sudden tragedy takes place. The way individuals deal with these life alterations may differ for each person; however, in some form their mental health is altered.

Examining the mental health issues among adolescents in the area being researched, Orlando, Florida, can be informed by surveying global mental health statistics in adolescents. According to the World Health Organization, "an estimated 10-20% of adolescents globally experience mental health conditions, yet these remain underdiagnosed and undertreated, as well as "globally, depression is the fourth leading cause of illness and disability among adolescents aged 15 – 19 years…Anxiety is the ninth leading cause" (World Health Organization, 2019). These statistics reiterate the fact that a problem is occurring among young students as there are large populations of pupils who struggle with forms of mental health and behavioral problems. These concerns are not being addressed appropriately within school settings, even though such students spend most of their time at school surrounded by teachers, advisors, peers, and counselors.

In *Mental Health Stigma: Impact on Mental Health Treatment Attitudes and Physical Health*, Amy E Sickel, Jason D Seacat, and Nina A. Nabors conduct an experiment with a large pool of subjects to prove their hypothesis right, that there is a stigma surrounding getting mental health support which correlates directly and indirectly to a person choosing whether or not to seek such help. This article serves a point in this study as it is important for the reader to understand the stigma that is otherwise prevalent in society when addressing mental health; therefore, students are more likely to not seek out support when dealing with mental health issues by mental health professionals and instead find that support in other ways. In Sickel, Seacat, and

Nabors' research, they found that "fewer than half of all individuals living with a diagnosable mental illness actually seek treatment for their mental health issues" (2). As students are possibly dealing with mental health problems or circumstances that may cause a lack of behavioral or emotional support, they are not likely to go someone professional to help or intentionally seek support.

Based on the curriculum that theatre educators teach in relation to critically examining character intention, for example, they are opening a forum about possible problems a character is facing or the "why" of a character's actions; this discussion can lead to the topic of mental health to be deliberated among students. Educators are faced with a large population of students each academic year, some of which may not be supported by parents to meet emotional needs that are necessary for proper development; therefore, teachers have the responsibility to provide safe environments for those students to have such needs met.

A source of evidence in conjunction with the previous statement can be found in a study conducted and analyzed by Amelia Gulliver, Kathleen M Griffiths, and Helen Christensen in *Perceived Barriers and Facilitators to Mental Health Help-Seeking in Young People: A Systematic Review.* This specific study compiled information on the perceived barriers that young people face when addressing or seeking help with mental health issues through qualitative and quantitative research studies, surveys, and observances. In this research, it was found that most of the young people being observed did not want to reach out to others as "most of these were concerns about what others, including the source of help itself, might think of them if they were to seek help" (Gulliver, Griffiths, and Christensen, 2010). These students were hesitant to speak with someone whose career choice was to help the student mentally through counseling and/or therapy.

These same types of mindsets exist in students in public high school settings. For instance, students may not be likely to reach out to the counselor on campus if that individual has a fear of a label or judgement being placed on them by other peers if someone were to see that student seeking professional help; however, in other cases, students could desperately be seeking out their counselors and those professionals can be overwhelmed with the large influx of students needing help and lack of resources available for them to aid those young people. It is also important to note that in most schools, counselors are merely academic advisors and not mental health professionals; the faculty members at schools whose purpose is to advise students may not always have the qualifications to provide mental health support. The way to resolve this issue of merely having students address their own mental health issues to professionals is through educators breaking down the stigma surrounding mental health through discussing the topic more openly with students. As the World Health Organization stated, "the consequences of not addressing adolescent mental health conditions extend to adulthood, impairing both physical and mental health and limiting opportunities to lead fulfilling lives as adults" (World Health Organization, 2019). This responsibility falls on every person who can teach and alter a child's life; teachers, parents, and guardians alike have the power to make a change on mental health stigma and conditions among their students if they simply begin addressing it. Moreover, it falls on every subject teacher, including theatre educators. The problem we now face is how to do this.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to exam educator practices regarding addressing mental health issues with 9th through 12th grade students. It is my hope that through having conversations about the choices which theatre educators are making to address mental health

with their students, we can then begin to brainstorm ways to better approach this topic with students while breaking down barriers of stigma and resources that teachers face. This study will reveal opportunities as well as a limitation that theatre educators face when addressing such topics.

Structure of Thesis

This thesis will be based on interviews with various secondary level theatre educators in high school level classrooms to determine what is taking place in theatre classrooms to address mental health with students. It is my intention on raising awareness of the mental health crisis taking place in young people today as well as start a conversation that hopefully continues beyond this research to find better ways to address mental health with students in theatre classrooms.

In this chapter, I started with an introduction to the research study on how mental health is being addressed in secondary theatre education classrooms and rehearsal spaces, and included a personal overview, statement of problem, as well as a description of the purpose of the study. In chapter two, a literature review will be conducted on scholarly sources that pertain in some form to the subject being addressed, specifically focusing on theatre in education, theatre curriculum, theatre and social change, and mental health in the classroom. In chapter three, I will illustrate the design and methodology of the research study, including the process that will be taken to collect data. In chapter four, findings from the data collected will be analyzed to see how the information gathered pertains to the research question. Chapter five will be a conclusion of the study, findings, personal perspective of the topic being addressed, as well as further research questions that will be examined due to this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theatre in Education

Theatre education is different than math, science, or reading classes because students are being taught about a creative art form which requires a certain skill set different than that which is needed to learn core subjects. Art is interpreted and adaptive. Theatre education is important because "it helps to develop the learner's thinking and get rid of the stodgy atmosphere of education: characterized by repetition and stagnation. Also, it helps to develop his personality through integration and work and cooperation with the group" (Jarrah, 2019). The performing arts in education is a tool to develop a unique outlook on reflective thinking and problem-solving skills. For instance, some students can learn better when they are performing a piece of reading, rather than merely reading it; this is because visually, students are seeing the work come to life in front of them. Theatre creates space for creative brainstorming to be cultivated which then offers space for reflection.

In a study aimed to identify the impact of drama in education on life skills and reflective thinking, it was concluded that "reflection is of great importance as it teaches students to reach logical and correct results in the situations they face inside and outside school, as it increases their efficiency, and develops their ability to reach the right results" (Jarrah, 2019). In my opinion, the most important question a person should always ask themselves is "why?". Students, teachers, and other individuals in the world all need to continuously reflect on why they are doing what they are doing or feeling what they are feeling; moreover, there needs to be safe spaces for individuals to explore their "why".

Theatre curriculum is offered at about half of the public schools in the United States, as previously stated. In these classrooms, theatre teachers are teaching students about a variety of

theatre related topics like theatre over history, theatre and social change, diversity in

entertainment, the business of theatre, various roles within theatre, among other possibilities.

These topics or units that teachers can dive into instruction on each carry an important aspect

about them that is important for students to learn in order to fully understand and appreciate the

performing arts.

Existing literature reveals ways in which theatre is a beneficial tool to cultivate mental

health related conversations or coping mechanisms. Research conducted by Hani Yousef Jarrah

concluded that "The effectiveness of utilizing theater as a way to advance change by exploiting

its forceful emotional part has been ascribed to two fundamental capacities: a cathartic capacity

as well as a performative" (Jarrah, 2019). This specific study sampled 100 students in 10th grade

at Emirates National School in Abu Dhabi. The purpose of this study was to investigate the

impact drama had on students when it was incorporated in their classes, outside of just a theatre

course. This study is noted as it relates to theatre having a means of emotionally divulging into

topics that participants of the craft may not otherwise investigate in such an open forum.

A second piece of support for this research is found in Roger Wooster's *Theatre in*

Education: It's a Critical Time for Critical Thinking. In this writing, Wooster discusses the

historical upbringing of theatre in education as it developed in the 1960s as well as analyzes the

obstacles that have become so multifaceted for theatre educators today, including funding

limitations, class sizes, lack of resources, and stigma on theatre education not being important in

comparison to other courses. Wooster's research chronicles how theatre in education, or T.I.E.,

first developed after World War II, when parents began to look at education with a more

egalitarian approach (Wooster, 2016). T.I.E. then became more developed as arts councils and

prominent theatre practitioners began to form and become known. T.I.E. today has transformed

from what it first was intended to be in the 1960s. Theatre in education "enables children to 'muse' upon possible futures, to conceptualize problems and envisage solutions. The imaginative use of play to place ourselves empathetically into thought processes of another has given rise to the art form of theatre, but it also offers this continuing tool of self-development" (Wooster, 2016). This area of education divulges students into a way of thinking uniquely found through analysis, repetition, and conversation about a variety of critical thinking. Theatre in education is an art form that is considered therapeutic and cathartic for people to partake in; this is necessary for students in their developmental years so they may become more easily able to understand their own emotions and judgements.

Theatre Curriculum

Theatre in education has been analyzed and determined to be beneficial for students; however, there are limitations educators face when it comes to the facilitation of theatre in classrooms, whether that be a core subject classroom conducting theatrical activities that correlate to their subject matter or theatre educators in their theatre courses. The National Center for Education Statistics found that "there was an equality gap in arts offerings and the quality of instruction. Furthermore, findings revealed that students in affluent schools were much more likely to have skilled drama teacher than students in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods – that is, if they have drama programs at all" (Duffy, 2016). Some populations across the United States do not have the economic ability or resources to offer theatrical programs within their public schools. This limits those students who attend such schools from being able to develop their reflective thinking as the creative opportunity to do so found through theatre education is not available.

Another way in which theatre curriculum is limited, causing a gap in how students are able to learn more about this subject or grow through theatrical lessons and activities, is through standardized testing. As Duffy states, "Federal education accountability initiatives like the Bush administration's *No Child Left Behind* and the Obama administration's *Race to the Top* pressured schools to reduce classes outside of the non-STEM courses due to accountability standardized testing" (Duffy, 2016). This federal pressure has pushed theatre out of schools as such institutions are being pressured to ensure efficient standardized testing results are proficient enough to receive funding; this deemphasizes theatre courses because they do not correlate to funding being given.

Theatre curriculum for schools that do offer theatrical courses are normally not pre-designed curriculum units for theatre educators to use; moreover, the state standards that are required for theatre courses to instruct upon are not focused on specific areas of reflective thinking or mental health combative or conversations. Theatre curriculum has the capability to be enriching for students who partake in the lessons and activities surrounding the subject, but restrictions such as poverty, economic status, educational testing, standards, and traditional theatre education, must be overcome in order for there to be groundbreaking innovation to occur (Duffy, 2016).

Theatre and Social Change

Theatre educators should feel they have resources readily available and accessible to use in order to address mental health. According to author Joan Lazarus in *Signs of Change,* theatre education is a socially responsible practice. This is correlated to the specific research being proposal as theatre educators are seemingly accountable for opening a dialogue about correlation and causation of mental health issues not only seen in prominent characters in plays, but in the

real world, based off the context of Lazarus's text. As Lazarus has stated, socially responsible practice includes teaching students how to connect with their learning. An example Lazarus gives is students working on analyzing William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, in which "students working on this may not be considering suicide or facing gang violence, but they can identify with defying or being thwarted by authority figures or being part of a group that is either privileged or excluded from certain activities" (Lazarus, 2004). This example is one of the many ways in which correlation is facilitated by a theatre educator when analyzing a play with students; moreover, these students then can open discussion about theatre making and reflective learning.

Although the focus of this thesis is to explore the conversations happening within theatre educational settings around the topic of mental health, the literature being reviewed offers insight to theatre educators on ways to approach such topics. When looking at theatre and social change, it is important to also explore arts-based therapy that has positively impacted individuals who struggle with various mental health issues such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and/or behavioral problems. For instance, a 2017 study was conducted at a Norwegian mental health hospital which offered theater and music workshops to various patients who were suffering from long term mental health illnesses. In this study, researchers Orjasaeter and Ness discovered that prior to doing such arts-based workshops, the patients reported feeling less open and willing to address their illnesses to mental health professionals. However, after the art form was implemented, patients felt more open to speak about their mental health illnesses as less professionalism and more expression was offered. This specific social experiment offers insight to this research as it highlights ways in which theatre can alter outcomes of addressing difficult topics and situations.

Another therapeutic art form that has been shown to positively affect individuals with various mental health issues is drama movement therapy. In a 2019 study, researchers synthesized 41 controlled intervention studies, with 21 being samples who partook in dance movement therapy. Of these samples, the control group was that each person being observed was diagnosed with either depression, anxiety, or schizophrenia and/or possible had autism, were elderly, and/or diagnosed with a disease that was life threatening. In this investigation, it was found that

> DMT decreases depression and anxiety and increases quality of life and interpersonal and cognitive skills, whereas dance interventions increase (psycho-)motor skills. Larger effect sizes resulted from observational measures, possibly indicating bias. Follow-up data showed that on 22 weeks after the intervention, most effects remained stable or slightly increased. (Koch, Riege, Tisborn, Biondo, Marti, & Beelman, 2019)

This investigation reiterates the notion which is being explored: how art forms have the capability to improve mental health in individuals who are actively engaged in such art.

Mental Health in the Classroom

Now that review has been completed on theatre in education, theatre education itself, theatre for social change, and various art forms in relation to therapy, it is time to get as close as possible to the intention of my research, which is to find out how, and if, mental health is being addressed in the theatre classroom. Before being able to explore this research question, it is important to first discover how mental health is being addressed in schools across the nation, across all subjects. A systematic review was conducted on universal mental health awareness programs in K-12 schooling throughout the United States. In this 2016 investigation, it was concluded that universal mental health programs should be implemented across schools in the

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nation as the research found that students learned more through intentionally being taught about mental health then prior to being in such programs. This investigation sampled 15 studies and found that upon educating the studies on mental health topics including mental health, mental illness, violence, mental health issues, mental health literacy, depression, depression risk factors, suicide, suicide risk factors, suicide warning signs, and suicide myths and facts, there was an improvement in pre-test versus post-test results (Salerno, 2017). This means the study showed understanding and knowledge increased when education on such topics was given. Providing a universal mental health program to students which covers all areas surrounding mental health, gives students the opportunity to become informed, aware, and able to understand and help when mental health issues or signs of risk are seen among themselves and those around them.

Although universal mental health awareness is ideally the best alternative to addressing and combating mental health among students, these programs are not necessarily offered across all schools, making the responsibility of addressing such topics to have to take place more flexibly in the classrooms. For instance, instead of students being taken out of classes to be taught by mental health professional on this subject, teachers can talk with students on mental health in creative ways. Specifically, in relation to this research, theatre educators have the greatest platform to be able to bring such topics up as they are addressing so many areas of critical and reflective thinking that can take the route to then bring up mental health among students.

When zooming into the focus of this research, which is theatre education and mental health in students, looking at personal testimony of theatre educators in relation to mentoring reflects the intention of the research being done. Testimony of firsthand experiences with students in theatre classrooms is what makes up this research and offers insight to other theatre

educators on the front line in classrooms each day. Author Elizabeth Swados put to words a testimony that seems to be common across theatre teachers. In her novel, *At Play, Teaching Teenagers Theatre,* she stated

> I've said that I believe the theater can heal. When students are fired up enough to express themselves and find form for that expression, the theater can battle humiliation and horror of a bad home life, problems in school, or unspoken secret terrors. Often those who become the most smitten by artistic expression are the students you'd never expect to last a day… We have to make theater—this powerful and magical art form—more accessible to outsiders as well as those bursting with talent and confidence. You never know what you'll find… and those young people may bring to enrich your classroom as well as their own lives. (Swados, 2006)

Theatre is a unique form of expression that actors and audience members alike get to experience. As students are struggling with outside circumstances as well as internal challenges, their mental health is being affected and theatre offers the ability for relief and reflection to take place.

METHODOLOGY

Research Question

        The intention of this research was to gather information about what exactly is taking place in theatre education courses and rehearsal spaces when addressing mental health, as well as exploring whether this topic is being introduced implicitly or explicitly. This study sought to answer the following question: What are the conversations taking place and methodologies being used in 9-12 theatre education classrooms and rehearsal spaces to discuss mental health?

Researcher's Role

        The role of a researcher is not merely to gather information or data which correlates to this study. Playing this role, I needed to and acknowledge the limitations I face in order for this study to be successful. It is important to note the features of any researcher that may alter the responses, inadvertently, of those being interviewed for this study as well as the language that may seemingly appear in this work. In this case, it is important to note that I, as the researcher am a straight white, young female, with no experience working directly with the student population being analyzed. When discussing this topic, I had the responsibility of being aware of my bias yet overcoming those privileges, stigmas, limitations, and differences from the population being researched on, to create a conversation that is productive.

Research Setting

        The qualitative data being collected for this study was from various secondary education theatre educators who currently work in an educational environment, teaching theatrical courses. It is important to note that the location in which this information was collected in was Orlando, Florida. This is mentioned because Orlando, Florida is a large hub of performing arts center and culture, with many opportunities of theatre educational growth that may not otherwise be

available in other locations. Due to this, the tone when I approached the topic of theatre, regarding the focus of this research on mental health for students in theatre education focused areas, may be different than that in a location that may not have such a plethora of resources and opportunities for theatre accessible for its students.

Research Participants

I sought out willing participants to be interviewed for the thesis who were currently serving as secondary level theatre educators in a high school setting. Four interviewees were reached out to via professional email and private Facebook connection groups. The identity of each participant remained anonymous, ensuring that communication with each interviewee only involved the researcher, the researcher's thesis chair, and each interviewee individually.

In the findings chapter of this study, the interviewees will be referred to under the pseudonyms Adams, Bernard, Crows, and Delacruz. Such willing participants were reached out to privately upon showing willingness to be interviewed. Adams is a female theatre teacher who began her career directly after college graduation. She has worked at her current high school since 2013, which is a school that serves over 2,000 students; of which is 58% minorities. Bernard is a theatre teacher who began teaching seven years prior to this research and has only ever been employed at the school he currently is employed in since the start of his teaching career; prior to teaching, he led young adult theatre projects and productions. Crows is a male teacher who has been teaching for fifteen years in secondary education. The school Bernard and Crows both work at has over 3,000 students with 88% students being minorities; 64% of those students are Hispanic. Delacruz is a female teacher who began teaching as an English teacher until she transitioned to become a full-time theatre teacher. The demographics of Delacruz's

school is over 50% students being Hispanic, over 30% are white, and the remaining number of students are black, Asian, or another ethnic group (Pubic School Review).

Race and gender were a variable in this study as it is important to gather information from diverse sources, being that these aspects do play a role in the way a student may approach their theatrical education, whether that is intentional or not. I attempted to ensure no questions being asked in the interview process made the individual being interviewed uncomfortable or unwilling to participate; however, if the participant being interviewed did voice concern, the portion of the interview questions that emit such feelings could be skipped.

Ethical Considerations

This study was submitted and approved to the University of Central Florida's IRB Office of Research for approval prior to research being conducted and publication taking place. The secondary level theatre educators that were interviewed remain anonymous to protect the integrity of the interviewees and the educational institutions in which they were or are employed.

Data Collection

The following process was used to collect data for this research: I connected with four secondary high school level theatre teachers in a specific county within Orlando, Florida to ask for consent on whether those educators would like to be interviewed for a University of Central Florida undergraduate level thesis project. All necessary information about the thesis project, including the research question and intent of the project to those being asked to be interviewed was given. After each subject individually consented to being interviewed, an appointed time for a one-on-one interview was decided by the interviewee and myself.

Each interview took approximately 25 to 60 minutes and the interviewee were asked a total of eight questions pertaining to the research topic. The pre-determined questions were

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designed to ensure that the responses could correlate to each interviewee's individual experiences with high school drama/theatre students, specifically focusing on discussions of mental health with such youth. The nature of the interview required interpretation of the responses during the interview as well as after. After interviews have been transcribed, common themes among the interview responses from all teachers who participated were annotated. Once common themes had been analyzed, I determined the obstacles theatre educators who were interviewed seemed to face as well as discussed where the research should go next.

The interview questions that were asked are as follows:

1. What is your experience as a theatre/drama teacher in secondary education?

2. Have you worked in other counties, or are you familiar with other counties? If so, have you noticed any differences in how the topic of mental health is approached, or received, in theatre education?

3. What are the responsibilities of a theatre educator when addressing mental health in classroom and rehearsal spaces?

4. How do you perceive the mental health issues facing your theatre students? Do you feel that there has been a change in student mental health from the time you started teaching to now?

5. As a teacher, do you intentionally address mental health when teaching and/or directing, and if so, how?

6. Do you feel that there are enough resources (plays, curriculum, professional development) available to theatre teachers to help combat mental health problems students face? If so, what are those resources that you have used?

7. Is your school environment supportive of you incorporating conversations surrounding mental health in your theatre classes and/or productions? What limitations have you faced? How have you advocated for your work?
8. Does the canon of plays suitable for secondary education adequately address issues surrounding mental health? Can you provide an example of a theatrical piece that may bring up mental health in a productive or unproductive manner?

It was the hope that through this research, best practices can be learned and shared amongst theatre educators, so mental health can be a focus in student education. It merely starts with a conversation and that can spark conversation and brainstorming amongst educators, no matter the subject area, to make the arts more accessible to students so that creative facilitation of discussing mental health can happen.

FINDINGS

This chapter will discuss the responses of four teachers across the Orlando, Florida school district in regard to the interview questions previously listed for the conducting of this research. Those who participated in this research have had their identities changed for the purpose of keeping their personal and employment information private. The pseudonyms being used for all the participants are Adams, Bernard, Crows, and Delacruz. It should also be noted that these participants are of various backgrounds, cultures, and age groups who all teach a variety of 9th through 12th grade students.

Mental Health Changes

Mental Health continues to change over time as we evolve, experience, and expose ourselves to various factors. The participants in this study were interviewed and asked their views on those changes; such as their thought process on how mental health has been addressed in society and particularly what students' perspective on this is compared to the time the participants began working in the education industry to now.

Adams and Bernard both agreed in their responses, believing that mental health was not as accepted as an "open dialogue" culturally over five years ago when either of them began their teaching careers. Adams and Delacruz each discussed how they perceive students today to be more open about speaking on their mental health concerns than they were in the past. For instance, Adams observed this during an activity called "senior circle" where fourth year students were provided an opportunity to communicate openly about any feelings or experiences in theatre they have had over their time in the theatre department at that school. During this time, one student began candidly speaking to their castmates and teacher about how they had struggled with suicidal thoughts and their attempted suicide. Adams considers this a "profound" moment

as what tended to happen was other students also began to open-up about their mental health struggles with each other. It was a cathartic experience for students who authentically connected, genuinely related, and safely discussed their own internal trials and tribulations where once there had been reservation to do so. This is similar to Orjasaeter and Ness's 2017 findings in the Norwegian hospital where when exposed to the arts-based workshops, the patients became more open with discussing their mental conditions. Although the "senior circle" that Adams facilitated was not the same form of a workshop as this 2017 study, there are commonalities between the two which show how arts-based activities provide a more informal platform for participants to feel comfortable to discuss possible difficult or personal struggles.

Bernard shared how at the start of his teaching career there was little to no discussion of mental health in theatre whereas now mental health is discussed in almost every production process that deals with subject matter that may be sensitive. He believes that his own personal growth could be a reason for his more skilled approach at discussing mental health in his classrooms, but the topic itself being addressed in society could be due to the influx of knowledge and awareness that now comes through technology and research. All of the interviewees believe that due to growing awareness of mental health issues, the topic has become discussed much more often among students. Although the awareness is growing, Bernard believes more conscious initiatives need to be made to educate students on this topic because theatre students are being asked to "re-live struggles that they have had and tumultuous moments in their lives or things that bring up those kind of memories in order to tap into their creative outlet in their performances." Students are being asked to take a deeper dive into the depths of their thought processes that can and may alter their mentality on sensitive subject matter relating to their personal challenges.

Crows also agrees with the connotation that students are seemingly more open to discuss their struggles then in the past, stating "there is a decrease in the negative connotation of drama, referring to conflict among the students"; however, Delacruz challenges this fact by saying students may be more in tune with one another because they are all struggling more than ever before. We can see this possibility supported through World Health Organization's rapid rising statistics over the years of mental health conditions in adolescents. Crows was the only interview participant to bring this topic up that there is a large increase in recent years in students who are diagnosed with various mental disabilities such as Attentive Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder versus physical disabilities, which were the more common diagnosis over mental disability when Crows began teaching. This as well as Delacruz shared that we have dramatically altered student mental health over the years due to the "impossibly high" standards being pushed on students to "be good at everything" as well as the constant access to social media making it "exuberantly harder" as students are not resting or escaping from the struggles they are facing.

Responsibilities

As previously discussed, teachers have various responsibilities put on them that are clearly not seen in their formal job descriptions. All four of the participants agreed that teachers are responsible for student safety, which correlates to Lazarus' statement on being socially responsible human beings. Social responsibility is a concept that all teachers need to feed into in order for them to create a tremendous amount of change seen in student mental health. Adams believes the topic is so consistently discussed among that specific population due to the connection and comfortability those students have with their theatre teachers. This is similar to Bernard's observation of his students which he believes is due to the fact that theatre students find theatre classrooms to be places where open expression of emotions can take place. Adams

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stated, "we see a shift and change in them", in reference to theatre teachers who spend such large portions of time with students and how with that, there are signs which become easily seen in student emotional and mental tendencies. In the interview, Adams quoted their student who referred to Adams as "the theater teacher, but you're also mom, psychiatrist, counselor …". All of the participants in this research restated the fact that they feel more than just an instructor on theatre topics to their students.

As some of the participants similarly stated, it feels as though theatre educators hold many more roles than just being teachers. Talking with Delacruz, she referred to a new initiative that was adopted in the same school district where this study was being conducted in during the gathering of this research. This new initiative, which was implemented recently in Spring of 2020, makes it mandatory for teachers to provide training and instruction on the topic of mental health to students. The interview with Delacruz was different in relation to the others as this new curriculum for teachers was implemented prior to the interview, while the other interviews did not have this training initiative available for use in the classroom yet. The 2016 investigation previously discussed stated that students learned more through intentional mental health training at their school then in a more subtle manner previously used. Hopefully the new Orlando initiative for mental health training in their schools also finds the same or even better results.

Intentionality

Many of these theatre teachers discussed how they intentionally cultivate conversations pertaining to mental health with their students. Intentionality in this case is best defined as the quality of mental state that consists in being directed toward someone's thoughts, actions, or beliefs. Each of the participants spoke about how they have used their own experiences to create open dialogue about mental health to then spark students to do the same about their own lived

experiences through small group discussions, cultivating a clear safe space, and mirroring life experiences in exercises. Adams said she do not intentionally address mental health unless it is brought up in some fashion which at that point the topic would be discussed. However, Bernard did say that a technique used to intentionally focus on mental health of his students is through daily reminders to those students about going at the pace they feel comfortable with in the rehearsal process, especially when dealing with sensitive topics. The interviewees each stated how they use various methods such as group conversations among students to educate them on becoming more aware of other individuals' feelings and not just their own.

Like Bernard, Crows mentions that the first class and/or first rehearsal is when you inform students that the theatre is the safe place where students can be out of their comfort zone and try new things but also celebrate failure in stepping out of tendencies they have previously created. This discussion is also a way to assure students of the educator's open-door policy is available to all their students if needed. Crows feels that "theatre teachers and theatre people tend to have a higher emotional IQ… We pick up on moods and issues; we are in touch with that. A kid can go into a math class and it doesn't matter what their state of being is; it is 'do these problems, the end.' I think with us, it is different. There is an innate sense of having your finger on the pulse of where kids are." Crows feels that the culture needs to be deliberately cultivated in order to create connections and life experiences which, in turn, will develop the easy ability to become more aware of a student's mental health. The others agree, it is critically important to check-in with your students, sometimes even daily, asking how they are mentally without it necessarily being an obvious mental health check in so to speak. Delacruz stated, "we are reading plays and analyzing characters that go through things which drum up issues for these kids"; theatre is a segue into discussion on mental health. The most common theme throughout

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each of the interviewees was how important each of the interviewees felt on ensuring that students are aware that their theatre class has an open-door and open-communication policy.

Resources

Although each of the interviewee's school administrations seem to be supportive of the theatre departments, all of these participants agreed that there are not enough mental health professionals on their campuses or in the area for rehearsal processes. As participant Bernard stated, "We have one SAFE counselor and the kids often come to me and say, 'No, I don't want to go to the SAFE counselor because there is nothing they will do for me.'" The SAFE counselor on the Orlando school campuses are a part of the Student Assistance and Family Program for that county, whose responsibility is to provide resources for students who are struggling with mental illness or need support due to financial circumstances so they have a place to go to at school to feel heard. The issue is that there are not enough of these counselors on campuses, as agreed upon by all of the interviewees. Bernard and Crow's school holds a population of over 3,000 students; there is one mental health professional on that campus for those adolescents to speak with as well as for teachers to receive support from in facilitating conversations on mental health with their classes. Similar to Crows, Bernard also believes that referring their students to the counselor at the school is in a way a "let down" as it is known that such pupils will not seek out that professional help and want to receive direct advice from the person they feel closer to at school which, in that case is Bernard or Crows.

This is different from what Adams believes, which is that students are more willing to go seek professional help from an on-campus counselor at their school if the recommendation was made by Adams. This is due to the fact that Adams believes that theatre educators are the "front-line" for students, and they are more willing to receive suggestions from the person they are

confiding in in the first place. Both Crows and Delacruz noted that the training they have

received over the years which has made them capable of creating connections with students and

easily seeing student mental and emotional needs which came solely through life experiences.

Bernard went further into this discussion on lack of resources as it pertained to theatre

industry personnel not being available to help in many theatres to deal with sensitive subject

matter for actors. For instance, Bernard had difficulty finding what is called a sensitivity coach,

or someone to be the mediator of guiding students to feel comfortable trying new choices

through their acting when dealing with subject matter that could be triggering to a student due to

their own lived traumatic experiences, to instruct students during a rehearsal of a show titled

Almost, Maine. The sensitivity coach would provide students the opportunity to be learn what

consent is, understand of how the scenes they were in could affect their own thoughts and

feelings, and support better direction on how to deal with sensitive subject matter. Bernard

searched in the Orlando area for a sensitivity coach and could not seem to find any. All of the

interviewees believe that mental health has "come to the forefront" of conversations in recent

times versus in the past where it may not have been as accepting of such discussions. However,

there are not any specific resources available to theatre educators as a tool for addressing mental

health in lesson plans and productions other than specific plays which evidentially note on such

subjects.

Another topic discussed was a mental health training initiated in the 2019-2020 academic

year in which school faculty members are required to complete an online program meant to

educate them on mental health and offer ways to approach mental health with students.

Commentary on this training was given from various participants of this research. All of these

participants stated that this was the first initiative they each were apart of regarding mental health

awareness training. Of these responses given on this training, Bernard said "it's okay but it's not incredibly personalized. It's sort of like a test; you sit there trying to get the answers right and there is a separation between a relationship and an online based interaction." The participants believe that a majority of the training is common sense but that most teachers may not be as in tune to addressing student emotional and mental struggles as theatre educators may be due to the everyday occurrences which theatre educators face. When analyzing responses on the new training now available for teachers to facilitate with students in the school county that this is research is being conducted, Delacruz stated that although the training is useful, "one size does not fit all." This means that not every student population or individual has the same struggles or imbalances; therefore, there needs to be more individualistic approach for dealing with student mental health.

In regard to the canon of plays offered to secondary education theatrical companies, it is noted by Bernard that "almost all plays bring up mental health in some way, whether in between the lines or an actual theme of the show". The plays that are offered across theatre education are available to a variety of diverse schools and populations; however, it is normally under the discretion of the administration and theatre director at the school to decide what is acceptable to perform or learn in class and what is not. Crows even stated that the plays that are available to secondary education theatre classrooms are dependent on what each administration of various schools allow to be produced and analyzed. This in turn may cause a shift in the way mental health is approached by a variety of theatre educators as they are set with different boundaries across different schools. Some theatrical pieces that were brought up as suitable works which adequately address mental health in some form are *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams which portrays the many losses the protagonist, Blanch DuBois, goes through and how

those losses impact her future decision making. *Next to Normal*, by Brian Yorkey, focuses on topics of bipolar disorder, depression, suicide, and drug abuse throughout the character Diana Goodman, a mother who is managing all of these various struggles. These pieces are just two of the many theatrical works that can be analyzed in theatre education classrooms to help teachers address challenging topics like mental health.

CONCLUSION

The conversation surrounding mental health in theatre education has now begun through this research. Four educators were interviewed and through that analysis, it was concluded that there is more work that clearly needs to be done in order to even put a dent in creating mental health advocation and education for students. This study found that high school students are lacking resources they need to address their own mental health needs; moreover, schools are not providing enough training and support for teachers to feel prepared to have conversations surrounding mental health with students. With new advancements in this area which came to light toward the end of this study, it is refreshing to see some change but there needs to be more. The high statistics presented in this research proves a point in itself that students are in desperate need of help to better alleviate the struggles they face mentally.

Teachers can help combat mental health conditions. This study has proven that there are ways in which theatre educators can analyze their curriculum and activities for students in order for more intentional support to be given surrounding discussing mental health with students. This goes for all classrooms and educational spaces, not merely theatre courses; moreover, school districts worldwide need to be setting a precedent that mental health should be focused on as it is clearly evident that this topic is a large factor in students' lives. From educators to administrators, school faculty and staff should be the facilitators of these conversations so that students are informed and feel they have a safe space to speak up. All educational institutions need to be that place for students, not merely theatre classrooms, although that is the focus of this research.

Specifically, when looking at theatre courses, it is important to continue to break down the stigma that has seemingly grown around arts related fields of education, which is that those

courses are not as important as S.T.E.M. classes. Theatre courses are as important as any other educational lesson. Theatres across the world are open spaces for educating and challenging one's way of thinking through watching a show on stage and learning how to apply that to one's life. Theatre education offers students the ability to creatively analyze who they are and how they think about certain life circumstances including but not limited to culture, labels, status, abilities, and mentality.

Mental health is relevant in society today as more research is being conducted and available. This topic has become a discussion across multiple industries, and we have seen how the arts have been able to creatively cultivate conversations to initiate such discussions and provide support for those who may struggle with mental illness. In education, the idea that student mental health needs to be addressed and focused on has only recently emerged, and only in a very small portion of the education system. This research's purpose was to further that conversation about mental health in classrooms, specifically focusing on theatre education classrooms and rehearsal spaces. It is not the intention of this research to find an all-encompassing solution to the never-ending rabbit hole that is mental health issues which are seen in this world that is continuously being infected by negative and tragic circumstances and events which alter such internal balances.

Research surrounding these topics has now been conducted, but there are questions left unanswered. This research is important because it should matter how adults who regularly engage with youth—whether as educators, actors, parents, principals, lawyers, or doctors— what approach the topic of mental health. It is especially essential to focus on mental health in adolescents as they are the next generation that will become the future professionals in various industries. Young people are being faced with so many more factors that can affect their mental

health negatively; this can be anything from technology being a means of constant information and communication and it always being available, or to the growing violence and safety issues facing the world. Mental health is altered by all of these factors and more, and the job of those who help guide and shape students is to help mentor them in their mental health as well. This is just as, if not more important, than students learning math, science, history, or even theatre in school. School is a place of growing for all areas of one's life, not just for reaching learning goals and standards in order to graduate.

Whether an educator or bystander in student education, every individual in a student's life has a responsibility to talk about the facts surrounding mental health which can catapult a positive change in alleviating mental health issues in adolescents. Specifically, those who are theatre educators have a unique opportunity in their everyday classrooms and rehearsal spaces to use the incredible art form that is theatre to discuss mental health with students. As the prominently known acting teacher Stella Adler once said, "The word theatre comes from the Greeks. It means the seeing place. It is the place people come to see the truth about life and the social situation. The theatre is a spiritual and social x-ray of its time. The theatre was created to tell people the truth about life and the social situation" (*The Art of Acting).* Theatre has the ability to reflect life on stage; from human connection to mental processing, theatre is a representation of people. The performing arts has the capability to bring to light on the otherwise dim lit conversations of mental health. This in itself is what we do next with our students. We start the conversation.

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