

Executive Summary:

Youth's perception of theatre participation within their daily lives

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Introduction to the Study

Adolescence is a period in which youth are able to explore different aspects of themselves through participation in meaningful activities. Theatre participation allows youth to develop friendships (Hughes & Wilson 2007; McLauchlan & Winters 2014), build interpersonal and psychosocial skills (Landy 2010; Larson & Brown 2007), and learn in a different context than traditional classroom settings (McLauchlan & Winters 2014). One gap in the current literature is how theatre participation shapes young people's engagement in other activities in their daily life.

Conducted by two graduate students in the Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy at the University of Toronto, this study was done in partnership with the Drama School at Young People's Theatre (YPT) and asks the question, "How do youth perceive their theatre participation within the context of their daily lives?"

Method: What happened?

Ten young people between the ages of 11 and 17 agreed to participate in the study. The participants had a wide range of theatre experiences; some had been involved in theatre since they were young, while others had started recently to take classes at YPT. Each participant took part in one semi-structured interview. Thematic analysis was used to make sense of the data collected during the interviews. The researchers also participated and observed YPT Drama School sessions to inform the analysis.

Findings: What did we learn?

The overarching narrative of *constructing a life around theatre participation* emerged from the data. This refers to the stories that the participants told during their interviews about how they integrated theatre into their day-to-day life activities and routines. For some, theatre has become a part of their consistent life routine, whereas for others, participating is seen as a seasonal activity only. Youth also spoke about how they came to take part in theatre, why they have continued to participate through classes, and the other ways in which they choose to engage in theatre.

The two themes of *choosing and maintaining participation* and *forming relationships and identity within context* emerged from this overarching narrative.

Choosing and Maintaining Participation refers to the reasons youth choose to initially participate in theatre and why they continue to do so. These five subthemes emerged: taking up views and interests of others, pursuing a passion, sharing theatre with others, feeling success, and "there's so much more." For instance, youth often initially chose to participate in theatre based on their relationships with friends or family members and often continue in theatre because they valued maintaining the relationships they had built in that context. Many participants spoke about the value of creating something together and the success they feel in being a part of this particular creative medium.

"In Drama School, like, it's the same because it's ... wow, I create ... I helped create this. It's beautiful! It's the outcome, it's beautiful, even if it turns out to be like a completely lame play, just, I take pleasure in knowing that I was part of this and I helped create this." – Blue

“Storytelling ... is such an old tradition - it goes all the way back to ancient times and telling the story over and over, and bringing your own elements to it. It's just entertaining, at the very base of it all, it's entertaining the audience.” – Owl

Forming Relationships and Identity within Context refers to how theatre participation allowed youth to form diverse relationships and identities not only in the YPT Drama School, but also in different parts of their lives, such as at school or at home. These three subthemes emerged: theatre as a safe space for exploration, managing relationships with family and friends, and infusing theatre into daily lives. For example, participants reported that they were able to explore a variety of ways of being through participation in theatre and choose which to bring into their daily routines and lives. In so doing, youth became more comfortable with learning and expressing who they are outside of theatre.

“Acting’s taught me you don’t always have to be ... Like even though you are the same person, you don’t have to act the same way all the time ... you can always be someone different if you want to ... you don’t always have to be excited, or you don’t always have to be miserable if something happens.” – Cupcake

“I tell myself, ‘Oh, if you can keep one mindset when you’re acting, you can keep one mindset when you’re studying.’ So ... I sit down at the table and I’m like, ‘Okay, think like you’re acting’ ... That’s how I apply it.” – Cookie

“Acting did teach me a lot with dealing with people and how to accept other people’s ideas and not to be so headstrong on my own.” – Hot Dog

Discussion: What does this mean?

The findings of this study speak to how theatre participation supports identity construction and relationship building in the daily lives of young people. Adolescence is a crucial time for identity construction (Burton 2002). This study illustrates how the theatre classroom can offer young people a safe space for exploration. It also demonstrates that participation in theatre allows youth to explore multiple identities which can translate into the context of their daily lives.

Findings also offer insight into how the skills and attitudes, developed through relationships built through theatre participation, can be transferred into other relationships outside of the theatre classroom. Similar to Hughes and Wilson (2007), the youth in our study reported that they were able to develop and fine tune their sense of self through their relationships with others, thus becoming more comfortable with self-expression.

The confidence young people gained in the YPT Drama School translated into school contexts—as they were more willing to take on new challenges such as school projects—and into family contexts—where youth were able to cultivate relationships through shared activities.

Finally, theatre participation allowed youth to understand and recognize the motivations behind others’ actions, which helped youth to empathize with individuals whom they interact with in their day-to-day lives.

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