

Youth's perception of theatre participation within their daily lives

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Introduction

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, build interpersonal and psychosocial skills, and learn in a different context than traditional classroom settings. Although the outcomes of youth theatre participation are highlighted within the literature, current literature does not describe how it shapes youth's engagement in other activities within the context of their daily life. The purpose of this paper is to present the findings of a study exploring the perceptions of youth about how their theatre participation shapes their engagement in other activities within the context of their daily life.

Background

Aspects of youth theatre participation have been well studied, as it is perceived to be a useful tool for facilitating youth development in many areas. As no clear definition of theatre participation has been provided in the literature, for the purpose of our study, theatre participation refers to being engaged as an active participant in one or multiple elements of theatre (e.g., script writing, acting, directing, choreography, filmmaking, costume and set design). Theatre participation allows youth to form friendships and build empathy while being a part of a team. In theatre, participants are frequently encouraged to go beyond their comfort zone and interact with peers outside of their social circles, which can translate into a supportive environment for developing new friendships (Hughes and Wilson 2007). Youth expressed valuing the relational activities within the theatre classroom (Malin 2015), such as learning about characters' motivation for their actions, as it allowed them to build empathy and become more equipped with managing future conflict with others (McLauchlan and Winters 2014).

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Youth have also valued the supportive environment of the theatre classroom, as it offers them an opportunity to build friendships due to the social nature of theatre participation (Hughes and Wilson 2007). They expressed choosing to participate in theatre as an outlet for getting to know their classmates (McLauchlan and Winters 2014). Youth may become more comfortable with participating in interactive activities with others, as theatre participation has been shown to increase self-esteem and confidence (McLauchlan and Winters 2014). For example, Osterlind (2011) conducted a study in which youth reported that theatre participation has allowed them to become more open and playful when interacting with peers, thus bolstering their interpersonal skills.

Psychosocial, daily living and technical skills can also be developed through theatre participation. For example, some youth reported that their engagement in theatre provided them with an outlet for expressing their emotions (Larson and Brown 2007) and coping with stressors (Landy 2010). Clinicians have used theatre as a medium for interventions surrounding health-related concerns, such as peer-mediated programs that promote the development of social skills among children with autism spectrum disorder, as well as increase independent living and self-care skills (Corbett et al. 2014). Youth theatre programs have also been used as an educational tool for health promotion in areas such as sexual health and drug use (Corbett et al. 2014; Guli, Semrud-Clikeman, Lerner and Britton 2013; Harvey et al. 2000; Starkey and Orme 2001). In addition to using theatre as a tool for health promotion, youth also improve their technical skills relating to performing and creating productions (McLauchlan and Winters 2014) such as acting, blocking and choreography within the theatre classroom.

The environment within the theatre classroom allows youth to learn in a different style compared to other traditional classroom settings. Theatre has been reported to offer youth flexibility regarding the number of choices that are offered within the theatre classroom. For example, some youth reported that theatre classes offer them more flexibility with regards to following rules in comparison to didactic teaching methods (McLauchlan and Winters 2014). Youth expressed taking

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theatre as a choice elective in school because it offered them more interactive and hands-on learning. The interactive component of theatre allows youth to walk around the classroom and talk to their peers through theatre activities. Overall, youth who participate in theatre within the school environment prefer the freedom it offers in comparison to structured classes (McLauchlan and Winters 2014).

Study Purpose

Although the current literature regarding theatre participation among youth does address psychological, interpersonal and learning outcomes of theatre participation, it does not explore theatre participation in the context of their daily lives. The ways in which youth perceive their theatre participation in relation to their daily activities and routines has not been explored. This study asks the question, "How do youth perceive their theatre participation within the context of their daily lives?"

Methods

Study Design

A qualitative interpretive design based on a constructivist paradigm was used for this study. A constructivist paradigm allows for a co-construction of the researchers' and participants' experiences, thus allowing for a shared understanding of the data (Haverkamp and Young 2007). This paradigm views reality as being subjectively co-constructed among researchers and participants as reality is viewed as existing within social interactions and not beyond them. To support the development of this shared understanding, the first two authors participated in youth theatre classes for approximately 60 hours each at the Drama School at Young People's Theatre (YPT) in Toronto. They participated in the theatre classroom, both as students and facilitators, and were involved directly in the work with the youth, such as creating scenes with other students or participating in improvisation exercises. This participation allowed the authors to gain an appreciation for what took place in the theatre classroom and to build rapport with youth who participate in the theatre. Also, two researchers on the team have careers in theatre, which also enabled a broader interpretation of the data. Paradigmatic coherence was

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maintained throughout the study, as the researchers' positionality was acknowledged continuously from the initial stages of the research study to the development of this manuscript. Ethics approval from the University of Toronto's Research Ethics Board was obtained prior to recruitment, and YPT staff agreed to participate and offered feedback on recruitment flyers and process.

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were purposively recruited through YPT's Drama School. The inclusion criteria for recruitment was youth between the ages of 11 and 18, who participated in at least one session (e.g., a 2-week full-day camp or a class meeting once-a-week for 9 weeks) within the past year. Following the procedures approved by the research ethics board, an announcement about the study was made in class, and flyers were handed out to interested youth by one of the authors affiliated with YPT, but not associated with the Drama School specifically. E-mails were sent out to parents outlining the details of the study by the Drama School Director, who is also an author. Youth and parents who were interested in hearing more about the study were invited to contact one of the first two authors through e-mail or telephone.

Ten youth between the ages of 11 and 17 (girls = 7, boys = 3) agreed to participate in the study. Informed consent and assent were obtained in written format from the parent(s) and youth, respectively. Participants in this study had a wide range of theatre experiences, as some youth had been involved in theatre since they were young, whereas others had only recently started to participate.

Data Collection

Each youth participated in one semi-structured interview conducted by one of the first two authors. The interviews took place in a private room at local library or community centre. Each interview was approximately 45 to 75 minutes in length, and youth were asked to choose a pseudonym at the start of each interview. An interview guide was created and modified after each interview for use in subsequent interviews to explore themes in greater depth as they emerged from the data. The interview

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guide had four foci: (a) theatre experiences, (b) other daily life activities, (c) theatre in the context of daily life, and (d) theatre and young people's future. Questions from the interview guide highlighted what brought youth to Drama School, what activities they participated in there, how theatre participation has shaped the way they view themselves and/or others within all aspects of their lives, and how it has shaped other life activities. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first two authors and research assistants.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to make sense of the data. Thematic analysis is a method for "identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data" (Braun and Clarke 2006, 6). After each interview, the interviewers wrote reflexive notes detailing their initial impressions of the interview. These reflexive notes were discussed with the research team. Transcripts were then coded by the first two authors and discussed until consensus was reached. Approximately 245 initial codes emerged from the data. The codes were then manually sorted into separate groups with each group containing similar ideas. Seventeen preliminary themes emerged from the data. All preliminary themes and their connections to one another were discussed with the research team. Superordinate groupings of the preliminary themes were constructed by the first two authors with input from the research team by combining similar themes and acknowledging relationships among themes. Themes were continuously re-sorted and discussed with the research team in relation to the research question to ensure that all perspectives of the research team were captured until consensus was reached, resulting in one overarching concept containing two themes, each with multiple subthemes.

Findings

Constructivist research allows for a shared understanding of the data (Haverkamp and Young 2007). As previously discussed, within this study the researchers' subjective experiences with theatre participation contributed to the types of questions asked as well as to their interpretation of the data. In

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addition, in alignment with a constructivist paradigm, the past experiences of youth who participated in this study helped shape the emergence of the findings.

The overarching narrative of constructing a life around theatre participation emerged from the data, which refers to the “stories” that the youth told during their interview about how they integrated theatre into their day-to-day life activities and routines. For some youth, theatre has become a part of their consistent life routine, whereas for others, participating in theatre is seen as a seasonal activity only. In speaking about how theatre fit into their daily lives, the youth also spoke about how they came to take part in theatre and why they have continued to participate in theatre by taking classes and or engaging in other theatre activities. Two themes emerged that capture this overarching narrative: (a) choosing and maintaining participation and (b) forming relationships and identity within context. Multiple subthemes emerged within these two themes.

Choosing and Maintaining Participation

Choosing and maintaining participation refers to the reasons youth choose to initially participate in theatre and their reasons for continuing to do so. Five subthemes emerged within this theme: (a) taking up views and interests of others, (b) pursuing a passion, (c) sharing theatre with others, (d) feeling success, and (e) “there’s so much more.”

Taking up views and interests of others. Youth’s initial involvement in theatre was influenced by friends, family and other significant individuals in their lives. Some youth mentioned that their teachers encouraged them to try theatre, as they felt they had potential to act. Other youth described theatre as something they grew up with as a part of their family culture. As Cupcake stated, “and my family. And especially when like, all my cousins from my mom’s side gathers, we love to put on performances, especially then because all my cousins really like performing.” Venera reported taking up similar interests as her brother, “my brother does it and I always found that interesting seeing him doing plays or when he went to movie camp ... I thought that, that’d be cool.”

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Some youth reported that their initial interest in theatre was sparked by the performances they see in their day-to-day lives, such as watching television or plays. Milkshake spoke about how watching reality shows influenced her interest in being a part of a production, rather than taking on the role of an audience member, "Probably because like I watch the shows on TV and it looks like what I want to be. Like, I watch a show ... And I see those girls on it, and I'm like ... I want to do that. I want to be like them." As Owl illustrated, some participants were curious about all aspects of the work involved in creating a production:

Everyone was just kind of focused on the play itself, the musical, and I was just interested in how it worked. I was like, "How does it work? How do you rig them up and make them fly? How do the actors know what to say, when to do it?" And so I was just fascinated with that.

Pursuing a passion. Some youth expressed a strong dedication to theatre participation. These youth were willing to put in the extra effort, regardless of the outcome. Some participants spoke about how the passion they experience through participating in theatre has allowed them to overcome the stereotype of the "theatre kid," and to care less about what others think of them by expressing themselves freely. Owl spoke about sharing her passion with her theatre peers:

It's a bunch of different people who all share the same passion. And theatre kids, I think, are especially passionate about it. So that's where I think a lot of the stereotype comes from - that these people are crazy to be so passionate, so willing to go the extra mile for this stupid school play.

Some youth expressed theatre as a necessity and/or routine within their daily lives, whereas others have set points throughout the year during which they take part in theatre. As Rice mentioned, "the summer time is for some sports, and like just hanging out with friends." John described Drama School as part of his weekly routine:

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I'm kinda used to the fact that okay, I'm going to go this Saturday. I'm going to meet a bunch of people. I'm going to act, I'm going to show them what I can do. So, um ... at this point in my life, I just feel like this drama [involvement] would probably never end.

Milkshake spoke about how attending Drama School classes does not feel like work in comparison to other weekend activities, "I'm like, okay. Here we go again. Seventh year in [language school]. And then when I'm in theatre, I'm excited to go, because I like it ... it doesn't bother me that it's on the weekend."

Many youth expressed that theatre is currently very prominent in their life, but imagined a future with less involvement in theatre for various reasons. However, youth felt that their passion for theatre participation has allowed them to gain confidence in pursuing acting as a career. As Blue stated, "seeing all these actors . . . it's given me hope that I could become this. And it's nice to dream, but it's also, like, you have to wake up sometimes. And, drama has allowed me to dream more about my future."

Sharing theatre with others. Many youth expressed wanting to share their love for theatre with others by teaching them what they know about theatre. Owl stated she is often the "go-to person" for theatre projects within her school:

It's because of my experience with theatre that I get chosen as that person. Umm, guiding people through . . . who don't usually do this . . . just at school . . . guiding people through it and helping them understand what builds a character, and how to build their personalities. Just because people love sharing their passions with everyone and for me this is going one on one with someone and showing them the ropes.

Venera stated that she shared theatre with others by speaking about her class experience to friends and family members:

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Well, I talk to my friends a bit about the, uh, drama classes, like I say I had a really fun time at my drama class and then I change the subject but I like to talk about it and um, after class, my mom, I always tell my mom or my dad what we did during the classes.

Some youth valued making others happy by entertaining them through theatre and giving audience members something to do with their time. Many participants spoke about the enjoyment they get from performing in front of an audience. Owl stated:

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.

Feeling success. Several youth expressed that having their performances recognized and validated by audience members was invaluable, as described by Milkshake, "Oh . . . when I was in audition, nobody would tell me that [I was good] but after at the end of the audition and people were like that was really good, thank you and I was like . . . maybe this [the classes] is helping." Others had a deep appreciation for the outcome, as well as the process of being involved in something creative. As Blue described:

In Drama School, like, it's the same because it's like, wow, I create, like, I helped create this. It's beautiful! Like, 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 like, I helped create this.

Furthermore, as Cookie illustrated, some youth expressed that feeling successful through participating in theatre activities gave them a sense of belonging:

It didn't make any sense, why are we stacking chairs [as a theatre exercise] . . . my feelings changed. It was like uh, success, like I had a feeling that I was a part of something successful but at the same time it was weird. It was just extremely weird. Stacking chairs is not really a thing

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like . . . but in the end, with the feeling of everyone, like shouting and screaming 'yeah, yeah!' It felt great.

"There's so much more". Youth reported that engaging in theatre is more than just learning technical skills. As described by Cookie, "you just learn more and more about the acting. It's not just about going up on stage and saying a couple of lines, uh, it's more to that. It's more to that." Youth are given an opportunity to learn more about themselves, as well as about others around them. Youth also expressed the desire to go back to theatre to learn more about technical skills. Participating in theatre has also shaped the way youth perceive the world around them, as described by Blue:

There's so much more. There's art, there's music, there's colour, there's acting, and it's really quite beautiful to see how other people's mind works, how it revolves around social media or fashion and then mine is like "I wanna go see a play. I wanna go see a musical. I wanna go dance in the rain or something." Like, I wanna be individual, I wanna be different, and, theatre and acting has really helped me do that.

Forming Relationships and Identity Within Context

Forming relationships and identity within context refers to how theatre participation allowed youth to form diverse relationships and identities within the different contexts of their lives, such as theatre, school and home. Three subthemes emerged within this theme: (a) theatre as a safe space for exploration, (b) managing relationships with family and friends, (c) infusing theatre into daily lives

Theatre as a safe space for exploration. Youth reported that the theatre classroom offers a safe environment for them to explore their identities and to try out different parts of their new selves that they have discovered through class activities before reenacting them in the real world. Through theatre participation, youth accepted their identities as different parts of their self that emerge within different settings. Youth compared the theatre classroom to the home environment, explaining that they felt comfortable around their theatre peers to explore different identities, as illustrated by Blue:

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They don't judge people and you don't judge them because . . . you're pretty much like them.

You're a freak, everyone's a freak, you know? They indulge you and they think like 'wow, she's really brave to go up and do that,' you know. It's pretty nice.

One youth, Cookie, reported a reversal of relationships within the theatre classroom in comparison to the school environment. Youth disclosed that within the school context, they are not often provided with an environment that fosters freedom or flexibility in expressing themselves, as the traditional school classroom is often structured to involve primarily didactic teaching methods.

I just see it as like, school, it's also like a stage. So you're the audience and then the teacher's the actor. But in Drama School, you're the actor [corrects self], you're the teacher, and they're [the audience] the students.

Managing relationships with family and friends. Some youth reported that the context they are in does not influence how they manage their friendships, while other youth reported having a difficult time being close to and sharing secrets with their theatre friends in comparison to their school friends. As Venera stated, "In drama . . . you're not gonna stay together forever, it's not like in school, so I think that's one of the main reasons why it's harder to make friends there." Some youth view their relationships in the theatre environment differently than their family relationships. As John described, "everyone has their social mask. . . . When being with new people in theatre, it's slightly different than just being at home with my family because I might act sort of differently. I do stuff I usually don't do at home." Some participants mentioned how theatre participation shaped their interpersonal communication skills. One participant, Hotdog, alluded to how theatre helped her develop empathy:

But acting did teach me a lot with dealing with people and how to accept other people's ideas and not to be so head-strong on my own. And ... to be sensitive about other people's emotions. Like, when I start acting, I start mimicking the person I am with.

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Others conveyed sharing a special bond with their theatre friends and even described their theatre friends as a part of a family. These youth reported that their similar passion for theatre was a driving force for maintaining their friendships.

Infusing theatre into daily lives. Some youth reported putting on performances during family gatherings or asking other people to provide them with an improvisation scene during their spare time. As Cupcake stated, "I like improv because you control the scene pretty much. And . . . with my best friend . . . wherever we go, we're like 'hey, give us a scene' and then we just do it." Others discussed how they freely sing and dance down the hallways of their school. Cookie related how he transfers the focus he has in theatre to other aspects of his life:

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. Kinda ... that's how I apply it.

Rory referred to transferring her theatre skills to working with kids, "You're like, 'I need these kids to listen to me,' ... well, you use parts of theatre because you have to project to get their attention and you have to have a presence like you have on stage." Some youth reported being inspired by what they observe on a daily basis and transforming these observations into performances within the theatre classroom. As Blue stated,

It's made me see the world in a different way, like, when somebody sees something, they'll probably just think "oh, that's something" but when I see something, I get a million ideas just pop up in my head and for some reason, I think of ways I can perform it, you know?

Discussion

This study asked the question, "How do youth perceive their theatre participation within the context of their daily lives?" The overarching narrative—constructing a life around theatre participation—and its two themes—choosing and maintaining participation, and forming relationships

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and identity within context—were constructed from the data, and multiple subthemes emerged within each theme.

Youth initially choose to participate in theatre based on their relationships with friends or family members and often chose to continue in theatre because they valued maintaining the relationships they had within the theatre classroom. Our findings support current literature that stated youth value having relationships with others; engaging in arts-based activities promotes building these relationships (Malin 2015). Within the context of these relationships, youth discover various identities within the theatre classroom and choose which ones to translate into their daily routines and lives. Through participating in theatre, youth become more comfortable with expressing their identities that are formed through their relationships with others.

The findings of this study illustrate how the theatre classroom offers youth a safe space for exploring multiple identities. As adolescence is a crucial time for identity construction (Burton 2002), the findings of this study speak to how youth may first practice various identities within the theatre classroom and choose which ones to reenact within different contexts of their daily lives. Participation in theatre allows youth to explore their identities as they are consistently playing different characters and acting out real-life scenarios, which can help foster their understanding of their sense of self within the context of their daily lives. Although identity formation was not directly addressed during the research process, youth in this study spoke about how certain aspects of theatre became a part of them within their daily lives. Consistent with Erikson's model of identity formation, which suggests adolescents first explore alternative identities and then choose which ones to solidify (Marcia 1966), youth in this study demonstrated how engaging in theatre participation offers a space for them to take part in the various stages of identity exploration and formation as suggested in Erikson's model.

Previous research suggests that theatre participation may increase confidence and self-esteem in youth (Hughes and Wilson 2007). This finding is consistent with our study, where youth reported that

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they are able to develop and fine tune their sense of self through their relationships with others, thus becoming more comfortable in self-expression. The confidence youth gained through theatre participation also translated into school contexts, as youth in this study were more willing to take on new challenges, such as school projects. This comfort with expression and trying new things was also seen among youth who participated in theatre informally, that is, outside of the theatre classroom. Informal theatre participation, such as making up plays with family members, was gradually solidified into youths' identities, and thus routines, within the family context. Through participating in theatre alongside family members, youth were able to cultivate their relationships with family by way of a shared activity within their daily lives.

Findings from this study offer insight into how the skills and attitudes developed through the forming of relationships through theatre participation can be transferred into other relationships outside of the theatre classroom, whether it is with family, school peers, friends or teachers. The findings from this study were similar to other literature that suggests that participating in theatre allows youth to build empathy (Larson and Brown 2007). Furthermore, findings from this study illustrated how empathy was transferred into youths' daily lives. 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.

Strengths and Limitations

The inclusion criteria of this study limited the possibility for gathering perceptions of youth under age 11, and we were not successful in recruiting any youth who were 18 years of age. Youth who are 18 may have offered different perspectives than other participants as this age is a transition period from high school to further education or employment. These youth may have to make choices regarding future theatre participation. Younger participants spoke about the potential for participating in theatre after high school; however the experiences of youth aged 18 would have offered a richer perspective

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regarding theatre participation while transitioning out of high school as they are required to make more immediate decisions. In addition, the authors were not able to recruit any youth who did not enjoy their theatre experiences or who had discontinued theatre participation for other reasons. Furthermore, saturation was not reached in the development of some themes in exploring the perceptions of youth. For example, the authors were unable to address what characteristics of the theatre classroom contribute to a safe environment for exploration. While participants alluded that being in theatre allows them to feel comfortable and accepted, the authors did not directly ask what foster these feelings of being safe within the theatre classroom. Additionally, more direct questioning pertaining to the carryover of theatre to school may have highlighted a broader understanding of the differences perceived when being onstage versus being one member of an “audience” at school.

This study did have several strengths; most notably is that the positionality of the researchers allowed for a broader interpretation of the data. The youth in this study also had a wide range of theatre experiences, as some were involved in theatre since they were young whereas others had only recently started participating in theatre prior to participating in this study.

Future Research

The recruitment strategies limited the possibility for researchers to explore the perceptions of youth who did not enjoy their theatre experiences. Thus, an interesting question to consider may be why youth choose to continue theatre participation, despite not enjoying their theatre experiences. Future researchers may also consider exploring the perceptions of youth under the age of 11, as it would offer insight into the personal development of younger children whose social networks and levels of independence differ from adolescents. Exploring the daily routines of long-term theatre participants may offer insight as to why youth who participate in theatre sustain their commitment to and interest in theatre.

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In comparison to the current literature (e.g., Conrad 2015), youth in our study did not mention how theatre participation encouraged them to become more involved in their communities through volunteering. While many youth in this study contributed to their community during their spare time, many viewed volunteering and participating in theatre as two separate entities that did not influence one another. Future research should focus on exploring the relationship between community involvement and theatre participation.

Conclusion

Youth have various reasons for participating in theatre, whether it is due to interests of family and friends or their feeling of success from being involved in theatre. Theatre supports their management of relationships and, through exploring multiple identities within the theatre classroom, helps them to construct identities to navigate the different contexts of their day-to-day lives. The findings of this study speak to how youth solidify their identities and practice relationship building through participating in theatre and integrate these into their daily lives.

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