

A Welcoming Space for Whom?: Race and Inclusion in Suburban High School Theater Programs

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ABSTRACT

One of the most frequently cited points of pride for high school theater teachers is the inclusivity of their programs. Research in the past has demonstrated this narrative carries through to students as well, who often note that high school theater programs provide “physically and emotionally nurturing spaces...where niche community finds safe haven and encouragement of expression” (McCammon et al., 2012). As a teacher and researcher, I ask for whom are we creating these safe spaces? This literature review presents evidence that many theater programs, especially at majority-white schools, likely struggle to support and include BIPOC students, but that little research exists on BIPOC students’ experiences or about how best to address this struggle to create racially inclusive theater communities. Because of this gap, I explore the existing literature on BIPOC students’ experiences in majority-white schools and in diverse theater programs in urban schools and community programs, as well as work outside

academia that points toward potential underlying causes, solutions, and areas for additional inquiry.

As a former high school theater student and teacher, I've been steeped in the pervasive ideology that high school theater programs are inherently inclusive, "physically and emotionally nurturing spaces...where niche community finds safe haven and encouragement of expression" (McCammon et al., 2012, p. 11). In fact, former participants in high school theater programs consistently describe their high school theater programs as "safe environments" (p. 31) that gave them "a sense of belonging when [they] didn't fit in" (p. 34).

I found similar attitudes pervasive when, in my previous role as an urban¹ high school theater teacher, I attended the 2018 Broadway Teachers' Workshop in New York City, a professional development opportunity that, from my informal observations, seemed to be populated by mostly middle-class, white teachers from middle-class, suburban, predominantly white schools.² In casual conversation, one teacher noted that their theater program was like the "Island of Misfit Toys." Another bragged that her theater club was the Gay-Straight Alliance at her school. The inclusivity of programs was a general point of pride and a motivating factor of their work; however, I began to question for which students their programs offered safe haven during a talkback for *Once on this Island*, a show steeped in racial themes and performed by an all-Black cast. A teacher, who presented as a white woman, asked what I found to be a racially insensitive question about whether her majority-white school could perform *Once on this Island* since Broadway smash *Hamilton* had cast Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) as historically white figures, to approving nods from the crowd of over 100 educators. In discussion later, no one else seemed bothered by the question. I wondered whether BIPOC students would find "safe haven" in spaces created by these educators. My curiosity was further piqued by recent online discourse among theater teachers wondering if they could produce other popular musicals that require BIPOC cast members at schools with few BIPOC

¹ Throughout, I'll refer to suburban and predominantly white schools interchangeably.

² I define urban schools as those serving predominantly BIPOC students and/or students qualifying for free and reduced lunch in a major metro area.

students, like *In the Heights* and *Hairspray*, with the creators of *Hairspray* even green-lighting the idea of all-white productions (Liner, 2012; Peterson, 2018).

This led to my questioning the inclusivity narrative around high school theater programs, specifically at predominantly white schools, which according to a recent NCES survey are often the schools with the resources necessary to support robust theater programming (Duffy, 2016). My research was guided by the following questions: does the discourse around inclusivity in theater programs match the material practices? Sub questions I considered include: How are BIPOC students included or excluded from these programs? Are theater programs seen as “safe havens” for all students, regardless of race, and how does the race of students affect text selection, given that schools may only be able to create work featuring predominantly white casts?

In beginning this review, I reflected on the position from which I enter into this research. I am a cis-gendered, white, middle-class woman in my thirties who grew up attending majority-white suburban schools but have spent the whole of my teaching career in urban schools. As such, I am almost 15 years removed from regular experiences in suburban schools, thus my hypothesis cannot be investigated using my own recent experiences. I also cannot know the experiences of BIPOC students in a majority white theater programs. Perhaps tellingly, I didn’t even interact with many when I was a theater student. Although I attended a performing arts magnet program that pulled from 16 different districts across my diverse Midwestern city, only one black student was enrolled in my sixty-student program the two years I attended. This is obviously a singular example that cannot prove my hypothesis about the environment of programs nationally, but it does point to an area for inquiry. I also currently support pre-service theatre teachers who are about to embark on careers in a wide swath of school environments who could benefit from our having access to such research.

In reviewing the literature, I found little that addressed my questions directly. The literature that dealt with issues of racial inequity and the centering of whiteness in high school theater programs was limited to reflective and theoretical pieces on inclusion and speculation about potential solutions. Because of the lack of empirical research, I widened my scope to explore related topics that could shed light on the

reality of predominantly white high school theatre programs. First, I explore the substantial literature focused on the experience of BIPOC students in predominantly white suburban schools generally. I then survey research in urban schools and community programs serving predominantly BIPOC students for insight into potential issues and solutions with carryover potential to suburban programs. Finally, I review non-academic literature from a popular theatre website to see if these questions are being explored in other spaces. I close by exposing areas ripe for future scholarship in theatre education that are especially urgent given our political climate and the changing demographics of America's suburbs (Florida, 2019).

HIGH SCHOOL THEATRE AND BIPOC STUDENT EXPERIENCE

In searching for literature specifically highlighting the experiences of BIPOC students in predominantly white high school theater programs, I found that while there is ample evidence to suggest this as an issue that does exist and is worthy of investigation, research into the reality of the situation and testing of potential solutions is minimal. Most literature centers on practitioner reflection, both from high school educators and those training future theatre teachers, that delve into ideas about what *could* work but rarely address why issues arise, how students experience them, or what works to address them.

Holes in the Overarching Narrative

McCammon et al. (2012) succinctly capture the overwhelmingly positive narrative of inclusivity in high school theater programs while also highlighting the gaps in knowledge around who, specifically, is having a positive experience, as the data collected from past participants in high school theater programs was not analyzed by race nor did any questions explicitly mention race as a factor that could impact participant experience. Traces of racial issues surface in participant answers that point to areas ripe for exploration. One participant noted that “you meet so many amazing and interesting people in theater, all with their own personal life stories and world views. It's one of the most diverse tribes in any school. You really get a sense of just how big the world is and how worthy of respect each person is. We change each other for the better in that environment” (p

34). Because of the lack of investigation into race in both the initial survey and subsequent analysis, it is unclear how race fits into the use of the word “diverse;” this could mean students from a variety of high school social groups, social classes, or racial groups.

Findings also revealed participants wishing their schools had tackled more “socially charged” material, “lament[ing]...‘conservative’ play choices” (p. 9). This suggests that some participants were operating in conservative, likely white spaces that, as other research suggests below, could be alienating to BIPOC students. It also suggests performances of white dominant, canonical texts were the norm for a number of respondents, texts that would ask students of color to either play historically white characters or opt-out, an issue explored specifically by Cousins (2000) in her examination of the ways high school plays uphold and reify mainstream culture. Relatedly, participants noted that while programs cultivated empathy, “conservative play script choices for production or an ethnically homogenous school population inhibited adolescent awareness of social and cultural issues” (p. 17). This reiterates Cousins’ (2000) thesis that performing exclusively white texts breeds majority-white programs, potentially excluding BIPOC students in an on-going cycle. This reading of the data will remain only a theory without an empirical exploration of BIPOC students’ perception of their high school theater programs.

Drama Teacher Reflections on Race and Inclusion

While I found no direct reflections from BIPOC students on their theatre experiences, several pieces illuminate teachers’ perspectives. In the earliest among them, Garcia (1997) highlights a similar gap in the literature, naming that “little is known about the extent that drama/theatre programs in elementary and secondary schools promote appreciation for cultural differences, and even less is known about their effectiveness” (p. 88). His survey of theatre teachers’ investment in multicultural education found that most teachers’ incorporation of “multiethnic” content revolved around ideas of colorblind tolerance and respect, with nine teachers noting they had no approach at all. Unsurprisingly, given the scholarship on race in predominantly white schools below, many of the teachers who taught through a colorblind lens or who did not address multiculturalism at all identified as white,

teaching in predominantly white schools. Unfortunately for students in these spaces, “the enforcement of color blindness serves to exacerbate, not alleviate, issues of race and racism for students of color in predominantly white schools” (Chapman, 2013, p. 625). Teachers who did claim to teach multiethnic content reported that, because of this pedagogy, their classrooms were places of “mutual respect,” which supports the narrative above that theatre programs and classrooms are generally discussed as welcoming and safe spaces for students. Garcia (1997) ends with a series of questions that, at this time, have yet to be comprehensively answered: “How can the field of drama/theatre education support teachers in their efforts to teach in multiethnic classrooms and create positive classroom environments” for everyone” (p. 100)?

Researcher and theatre teacher Jo Beth González, who leads a high school theatre program at a predominantly white school in suburban Ohio, attempts to answer this question, although her writing and research rarely includes the voices of BIPOC students. Two of her pieces, however, do lend credence to the hypothesis that white theater programs struggle to welcome BIPOC students (Gonzalez, 2015; González et al., 2006). Both focus on attempts to include Latinx and Black students, respectively, in productions that center their experiences—*Simply Maria* and *Hairspray!*—and “illuminate tensions and insights that evolve from the efforts of a generally white high school drama club to tackle...play[s] that speak...to a marginalized component of the school's student body” (González, 2006, p. 124). While they provide helpful insight into one teacher’s attempts to create community, there is little evidence offered as to whether the attempts at inclusion resulted in any material difference for students.

A more comprehensive look at drama teachers’ perspectives comes from Joan Lazarus’s ten year study recounted in *Signs of Change* (Lazarus, 2012). She shares teacher reflections on what she terms “socially responsible practice,” discussing a range of student identities that impact practice both in drama classes and after-school productions. She recounts that teachers in her study asked themselves, “who is my program for? Who is being served and excluded? Whose voice history, culture, language, aesthetics, and perspectives are being heard? Whose material do we study, develop and produce” (p. 123). In her brief section on “Theater, Race, and Privilege,” she touches on BIPOC student experiences through teacher

narratives noting that “many teachers wish they could reach more or different students in their schools and use theatre more effectively to engage the school community in dialogue and action” (p. 122). One of her participants—quoted in a companion article to the book (Lazarus, 2015)—interviewed her black students about why they were quiet in class and got a range of answers about feeling isolated, wanting to just go with the flow and not relating to the material, again, hinting at the existence of an inclusivity problem.

Schroeder-Arce names this problem directly, based on her own experiences, and explores solutions through her work with pre-service theatre teachers (Schroeder-Arce, 2016; 2017; 2019), specifically how theatre educators can interrupt the centering of whiteness and the erasure of students of color on high school stages. Her writing indicts white teachers and our educational theater system that erase BIPOC students and their lived experiences, pushing them to act out the white canon in programs centered on white norms. She theorizes that the mostly white students in her teacher education program attended theatre programs that produced white theater who will then, in turn, continue centering whiteness in their own practices. She also highlights the need for culturally responsive pedagogy in after school theatre programs and calls for more visibility of Latinx stories, specifically in Texas, where she works (2016). She notes this issue is especially salient in theatre education because, in our field, “young bodies regularly represent other bodies” (2017, p. 106). Additionally, she highlights the lack of specific tools and ideas given to teachers to do more than acknowledge their privilege and the failure of teacher prep programs to equip teachers to “disrupt hegemonic practice” (2017, p. 107).

Like Gonzalez (2015; González et al., 2006), Lazarus (2012; 2015) and others (Syler & Chen, 2017), Schroeder-Arce’s writing is reflective and practitioner-focused; she shares how she addresses this issue in her courses, but notes that “to really ever testify to the impact of such work would require in-depth, longitudinal study” (p. 112). Taken together, this literature lends validity to the idea that race, specifically the centering of white norms and the whiteness inherent in the theatrical canon often performed there, is playing a defining role in high school theater programs, potentially creating a hostile environment for BIPOC students, and that more study is necessary to reveal what strategies successfully create inclusive, anti-racist programs.

LOOKING TO OTHER SOURCES

Given the limited research on BIPOC students' experiences in predominantly white high school theatre programs, I widened my scope to explore research that could lend additional credence to my original hypothesis, offer potential solutions and point to avenues for future inquiry. I first looked to studies of BIPOC students' experiences in predominantly white schools as a whole. I then turned to the ways that drama and theatre are taken up in majority BIPOC schools and community programs, and finally, I explored writing outside of peer-reviewed journals to see if this conversation is happening elsewhere with insights that could be explored and built on in future empirical research. Patterns exposed in the literature provide insights that could illuminate a path forward for theatre teachers wishing to make inroads with BIPOC students by shedding light on why theater programs may read as inhospitable spaces.

BIPOC Student Experience in Suburban Schools

While a full account of scholarship related to issues of race in predominantly white high schools is beyond the scope of this review, an overview of ample research that has been done, especially in the last ten years, that centers students' voices to explore how majority-white school environments impact BIPOC students' experiences is instructive to my inquiries into whether high school theatre programs remain centered on whiteness and are potentially inhospitable to BIPOC students. Student voices are especially salient as the research on theatre specifically, as outlined above, rests almost exclusively at the teacher level. Overall, findings show that students struggle to feel a connection to their schools and to the teachers and counselors therein due to perceptions of unequal treatment and materially less access to the resources that make predominantly white schools so attractive to many families (Chapman, 2013; Diamond & Lewis, 2019; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Lewis-McCoy, 2014).

Chapman (2013) and Lewis and Diamond (2015) use student voice to expose the double standards and inequality that exists in how students experience majority-white high schools. Chapman (2013) first focuses on how "tracking, traditional curricula, teacher classroom practices, and student surveillance, sustain a racially hostile environment for students of color in majority-white suburban schools"

(p. 611). Diamond and Lewis (2019) focus on similar double-standards in discipline policies, highlighting that while written policies are race-neutral in design, in practice, they become imbued with “anti-Black cultural narratives that associate blackness with criminality and whiteness with innocence” (p.832). This ultimately results in Black students’ behavior being read as more serious and dealt with more punitively than corresponding behavior from white students. These patterns paint a picture of hostility that could ultimately make putting oneself in a vulnerable position on stage less likely for BIPOC students.

Another possible issue for theatre programs could be resource accessibility, as explained by Lewis-McCoy (2014). In his book, *Inequality in the Promised Land*, Lewis-McCoy explores why, in schools ripe with opportunities, the most coveted educational resources often flow to white families. Both Lewis-McCoy and Lewis and Diamond (2015) observed the racializing of certain activities, especially those thought of as valuable to white families. Through this lens, it is possible that theatre and drama programs could be marked as a highly regarded resource; thus, white parents angle to gain better access to it, marking it a white space and one potentially inhospitable or inaccessible to BIPOC students.

Each author closes with potential solutions to the inequalities plaguing majority white and suburban schools. The common theme is a call for schools to truly grapple with the ways that race is impacting actions, whether consciously or unconsciously, and for those in power to be willing to make substantive changes to the practices that uphold inequality and white supremacy. In my experience as an educator, and as Schroeder-Arce (2017) laments, the former is usually much easier to tackle than the latter but talk without material change is useless to BIPOC students.

Lessons from Urban Schools and Community Arts Organizations

In addition to looking at the work being done in suburban, predominantly white schools as a whole, theatre teachers could also take cues as to what issues and solutions may exist by looking at the work happening in urban schools and community arts organizations serving diverse populations. One example of what a successful program could look like comes from Woodland’s (2018) work

researching an after-school youth theatre ensemble in Australia, Traction, that cultivated a community among diverse students she could only describe as one full of love.

Lessons certainly could be taken from that space and applied to diverse high school theater programs. While Woodland does include one late caveat on her research that there “may have been minorities within such a large group whose voices were quieted or silenced on these subjects” (p. 175), she notes that overall, she found that the ensemble created an ongoing circle of love that made their work successful, both personally and artistically:

Love for drama united the young people; a sense of belonging or finding a home strengthened their capacity for artistic risk taking and aesthetic exploration; repeated rituals and practices of welcome, inclusion, and care formalized the ethics of respect and compassion in the ensemble, and further facilitated the affective dimensions of these; and all of this brought about a sense of loyalty and love for Traction itself as a community, and a desire to cultivate its loving ethos and communicate this to others. (p. 175)

Woodland captures both that the narrative that opened this paper of a loving theater community is possible while also specifically noting what it took to create such a community. She details that it took specific tactics and care from the facilitator to create a group unified across “age, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity” (p. 167), including talking explicitly about the need for community and calling out participants if folks were being left out, a norm which was then then reinforced explicitly by participants.

The research on community programs also highlights some pitfalls to be weary of in work with diverse groups of students. Both Edell (2013) and Snyder-Young (2011) explore how engaging in devising and Theater of the Oppressed work with students, often aimed at empowerment, can lead students to traffic in stereotypes and reproduce harmful discourses. Both caution teachers and facilitators working in diverse spaces to thoughtfully balance the need to allow students to express their own beliefs while mitigating the potential for harm.

Maloney Leaf and Ngo's (2020) research of a racially diverse community theatre production highlights the voices of young black

actors in the cast:

[They] held the theatre organization accountable for its lack of diversity in staffing, inferring how this lack impacted both the production and also their experiences as minorities youth...One African American female youth especially noted the difference between the white director's life experiences and those of black characters in the play. (p. 90)

Another student questioned "the theatre company's performance season for its lack of representation of communities of color and its reluctance to include shows that explore the wide spectrum of black experience" (p. 90). BIPOC students in high school theatre settings likely have similar feelings about predominantly white programs. Maloney Leaf and Ngo note specifically that these reflections were given to researchers, away from their white director, which additionally adds credence to the argument that we cannot rely on teacher accounts of this issue to know the true reality for students.

Additionally, extensive research exists on using drama pedagogy as anti-bias pedagogy to investigate and interrupt systems of oppression. While much of this work has been happening in urban schools (Edmiston, 2012; Gallagher, 2000; Gallagher et al., 2013; Gallagher & Rivière, 2007; Gallagher & Rodricks, 2017; Perry & Rogers, 2011) and white affinity spaces (Tanner, 2014; 2016; Tanner et al., 2018), they do point to the potential for theater pedagogy to address or interrupt the patterns playing out for BIPOC students in suburban and majority white schools.

Writing Outside Academic Publishing

After finding little that addressed my initial research questions head-on in peer reviewed journals, I wondered what conversations were happening outside of academia. I limited my non-academic search to *Howlround*, both because of its mission to "amplify progressive, disruptive ideas about theatre and facilitate connection between diverse practitioners" (About, n.d.) and, selfishly, because their archives are easily accessible, unlike other popular magazines for theatre educators, which were more difficult and expensive to access. I would argue *Howlround*, however, is the most likely forum for these

conversations, given its mission, popularity, and availability. I found numerous discussions around the the whiteness of theatre programs but was again disappointed to see much of the conversation happening at the professional and collegiate level, rather than the high school level; however, many of these lessons and reflections could again be easily applied to high school.

Most notable, given my focus on student voice, was a recent piece by a collective BIPOC students from Boston University's BFA in Theatre program about "how [they] grew a student-centered anti-racist movement" in the wake of the murder of George Floyd (Gil et al., 2020). They end with a list of clear demands to dismantle white supremacy in their program that could easily be a call-out to many high school theatre programs as well. A similar piece by Miranda Haymon, a "young, Black, queer director and a proud graduate of a liberal arts college" calls out "Liberal arts theatre programs [for] failing their students of color" (Haymon, 2020). Taken together, these begin to illuminate a pattern of exclusion in collegiate theatre, an area many may think of as more progressive than high school theatre programs. Other pieces reflecting on deficits in higher education include a piece on the need for more active inclusion in curriculum and syllabi (Valdes, 2020), the overwhelming whiteness of acting textbooks (Steiger, 2019), and a discussion of banking education (Freire et al., 2014) in relation to actor training (Harman, 2019). Only one piece meeting my search parameters centered high school theatre, which focused on censorship of high school plays (Serio, 2014); however, it centered students' collective experiences, rather than BIPOC students specifically. Interestingly, even in this non-academic space, most of the writing about race and inclusion in educational theater focuses on college theatre programs; while, like with all topics discussed above, it is not a stretch to imagine similar issues playing out in high schools, it would be beneficial to hear specifically about those issues from BIPOC high school students.

CONCLUSIONS AND CALLS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Despite inferences that can be drawn from high school theatre teacher reflections, accounts of BIPOC students' experiences in suburban schools and collegiate theatre programs, and the challenges of creating welcoming communities among diverse groups of students in

urban schools and community programs, it is ultimately impossible to know if BIPOC students feel welcome in our high school theater programs, and if not, what conditions could interrupt that reality if research is not conducted that centers student voices and experiences and then uses their guidance to move toward anti-racist practices. Suburban schools are only becoming more diverse (Florida, 2019), making this an imminent challenge to theatre teachers. If we continue to recreate the white dominant practices many of us, myself included, experienced as theatre students and fail to interrogate the racist implications of those practices, we will lose the diverse array of voices so many of us claim to want in our theatrical communities.

Theatre teachers have a unique opportunity as drama seems a natural balm to much of what is experienced by BIPOC in predominantly white schools—feeling unwelcome, silenced, and highly visible for all the wrong reasons (Prentki & Stinson, 2016). It seems that what students of color need most is “physically and emotionally nurturing spaces...[a] niche community [to find] safe haven and encouragement of expression” (McCammon et al., 2012, p. 11). If theater teachers can create this space for students, it could provide a haven for students to use theatre pedagogy to heal from and push back against the traumas they face in predominantly white spaces and provide a model for the rest of their school about what anti-racist spaces look like. Only by acknowledging the centering of whiteness and taking concrete steps to disrupt and change them will we truly create these safe havens and make a lifelong impact on *all* students.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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