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Part of it All: The High School Musical as a Community of Practice

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Abstract

This case study examined how participation in a high school musical theater production formed a community of practice, which impacted students' personal development. Interviews with five students from the cast of the musical at a suburban public high school constituted the primary source of data; supplemental data included a performance observation, the performance program, and informal anecdotes. Data presentation included a narrative vignette to provide rich, thick description. Prestructured case analysis aligned the findings to the elements of communities of practice, specifically meaning, practice, community, and identity, and pattern coding analysis revealed the themes of family and work. Consistent with the literature, data indicated that participation in a high school musical theater production fostered positive social and personal development through the formation of a community of practice. Suggestions for future research include examining the ways in which school musical theater productions can meet state and national standards, the presence of musical theater pedagogy in teacher training programs, analyzing high school musicals through the lens of family theory, and further investigating the emergent themes of this current study.

Keywords: communities of practice, musical theater, high school musicals, meaning, practice, community, identity, family, work, vignette

Musical theater has been a staple of American entertainment for over a century (Jones, 2003; Miller, 2007), and school music programs have incorporated musical theater into curricula for decades (Feay-Shaw, 2001). In recent years, educators (Bobetsky, 2009; Bos, 2012; Feay-Shaw, 2001; Lee, 1983; Ross & Durgin, 1998) have explored the potential benefits of involvement in musical theater and the transformative impact of musical theater productions on students' lives. Musical theater in schools often operates in close connection with the music education and theater departments, displaying the interaction between these disciplines (Bobetsky, 2009). Exploring the environment present within school musical theater productions might offer further insight into how participation in these productions impacts young peoples' personal development.

Existing literature (Bos, 2012; Feay-Shaw, 2001) indicates that participation in musical theater can have a positive, often transformative impact on student participants' personal development, yet research that considers specific elements of participation that may contribute to this phenomenon is lacking. Based on the existing literature, it seems that the social environment of musical theater productions can have a positive impact on students' personal development. Considerations of personal development within the literature encompass concepts such as social skills, self-identity, work ethic, self-confidence, motivation, and goals for the future. This study sought to investigate which elements of a high school musical theater production the students involved found meaningful, and how those elements of the production impacted students' personal development.

Communities of practice served as a framework through which I, the researcher, investigated the rehearsal environment of a musical theater production. Communities of practice are "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to

do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, 2006, para. 3). The environment of high school musical theater productions coincides with various elements of communities of practice including meaning, practice, community, and identity according to Wenger’s (1998) description of these elements:

- 1) *Meaning*: a way of talking about our (changing) ability—individually and collectively—to experience our life and the world as meaningful.
- 2) *Practice*: a way of talking about the shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action.
- 3) *Community*: a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence.
- 4) *Identity*: a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities. (p. 5)

Each of these facets of communities of practice can be present in various aspects of musical theater productions, as the literature suggests. Working together as a cast during rehearsals and performances allows students to develop their individual and collective abilities to experience Wenger’s concept of *meaning*. The task of mounting a musical theater production and striving for excellence in its execution offers students the opportunity to engage with shared resources, perspectives, and frameworks that foster the mutual engagement of *practice*. The social configurations within each cast, as well as the impact of the musical production on the school and general community, situates each student’s participation within a context of *community*. As students prepare throughout rehearsals to present the final performances, their participation helps to develop their *identity* and their personal histories of becoming within the contexts of the production, their school, and their community.

This study investigated a group of students who acted in a high school musical theater production. By examining the social environment of rehearsals through Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998), I sought to investigate how the meaningful elements of musical theater productions might impact students’ personal development. The research question that guided this study was:

1. In what ways does participation in musical theater productions as a cast member foster the development of communities of practice among high school students?

Participation in the study was limited to students at one public, mid-Atlantic, suburban high school and was delimited to students in the cast of the school musical.

Review of Literature

In examining school musical theater productions as communities of practice, literature dealing with musical theater in schools offers a context for understanding the ways in which musical theater has developed within the realms of general, music, and theater education. The push for articulating national standards for a number of academic disciplines during the 1990s (Porter, 1994) led to the development of national standards in arts education as well. Included in these standards for the arts were the National Standards for Music Education (National Association for Music Education, 2012) and the National Standards for Theatre Education (Consortium of National Arts Education, 1994), which delineated what every student should gain from school-based music and theater activities. The intersection of these standards offers a context for musical theater education.

The National Standards for Music Education delineate skills that every student should gain from music education. As a musical endeavor, participation in musical theater can aid in students meeting the following standards for music education:

1. Singing, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music.
5. Reading and notating music.
6. Listening to, analyzing, and describing music.
7. Evaluating music and music performances.
8. Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts.
9. Understanding music in relation to history and culture. (National Association for Music Education, 2012)

Similarly, participation in musical theater can target a number of the National Standards for Theatre Education, most clearly displayed by the specific mentions of musical theater in the following standards:

Grades 5-8

Content Standard #6: Comparing and incorporating art forms by analyzing methods of presentation and audience response for theatre, dramatic media (such as film, television, and electronic media), and other art forms

a) Students describe characteristics and compare the presentation of characters, environments, and actions in theatre, musical theatre, dramatic media, dance, and visual arts...

d) Students describe and compare the functions and interaction of performing and visual artists and audience members in theatre, dramatic media, musical theatre, dance, music, and visual arts. (Consortium of National Arts Education, 1994, pp. 47-48)

Grades 9-12

Content Standard #6: Comparing and integrating art forms by analyzing traditional theatre, dance, music, visual arts, and new art forms

a) Students describe and compare the basic nature, materials, elements, and means of communicating in theatre, dramatic media, musical theatre, dance, music, and the visual arts

Content Standard #8: Understanding context by analyzing the role of theatre, film, television, and electronic media in the past and the present

c) Students identify cultural and historical sources of American theatre and musical theatre. (Consortium of National Arts Education, 1994, pp. 66-67)

Though musical theater certainly addresses many of the national standards in music education and theater education, the lack of continuity in the pedagogy for musical theater specifically was an area of concern for Snider (1995). Using the arts framework for the state of California as her guideline, Snider (1995) found that, at the time, there were no formal teaching methods for musical theater, and musical theater was noticeably lacking in existing standards and frameworks. Presenting a standardized sample curriculum that included the areas of history, audition techniques, production values, and professional conduct, Snider provided specific

content for educators to address in their teaching and offered ways in which educators could meet national and state standards for the arts by teaching musical theater.

Lee (1983), Ross & Durgin (1998), and Bobetsky (2009) each described step-by-step elements of choosing, teaching, and mounting a musical theater production in schools. Lee (1983) and Ross & Durgin (1998) presented how-to guides for mounting musical theater productions that included elements such as choosing a show, finances, auditions, casting, rehearsals, directing, musical considerations, dancing, scenery, backstage considerations, costumes, makeup, the final performance, and a sequential checklist for the months leading up to a show. Similarly, Bobetsky (2009) presented an approach to producing musical theater in schools within the context of music education, suggesting a unit of study for the musical that would involve teachers from other disciplines, strategies for teaching the music, creating an original musical, and assessing the unit of study. Bobetsky's approach addressed the ways in which musical theater productions can meet various national standards for both music education and theater explicitly, providing a clear link between the disciplines of music education, theater, and musical theater.

Focusing on the growth and development of students obliged to participate in a fifth-grade musical, Feay-Shaw (2001) reported three areas of personal development for students: personal and social growth, musical growth, and theatrical skill development. Findings indicated that students who were cast in leading roles gained confidence, but in some cases were isolated from the group dynamic of the production. For children in the ensemble, Feay-Shaw reported significant behavioral changes and levels of personal development or social growth in each child by the time of the final performance; this growth appeared to stem from the mere experience of participating in the production. Similarly, Bos (2012) described the all-inclusive nature of the

Bellevue Youth Theatre (BYT), which welcomed participants of all abilities by casting all who auditioned and working to build confidence and self-esteem. Participants in the BYT program grew to depend upon and trust each other while learning to appreciate people different from themselves (Bos, 2012).

The literature of musical theater in schools spans national and state standards to individual progress of student participants. To further investigate the impact of musical theater on students' personal development, communities of practice (Wenger, 1998, 2006) offered an apt framework for analyzing the environment of the school musical theater production for this study. By existing within various social contexts, people encounter a number of communities of practice through which they “develop their own practices, routines, rituals, artifacts, symbols, conventions, stories, and histories” (Wenger, 1998, p. 6). These traits align with many descriptions of musical theater productions found in the literature. Researchers (Countryman, 2009; Hewitt, 2009; Snell & Hodgetts, 2007) have examined various musical communities through the lens of Wenger's (1998, 2006) ideas that may carry parallels to the environment of musical theater productions.

Countryman (2009) interviewed 33 high school graduates about their experiences in Canadian high school music programs, finding that students' participation in their high school music encounters exposed them to musical creativity, leadership, and independence. Outside of education, Snell & Hodgetts (2007) examined the co-construction of a community of practice through an ethnographic study involving six participants who frequented a New Zealand Heavy Metal bar called “6ft Under.” The authors found that participants formed a community of practice in their primary community space through their attitudes, styles of dress, dance, and knowledge of the genre. In another study, Hewitt (2009) examined how stylistic considerations

for various musical genres indicated the existence of communities of practice within music education programs in the United Kingdom. He found that formal means of learning, such as apprenticeship or transmission models, are popular in traditional Western classical music, but many other musical styles develop informal “knowledge-building communities” (Westerlund in Hewitt, 2009, p. 5) through which stylistic considerations disseminate.

Hewitt (2009) focused on communities of practice within genres of music, which could apply to musical theater as a specific genre requiring careful stylistic considerations in its pedagogy and assessment. These specifications help to shape the environment created during a musical theater production, which can include not only stylistic considerations (Hewitt, 2009), but also knowledge of the genre (Snell & Hodgetts, 2007), and the musical community (Countryman, 2009) formed during a production. The subject of music education in Hewitt’s and Countryman’s studies coincides with the inclusion of musical theater in schools and highlights the multiplicity of considerations necessary when mounting a musical theater production.

Methodology

This study followed a qualitative case study research design (Stake, 1995, 2000). In a case study, the researcher seeks to understand a phenomenon through the examination of a bounded group (Glesne, 2011). The design of the current study aligned with the specifications of an instrumental case study, in which the researcher studies a case to “provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization” (Stake, 2000, p. 437). I collected data at a public high school in a suburban, upper-middle class community in a mid-Atlantic state, which I selected as the site for this study after working with the students during the musical production of the previous year. During my informal observations before this study, I noticed personal and social transformations among the students over the course of the production. As I had witnessed evidence of findings

from the literature at this school through my informal observations, I returned to the school as the site for this study. After selecting the site, I identified the cast of the high school musical production as the bounded group, and applied the framework of communities of practice as a way to conceptualize and analyze that group.

In selecting participants, I applied purposeful sampling (Merriam, 1988) to obtain a typical case sample (Glesne, 2011) with the goal of choosing participants whose experiences might be typical for a variety of students who participated in the school musical. To that end, I selected five actors based on their class standing, their role(s) in the musical, and their years of experience in the school musical. I obtained consent and assent forms from nine interested students, and then I contacted five students in Grades 10-12 who had performed in roles of varying size in the show and had participated in the high school musical for 1-4 years. Each student agreed to participate and I proceeded with the data collection.

Data for this study consisted primarily of participant interviews supplemented by a performance observation, informal anecdotes, and the performance program. I attended the final performance, obtained a copy of the program from the show, and heard anecdotes from parents, students, and teachers during the intermission and after the performance. I prepared interview questions based on previous observations and informal anecdotes (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006) with the goal of connecting to the framework and research question of this study. I then conducted semi-structured interviews (Glesne, 2011) with the five participants, which allowed new ideas to emerge during the interviews while maintaining a connection to the topics of the study (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Each interview was 12 to 25 minutes in length and took place during the students' lunch break in a quiet hallway at the high school. Recordings of four interviews and researcher notes for one interview served as the data for later coding and analysis.

The following presentation of the data includes a vignette (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which drew from the interviews and other sources of data to portray “a series of events taken to be representative, typical, or emblematic” (p. 81) of the case. In this instance, the narrative vignette portrays a typical afternoon rehearsal as described by the participants, introduces the study participants, and displays potential emergent themes for interim understanding (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Data analysis followed a prestructured case analysis format, through which I aligned the data with the elements of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998, 2006), which in turn addressed the guiding research question. Pattern coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) constituted the final stage of data analysis, during which I identified two emergent themes to “pull together a lot of material into more meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis” (p. 69). As themes emerged from the data, I was able to synthesize those themes with the established frameworks of the study to further address the research question.

Trustworthiness encompasses the ways in which a researcher “can claim that their work is plausible or credible” (Glesne, 2011, p. 49). To gain trustworthiness, I triangulated the data from the interviews between and among the participants, analyzed supplemental data sources, searched for negative cases that could refine the data analysis, acknowledged and clarified researcher biases, underwent external audits of my findings, and sought to provide rich, thick description typical of qualitative research (Creswell, 1998). Acknowledging and clarifying my own biases as the researcher was crucial to claiming trustworthiness for this study. Having attributed much of my own personal development to experiences from my adolescent participation in high school musicals, I had to maintain an awareness of this potential bias in designing my interview questions and in analyzing the data. An additional bias I considered was

the influence of the Hawthorne effect (Macefield, 2007), in which participants might adjust reports of their experiences to address the goals of the study. Since participants were aware of nature of the study before the interviews, I explained before each interview that I wanted to hear about their experiences as honestly as possible without censoring or adapting their responses to what they thought I might want to hear. Throughout the development of the study, the data collection, and the data analysis, external audits enhanced the trustworthiness and accuracy of my findings.

Presentation and Analysis of the Data

In the following sections, I present and analyze the data simultaneously, which reflects the interactive nature of data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2006). The presentation is ongoing and holistic to offer a gestalt look at a complete picture, rather than a more traditional, source-by-source presentation of the data. I have substituted pseudonyms for the actual site and participant names throughout, and I have intentionally omitted the name of the musical to ensure the anonymity of the site and participants. The following vignette provides a context for the presentation of the data. While the sequence of events is a combined rendering of my own observations and interpretations, the vignette provides a rich and thick description of the context and includes formal data from interviews and supplemental data sources.

Setting the Scene—Vignette

As the bell rings at 2:47 p.m., two weeks before opening night of the spring musical, 46 high school students make their way to the 3:00 p.m. rehearsal in the auditorium at Fairmount High. Jeremy, a sophomore in the ensemble of the musical, stops by the lacrosse team's bake sale on his way to rehearsal, knowing it might be 8:00 p.m. before he can go home for dinner. This is his first year as a cast member in the musical and he is ecstatic about going to after school

rehearsals: “I’ve made so many new friends. I got a girlfriend, all because of the musical...everyone loves each other and cares about each other, we’re like one big family” (Interview, April 10, 2013). One of his favorite parts of being in the musical is the fact that he has become friends with so many juniors and seniors in the production.

As he pays for two slices of pizza and a Gatorade, he spots Ellen coming down the hallway and waves enthusiastically. This is Ellen’s third year in the musical and she is feeling the academic pressure of the end of junior year. For Ellen, the musical keeps her going through each year, despite the disorganized rehearsals, the tension between quarreling cast members, and the frantic directors. The “high” she feels after each performance carries her mood for months afterwards and she cannot wait to re-audition each fall (Interview notes, April 11, 2013). Ellen’s younger sister caught her enthusiasm for the musical and is also in the ensemble this year.

Jeremy and Ellen chat as they walk down the hallway toward the auditorium. They greet Samantha as she hurriedly jogs past them on the way back to her locker to grab her math textbook before rehearsal starts. She knows she’ll have plenty of time to get her homework done while the ensemble isn’t on stage. This is Samantha’s fourth and final musical in high school, and she is excited to have two featured roles during large ensemble numbers. Like Ellen, Samantha has felt a lot of tension in rehearsals, but that tension has tainted her experiences. While being well-rounded for college applications was one of the driving factors behind auditioning for the musical her freshman year, she is seriously considering whether or not she wants to audition for musical theater shows in college. “I don’t know if I want to deal with the stress that it brings...The people can be very high strung and intense, and I don’t know if I want to continue with that path. I might want to branch off and try a sport or a different club” (Interview, April 11, 2013).

As Samantha enters the auditorium at 3:06 p.m., cast members and their backpacks are sprawled around the seats in the audience. Excited chatter fills the space as groups around the room debrief from their day at school. Susan, the drama teacher at Fairmount and the stage director for the musical, finishes a quick chat with the choreographer, Francine, and the music director, Debra. “Okay, okay, okay! Shhhh! I need Victoria on stage, I need Roger with Francine, and I need the guys with Debra in the choir room!” yells Susan over the fading conversation in the auditorium. “Wait, Susan! What about the rest of the girls?” asks Samantha. Susan replies, “You should be going over your dances in the hallway. Where’s Victoria?” Victoria, the senior female lead, stands up and walks toward the stage: “I’m right here! What are we working on?”

This is Victoria’s fourth year in the musical and she has been working tirelessly to make her performance spectacular. Despite how excited she was to be cast as the lead for her senior show, she came into rehearsals feeling a lot of pressure, especially from the freshmen and sophomores who felt she didn’t deserve her role. Victoria had worried about divisions in the cast that had caused tension during rehearsals: “It’s intimidating, which you wouldn’t think because I’m this big, bubbly personality that wouldn’t get intimidated by anyone, but I did because I’d heard what underclassmen had said about me” (Interview, April 12, 2013). However, in recent weeks, the cast has come together and Victoria has overcome her nerves. She has worked to impress everyone and feels like this year, she had finally found her moment to shine: “This was the year where [people in] my whole grade saw me shine. I did so many activities where my grade was like ‘Wow! Where did she come from?’ So it was really nice to have my shining moment, but I don’t think it’ll happen again in the future” (Interview, April 12, 2013).

As Susan works with Victoria on stage, Roger starts to review his choreography for the male lead’s solo number in the first act. Roger is a star lacrosse player who has balanced his

commitments to also be in the musical for all four years of high school. In the fall, he will attend the local community college to get his general education credits out of the way, but plans to focus on auditioning for film and television in New York City during his college years. “I have a bunch of connections right now, my cousin is in the film industry, but I’m working on getting an agent and talking to important people. My plans are really to just see what happens” (Interview, April 15, 2013).

The afternoon flies by, and when rehearsal ends as scheduled at 7:00 p.m., the cast members make their way to the parking lot. Roger and Victoria laugh about their first attempt at a stage kiss and vow to work on it at tomorrow’s rehearsal. Samantha follows behind them; she finished her math homework and decided to go see a movie with two of the other ensemble members after rehearsal. Ellen finds her younger sister and on the drive home, they talk about the difficult new choreography they learned at the end of rehearsal. Jeremy says goodnight to his girlfriend and walks to the parking lot with a few of the senior guys, eagerly awaiting rehearsal the following afternoon.

The Musical as a Community of Practice

The vignette above provides a context for the more traditional data analysis of the following sections. Data in the subsequent sections address the guiding research question through prestructured case analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) that aligns the data to Wenger’s (1998) four facets of communities of practice: meaning, practice, community, and identity.

Meaning. Wenger’s (1998) concept of meaning, which concerns the ability for individuals and groups to find meaning in their lives and in the world, surfaced in many of the participants descriptions of their experiences with the musical. Victoria explained, “I tried out

and I made it freshman year and I've done it every year since and I've fallen in love. It's my favorite activity in school" (Interview, April 12, 2013). Roger articulated similar feelings, saying,

It's just something I'm really passionate about doing, I love it. It's been such a great experience for the past four years. I know me and [a fellow cast member], we were so sad when it was over—like, that was it. And other people are never going to do this kind of thing again. (Interview, April 15, 2013)

For Roger, who was also an active member of school sports teams, acting in the musical every year served as a venue through which he could express many facets of his personality, an experience that he felt was unique to the school musical. "With sports, you have to be this one, angry, mean person. You've got to want to hate the other team," said Roger, "but with theater, it's just being yourself and letting everything out of you, you know? There's so much expression" (Interview, April 15, 2013). Roger did not participate in the fall dramas at Fairmount, so his feelings reflected only his experiences in the spring musicals.

In explaining the meaningful elements of her participation in the musical, Ellen explained that the "high" from the culmination of everyone's hard work during final performances carried her through the each academic year (Interview notes, April 11, 2013). Jeremy described how meaningful the musical had been to him in mainly social terms, referencing his newly established bonds with upperclassmen and beginning to date his girlfriend. While Samantha described a great deal of tension, stress, and frustration, the meaningful aspects of her participation dealt with the refinement of her character and identity. Samantha explained a number of meaningful abilities she had gained from the musical, including

Not stressing out about the big things, especially backstage. People misplace props, directors yell at you or the group, and I realize not to take it personally. They just want what's best for the musical. Also, if you lose a prop, if you forget to put a costume on, it's not the end of the world. Things will go on, people will forget. For me, I'm less worried and more relaxed. I definitely became a stronger person. I don't want to say I desensitized myself, but definitely if I had something to say, I would say it. (Interview, April 11, 2013)

During the interviews, the participants chose three words to describe the environment of the musical (see Table 1). Some participants chose to explain and clarify their word choices, most notably Victoria and Roger. Both participants played leading roles and explained that the words they chose with negative connotations were actually framed by the struggles they encountered and ultimately overcame while preparing their roles.

Table 1

Participant Descriptions of the Musical

Participant	Word 1	Word 2	Word 3
Jeremy	<i>Fun</i>	<i>Family</i>	<i>Musical</i>
Ellen	<i>Charged</i>	<i>Intense</i>	<i>Provocative</i>
Samantha	<i>Crazy</i>	<i>Hectic</i>	<i>Stressful</i>
Victoria	<i>Stressful</i>	<i>Intimidating</i>	<i>Exhilarating</i>
Roger	<i>Frustrating</i>	<i>Fun</i>	<i>Hard-working</i>

Practice. The practices that took place during the musical provided a way to “sustain mutual engagement in action” (Wenger, 1998, p. 5). The participants explained that early rehearsals dealt solely with music. Later in the process, rehearsals included learning choreography and blocking. The three directors were very involved with facilitating the practices of the school musical. As Jeremy explained, “Debra would be working on vocal technique for the songs and she would specifically teach you how to sing, how to act and sing at the same time.” He continued, “Then our dance director, Francine, she would show you how to try to multi-task, so dancing at the same time.” Lastly, he mentioned, “Then of course, Susan would show you how to act sing and dance at the same time. So it’s all three things at once” (Interview, April 10, 2013). The coordination of singing, dancing, and acting was a challenge for many, as Roger explained: “People have never sang [sic] and danced before, so that’s hard for a lot of us, plus you’re losing your breath when you’re dancing” (Interview, April 15, 2013).

To help newer students learn their music, lines, blocking, and choreography, student leaders emerged throughout the rehearsal process, often based on their class standing and their role in the show. These student leaders included appointed dance captains and self-selected peer leaders with more experience. Jeremy explained,

When people were struggling, other friends or other peers were helping each other learn how to do it better. The dance captains...were definitely showing some of the less experienced dancers how to dance better. Then the singers that are higher up there who have been in the musical for four years and know the musical and the way it goes on were showing the younger kids, like me for instance, how better to sing and how better to dance. (Interview, April 10, 2013)

Student leaders also helped to alleviate discord among the cast members. Ellen mentioned that midway through the rehearsal process, one of the upperclassmen leads spoke with the cast to quell tensions between quarreling cast members, and he brought the cast together to prepare a successful production (Interview notes, April 11, 2013). As she was listening, Ellen felt a sense of awe that her peer had taken a leading role off-stage in organizing and motivating the cast. Similarly, Roger reported that occasionally the leads would step in to motivate and focus the cast “because we all knew how much it had to come together, so we all really worked together” (Interview, April 15, 2013). Offering further insight, Victoria explained that the directors had encouraged some of the leads to reach out to the younger cast members during rehearsal: “Francine asked me...she was like ‘You guys are the role models, you have to include them more’” (Interview, April 12, 2013). As the cast worked together to master their coordination and as student leaders emerged to unite the cast’s efforts, many students encountered a strong sense of community.

Community. Wenger (1998) explained the concept of community as “a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence” (p. 5). Jeremy’s enthusiasm for his first experience as a cast member in the musical reflected the significant impact of the musical on the social

configurations in his life. He explained, “All of my friends that I made from the musical are actually my group of friends now [outside of the musical]” (Interview, April 10, 2013). He continued, “I still have my other friends and stuff, but I really started hanging out with kids from the musical more.” Jeremy felt a strong connection to his fellow cast members that resulted from a sense of importance and belonging: “There is not one person left out, everyone mattered in the musical...the whole family, loving, equal thing. Everyone in the musical were [sic] people like that. If there were mean people, it wouldn’t work out like that, you know?”

Victoria also placed value on the social environment of rehearsals as she reflected on her experiences and explained why she enjoyed rehearsals:

What makes it fun? It definitely has to be the people. I didn’t really care for *Guys and Dolls* my sophomore year, I didn’t really like the show, I never had. But because I was with my friends, it was okay that I was doing that show for six hours a day rehearsing. Then this show, I loved, but if I hadn’t have had the people, it wouldn’t have been the same. (Interview, April 12, 2013)

Regardless of her interest in the musical itself, Victoria had maintained a strong dedication to participating in the musical because of the community she encountered among her friends during rehearsal.

In contrast, four of the five participants reported significant struggles with building the community of the musical during the year of this study. Jeremy, a sophomore, was the only participant who reported entirely positive encounters with cast members of all class standings and roles. The other four participants, all upperclassmen, reported what Victoria called a “huge attitude problem with the freshman” (Interview, April 12, 2013). According to Victoria and Ellen, many freshmen cast members felt that some of the juniors and seniors who were cast as leads did not deserve their roles (Interview notes, April 11, 2013). Victoria described how “It kind of caused a divide this year...the seniors and juniors were all friends because we had been together

last year, so there was a huge divide this year between the underclassmen and the upperclassmen” (Interview, April 12, 2013).

The division between upperclassmen and underclassmen revealed complexities in the community of the musical that entirely positive reports, such as Jeremy’s, did not initially indicate. In particular, Samantha mentioned many negative interactions between cast members. In an attempt to create a more positive environment, Samantha tried to reach out to fellow cast members and disregard any unpleasant interactions: “I was more friendly towards other people because I want everyone to have a good experience. If people were kind of mean to me, I brushed it off because it’s just who they are, I can’t do that” (Interview, April 11, 2013). The variance in the community of the musical could have likely been a result of the range of identities present within the cast.

Identity. The concept of identity displays “how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities” (Wenger, 1998, p. 5). Two sets of identities within the cast of the musical emerged from the data: the first were lead roles and ensemble members, and the second were underclassmen and upperclassmen. Samantha summarized tensions between these identities as she described the social environment of the musical as an ensemble member:

Sometimes it’s kind of hostile because there’re a lot of cliques, especially last year with the upperclassmen...but I found with the underclassmen, they were a lot more open to becoming friends and were a lot more friendly. It was hard this year because the cast was pretty split up. Of course there were the leads, and then we weren’t really all together at the same time—we were rehearsing at different times on different days and there wasn’t really a time for us to get together. (Interview, April 11, 2013)

Roger also mentioned that “in rehearsal, sometimes we’re split up like leads and ensemble parts,” a practice that seemed to highlight the difference between groups within the show. As he thought about the cast, Roger explained that “Some people think ‘Oh, I’m in the ensemble, I don’t have

to do anything, I can just goof around,' but with the leads, it's really focused" (Interview, April 15, 2013). This finding triangulated between multiple student interviews and the printed program, which listed the lead and ensemble cast members separately in the program under the headings of "cast" and "ensemble" (Performance program). The division between leads and ensemble members seemed to fuel the strain between the second set of identities regarding class standing.

Many of the participants recalled or reported very positive experiences with the musical as underclassmen. Jeremy, a sophomore, was ecstatic with "How loving and fair everybody was with each other, and how the seniors were best friends with the sophomores and the juniors were best friends with everyone." He felt that "there was no discrimination in any way, sense, or form" (Interview, April 10, 2013). Victoria recalled how during her "freshman year, it was very welcoming. Seniors had no 'I'm better than you' attitude, everyone was just embraced and we were all friends. We all ate lunch together, we talked, we all became friends" (Interview, April 12, 2013). Describing how he became involved with the musical as an underclassman, Roger explained "When I was a freshman, I had friends in the upperclass and they told me to go into these drama classes because they said it was a lot of fun, then [an upperclassman friend] pretty much got me into the musical" (Interview, April 15, 2013). Each of these students attributed their continued participation in the school musical to their positive experiences as freshman.

In contrast, all participants except Jeremy had been in the musical for multiple years and reported a rift between underclassmen and upperclassmen after their first year in the musical. During this study, that rift impacted the auditions and early rehearsals of the musical significantly; Victoria said, "you would not believe the tension we had at the beginning of the year" (Interview, April 12, 2013). Again, the printed program indicated a division of upperclassmen and underclassmen, as only leads and senior-class ensemble members received

printed biographies in the program. Fortunately, the work of bringing the show together in combination with student leaders uniting the cast brought all four grades together by the end of the show. Victoria mentioned, “I had my friends, and then by the end when everyone became friends with the freshman and we were all merging, it was just really great” (Interview, April 12, 2013).

Emergent Themes

The following sections address the research question as a result of pattern coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) that identifies two emergent themes. The emergent themes of Family and Work describe the environment that developed during the rehearsal and performance process, and they offer alternate perspectives in considering the elements of meaning, practice, community, and identity described above.

Family. All participants mentioned experiencing a positive and friendly environment at some point during their experiences with the musical. Jeremy, Ellen, and Victoria specifically used the word family to describe the environment. Mentioning how many friends he had made, Jeremy explained that “everyone loves each other and cares about each other, we’re like one big family.” Ellen supported Jeremy’s feelings, mentioning that one of her favorite parts of the musical was watching everyone grow as a “cast family” and develop throughout the rehearsal process. Victoria elaborated, saying

I know it’s kind of cliché, but you really do become a cast family. Partly because you spend so much time with each other that you just kind of have to like each other. So I always enjoyed rehearsals because, even if I had to sit in the hallway for three hours waiting for my scene to come on, you were with your friends and it was great.

Describing the negative environment sometimes present during the musical, Samantha described how the directors “would get kind of frustrated with us if we didn’t do things exactly the way they wanted us to” (Interview, April 11, 2013). In contrast, Victoria mentioned how the

directors addressed tensions among the cast by encouraging the seniors to reach out to freshmen to resolve the social conflicts between them. From this director facilitation, Victoria reported that by the end of the production, “We were really friends, but it took a long time to get there this year” (Interview, April 12, 2013). The triumphs and struggles that participants’ experienced through the theme of family connected to the community and identity elements of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

Work. Many participants described how the work of rehearsals had a significant influence on how much they enjoyed the rehearsal process. Students were either actively engaged and challenged by the tasks, or they had the opportunity to bond with their friends during downtime. Rehearsals consisted of “work, work, work,” said Jeremy. He clarified, saying, “But, when I say work, I don’t mean it in a bad way, I mean we worked and we had fun every single moment. It was a group dynamic, everyone loved each other, it was just a lot, a lot of fun” (Interview, April 10, 2013).

Describing reasons why she enjoyed participating in the musical, Victoria explained, “The musical requires the most work in so many areas. It’s the one school activity that’s the most fun, but it stretches you to grow as a person” (Interview, April 12, 2013). She continued, describing the social impact of the work and its influence on personal growth: “A lot of times, you’re outside of your realm or comfort zone being pushed up on stage, being judged by your peers.” Roger’s comments further supported the interaction between work, social environment, and enjoyment, mentioning rehearsals as “a little chaotic, but at the same time we have to work very hard, we have to keep focus, but at the same time we’re always having fun” (Interview, April 15, 2013). He continued,

We’re constantly doing something. Our lunch breaks, we cut them down from the past few years from an hour to a half hour, just because we’re constantly doing something and this year was one of the biggest times that we needed to get jam-packed on working. (Interview, April 15, 2013)

The theme of work that ran throughout many participants' responses connected to practice and meaning elements of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

Conclusions

This study examined the ways in which participation in a high school musical theater production might impact students' personal development. Findings indicated that participants in this study experienced and became members of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998, 2006) within their high school musical that provided meaning for students, unified them through the practice of rehearsals, offered a sense of community, and fostered individual and collective identities. The identity facet of the community of practice within the musical emerged as a source of conflict for the cast members, with divisions between lead and ensemble members exacerbating tensions between underclassmen and upperclassmen. As a group, the cast overcame the conflicts of identity through the practices of the musical, thereby forming a cohesive community that ultimately provided the study participants with meaningful life experiences.

Emergent themes connecting to the research question included themes of family and work. Three participants used the word "family" to describe the community they felt during the musical. This concept of a cast family also incorporated the negative or dysfunctional aspects of the rehearsal process, including discord among cast members. Many participants also described how the work of rehearsals contributed to their enjoyment and sense of accomplishment. Multi-tasking and coordination were essential elements of participants' enjoyment of the work during rehearsals, and the social interactions during the work process also contributed greatly to participants' enjoyment.

Connections

The findings of this study connected to much of the reviewed literature concerning musical theater in schools and communities of practice. The emergent theme of work connected to Bobetsky's (2009) suggestion that, through participation in a school musical theater production, students "will succeed musically and enjoy the social benefits of working together toward a shared goal" (p. x). Feay-Shaw (2001) also reported increased confidence among the three children who split the lead role in musical of her study, but also noted that the students' lead roles sometimes isolated them from the group dynamic of the production. This phenomenon from Feay-Shaw's (2001) study was also present in the current study, as participant interviews and the printed program indicated a clear divide between students with lead roles and students in the ensemble.

Connecting to literature dealing with communities of practice, the printed program of the show served as an artifact from the musical theater production that supplemented interview findings and indicated the extent to which the group existed as a community of practice, much as Snell & Hodgetts (2007) did with the artifacts in their study of the Heavy Metal genre. As with Countryman's (2009) study, the current study considered participants reflections on their experiences after time had passed to process the experience, rather than reflections on their experiences while the musical was in progress. This provided a retrospective portrait of each participant's experience in the musical and allowed me to identify elements of a community of practice within their responses, similar to the approach Countryman (2009) utilized.

Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

Much of the data from this study supported previous findings of the reviewed literature. As such, implications include support for addressing problems of previous literature, such as

organizing and codifying musical theater pedagogy (Snider, 1995). Future research might investigate ways in which a comprehensive approach to theater pedagogy might encourage the development of communities of practice in high school musicals as a means to address state and national standards. This perspective was beyond the scope of the present study, but such research would constitute a valuable contribution to the existing literature.

A number of the participants referenced the intervention of adult facilitators as a positive force within the community of the musical. Musical theater has become a common school activity for students across America; the adults who facilitate these productions contribute a great deal to social environment and overall success or failure of each production. Snider (1995) expressed the importance of cohesive pedagogical materials and practices when teaching musical theater; participants' comments in this study indicate that skills in mediating and facilitating the social environment of a production may also be valuable skills. Future research might investigate the inclusion of musical theater in teacher training programs and whether professional educators feel prepared to facilitate a production with regard to content, pedagogy, and social facilitation.

Family emerged as a theme of this study, with three participants explicitly describing the cast as a family and all participants mentioning the positive environment they experienced during their participation in the musical. Future research might consider investigating high school musical theater productions through the lens of family theories, such as the Bowen Family Systems Theory (Kerr, 2003). Family theories examine the interaction of varying individual identities, roles, and functions within the family unit. Applied to a high school musical theater production, family theories may offer significant insight into the relationships and social functions that various participants, including the directors, actors, stage crew, and orchestra members, might fulfill.

While the emergent themes of family and work were consistent among each participants' responses, the data supporting these themes as meaningful elements of the production having an impact on students' personal development was limited by the design and scope of this study as well as the number of participants. Future research might further investigate the themes of this study by involving more participants, utilizing different research paradigms, expanding sources of data, and incorporating other sources of validity. Continued investigation into the impact of school musical theater productions on students' personal development could have far-reaching implications regarding social influences on student growth, interdisciplinary connections present in productions, driving factors behind student motivation, and advocacy for music and theater education.

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