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UTILIZING EDUCATIONAL THEATRE AS A MEANS OF DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Utilizing Educational Theatre as a Means of Developing Intercultural Communication

Abstract

For over fifty years, research in psychology has promoted the idea that structured contact between disparate groups in activities that promote interdependence is essential in building inter-group acceptance and prejudice reduction (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1978; Stephan, Renfro & Stephan, 2004; Molina & Witig 2006). Arts education, specifically theatre production and performance, can be seen as a key means to fulfill the promise of this research tradition. This paper examines what happens when two Midwestern middle schools with disparate populations, one rural and the other urban, work with one another on a shared artistic experience. The analysis of both observed student interaction patterns throughout the production process as well as responses to open-ended survey questions draws a picture of how students navigate the maze of cross-cultural dialogue and relationship building as they jointly produce a full-length musical. Findings generally support the noted research tradition; however, variations are seen dependent upon students' facility in breaking down pre-existing cliques within each group, and in mediating the attitudes toward difference that students are exposed to outside of the production environment.

Introduction

The group of three twelve year-old girls pled their case with me. After having viewed the film version, they really wanted me to direct them in “Hairspray” as the middle school musical the following year. Despite the fact that the content is geared to an older age group, I was surprised that the students did not see what, in my opinion, was another more obvious issue. When asked what the theme of the story was, they eagerly said it was about kids dancing together on a television show. When pressed further, one of the group members said it was about desegregation- which they had talked about in social studies. When asked if after looking at our school, which is 91% Caucasian, we could do an honest job of telling that story, the girls paused. They knew that our school’s population was not diverse enough to support the casting requirements. Still, they wanted to produce the show enough that they tried to come up with a solution. Suddenly, one of the girl’s eyes brightened and a smile grew on her face. With a burst of enthusiasm she blurted out what she saw as the obvious response,

“We can paint our faces black!”

This statement should not be surprising when uttered by a twelve year-old in a predominantly Caucasian community. Middle school students, while taught about America’s past including slavery, the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement, rarely, if ever, talk about what a minstrel show was; it simply is not part of the official curriculum of school. Further, in this particular setting, a rural Midwestern town with a population of about 7000, many students have had few encounters with students of diverse backgrounds. As of 2003, United States schools have resegregated to the point where 72% of Black students, 76% of Hispanic students

but only 11% of White students attend schools where more than half the student population is non-White (Frankenberg, Lee & Orfield, 2003). Most students nationwide do not reside in communities where day-to-day contact with those from different racial or ethnic backgrounds is seen on a regular basis. When these population statistics are viewed alongside a research tradition identifying that structured contact between disparate groups in activities that promote interdependence are essential in building inter-group acceptance and prejudice reduction, (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1978; Stephan, Renfro, & Stephan, 2004; Molina & Wittig, 2006) as well as arts-education research documenting the ability of the artistic process to build relationships that cross the boundaries of race, class, gender (Lynch & Allan, 2007), it is easy to infer that because of geographic resegregation, schools are missing a distinct opportunity to build understanding between students of different backgrounds.

After similar conversations with multiple students in this community concerning the production of “Hairspray,” and taking into account the stated commitment of the district to focus on issues of diversity, I began to look for a means to allow the students in the local musical production I direct to work and learn with students from other backgrounds. With district approval I produced a jointly-cast musical between our local, rural middle school and an urban middle school located 80 miles away. As a part of this process, as a researcher, I had the unique opportunity to observe if and how patterns of interaction developed between students in this shared artistic experience.

Literature Review

Adolescence

Adolescence, or the period of growth occurring between puberty and adulthood, is both a social and physiological construct, and the rise of both the middle school and high school in the United States are associated with the wide acceptance of this developmental phase (Carnegie, 1995). Developmental traits identified with adolescence include the physical growth spurt of both the skeletal and muscular systems and changes in the levels of hormones released in the body. Intellectual development in this phase is marked by a shift between concrete and formal thought processes. It is during adolescence that humans move from being able to classify and organize to hypothesize and reflect on the act of thinking (Knowles & Brown, 2000).

Adolescent social development is also marked by certain traits. Of prime concern to young people in this age group are peer relationships and the creation of social identity (Tatum, 1997; Knowles & Brown 2000). As adolescents move from dependence to independence, relationships with family, authority figures and their peer group are in constant flux. Throughout the growth process, these students learn and relearn strategies to retain and make new friends (Sterns, Buchmann & Bonneau, 2009). Wider community norms are also known and taken into account as adolescents create and recreate their social worlds. With the aforementioned growth in cognitive development, these students can now see the world both as it is and as they feel it should be. Community standards are accepted and to some extent emulated at the same time they are questioned as to envision solutions to the problems adolescents are now able to identify (Knowles & Brown, 2000).

Consciousness of racial and ethnic identity forms throughout adolescence, and much like the physical and cognitive developments inherent to the age group, this consciousness develops on a timeline particular to the individual. Very young children are cognizant of differences in skin color (Connolly & Hosken, 2006; Tatum, 1997), but it is in adolescence that young people

can assign themselves to racial and ethnic groups and discuss reasons for this self-categorization (Tatum, 1997; Hammond-Stoughton & Sivertson, 2005; Roberts, Bell & Murphy, 2008). At the same time adolescents make these categorizations, they also grapple with the ramifications of these decisions and are able to see how choices based on race can affect their immediate social world and the wider community. For students in this age cohort, questions pertaining to race and their answers are still evolving (Tatum, 1997; Hammond-Stoughton & Sivertson, 2005; Roberts, Bell & Murphy, 2008).

Contact Theory

The premise of inter-group contact theory is that engaged contact between members of disparate groups, specifically in majority/minority relationships, is likely to decrease the prejudices held by each group's members. For prejudice reduction to occur, certain prerequisites must be met: equal status, where neither group is held in higher esteem than the other; cooperative interdependence, where group members work toward an outcome both perceive as valuable; acquaintance potential, where the situation allows for members from each group to build and maintain relationships across groups; and authority support, where members from both groups see a leader as supporting both the efforts and interactions between participants (Allport, 1954) Since the 1950s, the premise of intergroup contact theory has been tested in settings ranging from the laboratory to professional environments (Amir, 1978) to schools (Stephan, Renfro, & Stephan, 2004; Molina & Wittig, 2006) and has demonstrated forms of prejudice reduction in all tested locations.

The intersection of contact theory with educational research is ripe with possibility, especially when applied to adolescence. Adolescents are developmentally capable of sustaining

dialogue traits necessary to participate in contact studies and they are emotionally situated to be responsive to the potential benefits of cross-cultural interactions (Knowles & Brown, 2000).

Thus far, contact research has largely centered on the study of high school and college-aged adolescents; however, as the age group is characterized by an individual's development of traits similarly held by the overall cohort, findings can be extended to younger cohort members providing the application of results takes into account varying levels of maturity.

Contact studies centered on adolescents identify characteristics of prejudice reduction that may be applied to further research. First, Molina and Wittig (2006) find that not only is the premise of contact theory applicable to high school and middle school age adolescents, but also that group interdependence and acquaintance potential are the most reliable indicators associated with prejudice reduction. Types of dialogue that take place within the contact setting are also predictors of prejudice reduction outcomes. Barnard and Benn (2001) and Hammond-Stoughton & Sivertson (2005) both ascertain that dialogue structure of contact groups mediates outcomes. Specifically, dialogues which are multi-dimensional in their representations of students' narratives concerning race result in more prejudice reduction. Further, contact groups need not come to agreements on all foundational topics for prejudice reduction to occur.

The Role of Theatre

The arts, including theatre, have been identified as a means of increasing cognitive and social growth. Even for very young children, engagement in sustained imaginative play is seen as factor that changes the quality and quantity of how students make meaning of individuals and the world around them (Vygotsky, 1986). As children grow, the integration of drama into wider

language arts programs has been linked to increased comprehension and social-emotional development, (Catterall, 2002). Students in schools that integrate arts teaching methods into core content area instruction show academic gains greater than students in traditional classroom settings (Catterall and Waldorf, 1999).

Attempts to increase students' ability to identify, define and mediate difference through theatre in educational contexts has had varying degrees of success. In early elementary grades, the use of programs where students read and then acted out scenes from plays with cultural themes resulted in students being able to identify racial differences and situations where exclusion occurred, yet the same study also noted that students' attitudes toward race did not change as a result (Connolly & Hosken, 2006). Similarly, the idea of broadly utilizing the arts to target specific areas of inclusion in school contexts in Scotland had results that depended upon a teacher's knowledge of arts practices as well as their effectiveness in engaging students in risk-taking activities (Lynch & Allan, 2007).

Middle school and high school students' discussions of difference are paramount in the work of Schomann (1996, 2000) who analyzed methods enacted in the context of teaching peace through the use of theatre in mixed Jewish-Arab settings. Over two studies, four separate teaching methods were examined as students engaged in cross-cultural artistic processes. With the backdrop of peace studies in Israel as a centralized theme, students prepared or attempted to prepare performances that examined what was hoped to be a new era of peace in a troubled nation. In some production models, students created and shared meaningful responses to the idea of peace; in others, the artistic process, while productive, was fraught with the tensions and conflicts experienced in wider Israeli society. As in other studies, the results associated with

theatre utilized as a means to build dialogue and reduce prejudice were mixed; dialogue occurred yet prejudice reduction was not always a goal achieved.

In light of these mixed results, researchers still see theatre as uniquely situated to provide an environment in which to investigate students' growth in cross-cultural dialogue and prejudice reduction. Further, educational theatre productions, by their nature, can easily align with the tenets required of contact theory studies. Ensemble members share equal status, for without the contributions of all group members, successful performances cannot occur. Ensembles are interdependent with all performers engaged in a shared activity. The director acts as a facilitator whom actors recognize as supportive of the cast members' interactions. And while the director does not traditionally mediate the social interactions of the cast, in the realm of educational theatre, this task is often accepted as part of the director's domain.

Research Framework

The four tenets of intergroup contact theory as originally set out by Allport (1954) and followed by other researchers inform the structure of this study's joint-production organizational model. Because of my role as both director and researcher, this project is grounded in ethnographic participant-observation methodology (Spradley, 1980; Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998; Levinson, 2010) with the cultural domain being the joint cast grouping made up of students from two schools: the rural location previously mentioned and a second school from a large Midwestern city located approximately 80 miles away- the closest geographic area with significant racial diversity. During participant observation my role was two-fold:

1. to engage in activities appropriate to the situation and

2. to observe the activities, people and physical aspects of the situation (Spradely, 1980).

My level of participation in the activity was high and, as a known member in the artistic process, students did not view me as an interloper. While the students and their families knew about the research questions I would look at during the musical production, because of the previous relationship, I was already seen as a participant in the group; conversational norms and information sharing already existed between myself and the students. The likelihood of information being withheld or students not engaging in activities in a natural manner was lessened (Spradley, 1980). Precisely because of the nature of this relationship safeguards were used to give accurate voice to the students involved (Levinson, 2010). To supplement my own observations, students were also surveyed at both the beginning and end of the process as a means to frame researcher inferences. As conclusions were drawn from observed data, student responses on surveys were used to support or refute these findings.

The nature of participant-observation is to examine the given dynamics of a particular group and record them. Subsequently, from those observations, cultural themes particular to the group are identified. The nature of this research is not to expand findings to apply to all other cultural groups. Rather the goal is to explain the themes found within one group and allow those themes to further inform what is known from other research traditions (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998).

At the heart of this research is a joint musical production staged by students at the two schools. The rural school consists of over 90 percent Caucasian students. The second school is urban and only 10 percent of its students are Caucasian. As part of the production process, the following questions were be addressed:

1. Do middle school students develop inter-cultural dialogue as they participate in the shared artistic experience of producing a musical?
2. If such dialogue develops, what patterns mark this communication across each population?
3. What elements of the production process enhance or hinder the development of shared dialogue across cultural groups?
4. How do students report the process of developing relationships as they engage in a shared artistic experience?

Methodology

The Schools and Students

Maple Leaf Middle School

For five years prior to this research, in addition to my work at a small liberal arts college, I have directed the middle school musical for a local, rural, school district. I came to the college with a background in educational theatre, having taught and managed a middle school theatre program for nearly a decade. When the previous director at the local school sought assistance with the direction of the musical, I was hired into the position.

Maple Leaf Middle School is a neighborhood school located in a rural community of about 7000. The school has approximately 450 students, 91% of whom are Caucasian, 7% Hispanic, and 1% Black. Fewer than 1% of students hail from other backgrounds. Additionally, 29% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch programs. Academically, students' test

scores fall above the state average with upwards of 90% of students scoring as proficient on state reading tests and upwards of 80% of students scoring as proficient in mathematics.

Maple Leaf's daily schedule includes coursework in language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. Choir, band, foreign language, physical education and technology are offered as elective coursework. Extra-curricular activities include an array of athletics (football, basketball, volleyball, cross country, track, wrestling, cheerleading) as well as forensics and academic bowl. There is one theatrical performance per year and, at least for the past twenty years, that show has always been a musical. There is no ongoing instruction in theatre during the school day.

Greenwood Middle School

While my ties with Maple Leaf Middle School were established at the outset of this project, I needed to find an urban middle school wishing to collaborate on the production. To do this, I contacted an established children's theatre in the targeted urban area known for its significant educational outreach program. The theatre had contacts with city schools interested in arts partnerships and our conversations resulted in a list of potential participants. Certain school characteristics were sought before constructing a partnership for this project. First, the school could not be a magnet school which auditioned students into its program on the basis of talent in singing, dance, or theatre. Next, the school would preferably serve an equal but opposite student demographic: where Maple Leaf was over 90% White, our partner would be racially diverse with about 90% of student coming from non-White backgrounds. Ideally the academic profiles of the two schools would be similar as would the behavior profiles reported to the state. Finally, the partnering school would have to provide a school liaison responsible for

coordinating activities within the school environment. An analysis of the above characteristics superimposed on the list forwarded by the children's theatre as well as an evaluation of the schools' websites led me to call two schools. Discussions with each principal concerning scheduling and school mission and goals led to the selection of Greenwood Middle School for the partnership.

Greenwood Middle School is located in an urban center of approximately 600,000 people. The school teaches 1300 students in sixth through tenth grade, with expansion plans for a full high school program in the next two years. For the musical, only students in the middle school, grades 6-8, would participate. The student population is racially diverse, mirroring what is seen nationally in urban environments: 71% of the students are Black, 11% are Asian/Pacific Islander, 9% are Hispanic, 9% are Caucasian and 1% are Native American. Seventy-three percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Academically, upwards of 80% of students scored proficient in reading and 70% of student scored proficient in math on the most recent state-wide standardized tests.

Greenwood is a gifted and talented magnet school which requires teachers, parents or community members to endorse students' attendance. Giftedness is defined by the school as showing advanced abilities in the areas of academics, leadership, problem solving and/or the arts. There are no requirements for admittance other than application and letters of recommendation. If a larger number of students apply than there are spaces for, a lottery is held for admission. Once enrolled, students complete core coursework in language arts, reading, mathematics, science and social studies. Electives are offered in physical education, instrumental music, dance, art, and foreign languages. Choir is not offered at the school; however, during the year of this study, drama was part of the elective program. Greenwood Middle School has a stated focus of arts integration where teachers work to utilize the arts in the teaching of all core content. In its

extra-curricular program, Greenwood offers athletics: basketball, cross country, cheer, and soccer, and co-curricular programs: forensics, chess, dance, and engineering. Entering into the joint musical project, Greenwood had not produced either a play or musical in a number of years. Bea MacLamore, the dance teacher, a professional with over twenty years of teaching and professional artistic experience, agreed to serve as both the school liaison and choreographer for the joint-production.

Rehearsals and Performances

The musical production schedule at Maple Leaf lasts between eleven and twelve weeks encompassing all rehearsals and performances. Students must audition for the musical; a process that includes performance of a short scene, singing a verse from one of the show's songs, and performing a short choreographed dance combination. Maple Leaf also has a strict policy that all students who complete the audition process will be cast in the show. No students are turned away. Shows are selected with this policy in mind, and have large casts with numerous speaking and walk-on roles as well as options for a large chorus. Also, no fees are charged for student participation in the musical. For the joint musical production, none of these policies or procedures was changed; each was similarly executed at both locations.

For previous shows, rehearsals were held after school for 90 minutes, though not all cast members needed to be at each rehearsal. Detailed schedules outlining who needed to be after school on any given day were distributed to all cast members. Some rehearsals have been held on Saturdays to work on choreography, but generally all work was completed during after-school rehearsals. Rehearsals culminated in two public performances held in the local high school's theatre as well as two other in-school performances for the local elementary and middle schools.

For the joint musical, these practices were altered slightly. As Greenwood's after school transportation system only runs on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I led rehearsals at Greenwood on these days, while equal time was spent at Maple Leaf on Mondays and Wednesdays. Six Saturdays served as full cast rehearsals for coordination between the schools. Each school hosted two public performances as well as at least one in-school performance that served as a dress rehearsal.

During performance weekends, since two performances would be held at each location, students were given the option of staying overnight at the houses of cast members from the partner school. This option allowed students taking part to further build friendships with their cast-mates while also limiting late night travel between locations.

Production Design

Maple Leaf Middle School has paid positions for a music director, costumer, set builder, and a technical coordinator. These people continued their positions for the joint production. Stage and costume crews were open to students from both schools. Lighting and sound work was largely handled by students at Maple Leaf and the auditorium manager at Greenwood. This was a joint decision between me and Bea MacLamore as the students at Maple Leaf already had sound and lighting experience while Greenwood was still undertaking an inventory of the equipment in their auditorium. Bea was unsure as to whether they could figure out what equipment they had, refurbish it, and train students to use it within the allotted timeframe.

Show Selection and Casting

At first, Bea and I planned on finding a large show with diverse casting opportunities. We also knew that to attract students and sell tickets in both communities the selection of a show with some name recognition was important. As we went through our 'wish list' of shows, we found some need to modify our selections. Many big-name shows with diverse casts either included content too mature for our students or would not be approved by our school administrators (i.e.- "Hairspray" or "Ragtime, School Edition.") We wanted diverse casting options, but we also decided that it was not necessary to mount a show that addressed diversity as its main theme. Initially we were also concerned about selecting a show which would seem to include one school's students more than another's ("The Wiz" or "The Music Man.")

After much discussion, we decided we might be over-thinking the situation. In the end we decided that we wanted a large cast show where the kids would have fun: they would enjoy the music and dance sequences, be able to relate to content while learning new ideas and, in the end, have a good time. Casting would be race-blind and we would not worry about direct messages concerning race and diversity in the show, though if they were present we would address them. Bea suggested "Bye Bye Birdie" which met these criteria: large cast, relatable story and music the kids were familiar with and would enjoy. The story has some racial content but characters could be cast in a race-blind manner which would allow for discussions of diversity should they arise.

Research Procedure

Data collection encompassed two distinct methods. A participant-observer journal was kept at all rehearsals but specifically focused on student interaction patterns during full-cast rehearsals held on Saturdays. Notes kept at other rehearsals expressed how students from each school reacted to their counterparts at the partner school. Conversation topics between students or students and adults were also noted, and as far as possible, word-for-word transcriptions were recorded at the time. At the end of each rehearsal session, notes were checked for accuracy and any ancillary data not initially recorded was added in the margins. Throughout the production period participant-observer notes were coded by emergent themes, patterns of interaction, and other categories as they arose from the data. Rehearsal notes were supplemented with other documentation including notes taken at the open parent meetings held in both districts and articles documenting the project in local newspapers.

Every interaction of students was not recorded during the rehearsal process. At times, students were separated with one group working in one room on choreography, another working with an accompanist in a separate location and a third group working onstage. Recorded data resulted from interactions observed by the primary researcher. Information from other sources was only recorded if and when it came up in other directly observed interactions. Time and the number of students involved in the production were also limiting factors in data collection. Without audio or video recording devices, which were not permitted by one of the schools in the research approval process, there was no way to capture every interaction of over sixty middle school students during a twelve-week production period.

Student survey analysis was also an important part of this project's data collection. Short surveys were distributed to participating students before both the first rehearsal and last performance of the show. Surveys asked students questions pertaining to experiences with and attitudes toward engaging in cooperative work with students from differing cultural backgrounds. In addition, students responded to prompts concerning their expectations associated with working with students from the partner school. Survey responses were analyzed to ascertain how they supported or refuted researcher-made inferences from observed interactions. Not all students participated in data collection, nor was participation in research a condition for being cast in the musical.

Published reports from local media sources, including new articles, editorials and letters to the editor were also included to discern local responses to the project.

Findings

Community reactions, particularly in Maple Leaf, set the stage for initial student interactions during the production process. After that, student talk fell into three distinct categories and took place in one of three settings: interactions that occurred during structured rehearsal time, those that happened during unstructured time such as lunch breaks, and exchanges during dress-rehearsals and performances. In each situation, patterns that enhanced or lessened student interaction were noted. As the production moved forward, outside influences continued to impact student interactions. These instances are also recorded.

Community Reaction

At the outset, the program was launched in a similar manner within each community. After discussions and approvals at the district and school levels, I held open meetings with each community about the production's goals, structure and logistics. These meetings were approximately an hour in duration and included ample time for questions from both students and parents. The research project attached to the musical was also discussed as was the informed consent process. Students and parents were reminded that participation in the musical was not dependent upon participation in the research.

The initial parent meeting at Greenwood Middle School was met with excitement on behalf of the students. Parents were open to the process though they wanted assurance that the school's standards for academics would be maintained while their children participated in rehearsals and performances. There was no outward concern over the schedule or traveling between locations. This was confirmed by later discussions with the building administrator and Bea MacLemore, the choreographer and school liaison. Neither was aware of parent concerns or complaints related to the musical.

The same could not be said of the Maple Leaf Middle School community. The first meeting was well-attended, and while some questions were asked pertaining to the schedule and whether the school we were partnering with was an arts magnet (parents feared the Greenwood students would be more experienced and therefore would be cast in more of the leading roles), there was no animosity present at the meeting. However, a few days later I received contacts from both Maple Leaf's principal and the district superintendent each of whom noted that a small group of parents had called them to express their concerns about the project. Further, letters

deriding the project had been sent to and published in the local newspaper discussing why the project should be stopped. Reasons for halting the project ranged from weekend rehearsals would result in students having to choose between activities to students having to travel to an urban center 70 minutes away to a smaller number of students participating in the show than in past years. One parent letter suggested that if students did indeed audition parents should purposely opt out of the research participation as a means of protesting the district-backed partnership (Maple Leaf News, Letters to the Editor, December 29, 2010). Some parents were more blatant in expressing their dislike for the project. One parent declared at the district meeting that “We moved here for a reason,” possibly indicating that working with a school from an urban center was something she wished to avoid. Another declared that this process decreased diversity because some athletes with weekend commitments would not participate. (Production Notes, December 9, 2010). Again, this was a small group- not representative of the entire community; however, they were vocal enough to affect other community members and the students.

The administrators and school board of Maple Leaf continued to support the musical, despite letters to the local newspaper both for and against the project, and an online newspaper poll that gave four choices concerning the joint-musical project, one insisting that the community should “do whatever it can” to stop the project. Auditions were held a few weeks later and the number of students who auditioned for the production was consistent with the numbers from previous years. While there were some students who did not participate because of other activities, over sixty students from Maple Leaf and 25 students from Greenwood were initially cast in the production. Additionally, 83% of the cast was given permission to participate in the research project.

The tone of the Maple Leaf community set the stage for the first large cast rehearsal which took place at a dance studio near Maple Leaf Middle School. Many of the students from Maple Leaf were nervous before our first joint-rehearsal; community comments made them feel ill-at-ease. As one sixth-grade student put it in her final survey, “The way everyone was talking I was really scared at first,” (Student Survey, April 1, 2011). In a newspaper article published after the performances were complete another student admitted that, “We thought they would be pretty mean” (Stepleton, 2011).

Patterns of Communication

Though outside influences did set the stage for student communications, the communication patterns of all students from each school evolved over time. Student speech generally moved from technical communication to social communication to interpersonal dialogue. This process differed significantly from communication patterns shared within each school group which, in the cases of members of the same grade-level, began at the interpersonal level. Students within the same school, but from different grades generally began their communication at the social level.

Technical communication encompassed conversation, during structured (e.g. rehearsal) or unstructured time (e.g. lunch hour), where student interaction was grounded in theatrical craft. Students from each school, when developing shared dialogue, first found common ground when explaining blocking, choreography, and stage craft as opposed to discussion about school, musical taste or fashion. Of the 83% of the cast that participated in the research study, 94% of that number was able to converse with all cast members at least on a technical level by the end of the production.

Some students who developed the ability to converse fluidly on technical topics, then moved toward shared social topics, first discussed during unstructured time periods, and then referring to them when appropriate during more structured moments. These conversations were often based in some of the perceived, shared worlds of adolescence: school; entertainment, including music, books, television and movies; and social activities including parties, consumer-based activities such as shopping and dining out, and, in some cases, religious activities. Over half of the students from the research population at each school were observed engaged in social communication at least twice during the production process.

Interpersonal communication is defined here as a more intimate form of communication where participants share personal details about values, morals, and aspirations. This type of communication occurred largely during unstructured time in the rehearsal process and was entered into by only a handful of cast members from each school. The chance for student engagement in interpersonal communication was greatly advanced when students chose to participate in a home-stay over production weekends. Students who opted to stay with the family of a cast member from the partner school were much more likely to engage in or report being engaged in interpersonal communication.

A small number of students in very particular circumstances engaged in a type of dialogue that I will term transformative. Transformative dialogue can be seen as a subset of interpersonal dialogue centering on discussions where students from each school used conversation to create new knowledge of themselves and their peers, particularly concerning and building understanding of race and identity.

*Student Interactions in Structured Rehearsals**Perception of talent*

Prior to our first full-cast rehearsal, each school had completed a week of rehearsals at their home school. Each group asked me regularly about the students from the other school: “What are they like?” “Do they want to meet us?” “Are they as excited as we are?” (Production Notes, January 5-6, 2011). After brief introductions at the first joint-rehearsal, and completion of the initial survey, we staged two full-cast numbers, had lunch and then split into groups by chorus sections; teen characters and those in teen chorus working on one number, and everyone else staging another number in a different part of the building.

The first point of connection for the cast occurred when everyone realized that each cast member from the partner school was a capable performer and was equally invested in staging a strong performance. The student cast as Conrad, an African-American eighth grader from Greenwood, at my request began to improvise dance moves and interaction with the teen chorus girls while other cast members were staged. I told him he could show me what he liked, and Bea and I would work it into his blocking as long as his movements involved those onstage with him. While holding their positions once staged, other cast members began to watch his efforts, and were taken with what they saw. Maple Leaf students began asking Greenwood students if Conrad always made up steps like that and generally showed amazement that he was confident enough to improvise dance movement. His confidence helped the chorus girls to stay in character and ‘swoon’ as he performed. The Greenwood students enjoyed having their school-mate complimented and began telling the Maple Leaf students about the dance program at their

school and how they were allowed to create their own choreography, so most of them had some experience making up dance steps and involving others in their work (Production Notes, January 8, 2011).

The mutual interest in each other's performance abilities continued to be a strong means upon which students based their interactions throughout the rehearsal process. Particularly in the featured dance numbers, "Happy Face" and "Shriners' Ballet" students found themselves discussing how they were able to perform certain combinations and bestowing admiration on performers involved in each number. At a later rehearsal, Bea choreographed a lift in the Shriners' number which had six twelve and thirteen year-old boys raising Rosie over their heads and turning her, body parallel to the ground, while six feet in the air. The rest of the cast, engaged in various social activities at the time, stopped what they were doing to both watch and eventually applaud the group onstage. Again, this sparked discussions about how the students gained the confidence to try something like that, or didn't they think it would be scary to be lifted that high (Production Notes, March 5, 2011). Three of the boys involved in this dance number commented in their final surveys that their participation and work as a group in this number was their biggest individual accomplishment in the show. As one student said, "To be exact, I was very proud of the lift!" (Student Survey, April 1, 2011).

Interestingly enough, students from both schools saw ability in performing with groups as more admirable to individual characters performing strong solos. The performances of "Happy Face," a trio, Shriners,' an ensemble number, and "Hymn for a Sunday Evening," a quartet, were more likely to spark conversations between students from each school than beautiful solo numbers performed by the same individuals.

*Discussions of race as unifying and divisive themes**The MacAfees.*

It was never a goal in this process to force students to speak about racial difference. Bea and I had always agreed that we wanted the cast to experience working with members from the other school group as equals; however, if questions of race did come up we would delve into them further. Our decision to engage in race-blind casting did inadvertently set up some student discussions throughout the rehearsal process, including how the entire cast would define the central family unit in the musical, the MacAfees.

The MacAfee family is supposed to be the middle-class ‘any family’, and as they live in suburban Sweet Apple, Ohio in the late 1950s, the casting assumes the family is Caucasian.

In our casting, Mr. and Mrs. MacAfee, as well as their teenage daughter, Kim, were White while their youngest son, Randolph, was Black. At first, the students good naturedly commented on having a multi-racial family. At one rehearsal this developed into a protracted discussion as to how the MacAfee family could have two Caucasian parents and two children, only one of whom was Black. Many answers were bandied about: he was adopted, he was a foster child, Mrs. MacAfee engaged in an indiscretion which Mr. MacAfee later forgave, etc. When Bea and I told the group about race-blind casting and how we made a decision not to let a student’s racial background guide who was awarded what role, the students listened attentively but promptly went back to ferreting out new reasons for the multi-racial status of the family. (Production Notes, January 8, 2011). These discussions were openly held between all students from both

schools and expanded to include how some onstage chorus groupings, supposedly families, were also multi-racial.

Mrs. Peterson's story.

As previously mentioned, while discussions of race were not meant to be the prime focus of the project, there were times, in addition to the discussion about the MacAfee family, when racial issues arose from the script. "Bye Bye Birdie" includes an inter-racial romance between the lead characters, Albert and Rosie. Albert is White, Rosie is Hispanic, and Albert's mother, Mrs. Peterson, is wholly against the relationship. From lines in the script, it is an understatement to say she is both an over-bearing mother and a bigot.

In our cast, Rosie was played by a Black student from Greenwood and Albert and Mrs. Peterson were White and from Maple Leaf. The young man playing Albert was familiar with the script prior to casting and understood the plot and its underlying themes. Both Rosie and Mrs. Peterson were not familiar with the entire plot before casting, and while each girl loved her part, as rehearsals progressed, performing their parts became more difficult.

The seventh-grade girl playing Mrs. Peterson came to her first Maple Leaf rehearsal after reading the entire script with a worried expression on her face. When I asked her if anything was wrong she responded, "I love my part and I know it's supposed to be funny, but it's mean-funny," (Production Notes, January 12, 2011). Knowing what she meant, but wanting her to define the issue more so we could talk about it as a group, I asked her for examples of what lines she thought were "mean-funny." She correctly pointed to lines denigrating foreigners while riding the subway, as well as lines broadly stereotyping Rosie's Spanish heritage.

When I opened up the topic to the six students at rehearsal that day some of the eighth graders in the room, who had discussed satire in language arts the year before, were able to identify the literary device and explain it to Mrs. Peterson. Their description made it clear that while the character had these beliefs, the author was trying to highlight how wrong they were by the over the top portrayal of Mrs. Peterson. The student playing Mrs. Peterson, still worried, responded, “I know what satire is. I get it. But will people who don’t get it think I really mean it?” (Production Notes, January 12, 2011). As a group we went on to discuss the difference between a character and an individual playing a character. Mrs. Peterson began to calm down a bit before asking what might have been at the heart of her worry all along, “But, will the Greenwood kids think I’m like this?”

The Maple Leaf group was silent. After a few halting attempts to answer Mrs. Peterson’s question it became evident that this group was concerned that students from Greenwood might think they were bigoted, not because of the script, but because they were from a small rural, largely White town- and that the script might augment this image. After drawing these comments out, the students asked if it would be OK to talk with Rosie about if she understood the satire before running the scenes in front of the full cast. If Rosie understood it and wasn’t offended, they reasoned, it was likely that the rest of the students would understand it, too. (Production Notes, January 12, 2011).

At the joint cast rehearsal, Mrs. Peterson sat down with Rosie and discussed her concern. Rosie, a studious eighth grader with a background in forensics, told Mrs. Peterson that she understood the satire and wouldn’t confuse the character of Mrs. Peterson with who she was as a person. Both girls then came back and asked me if I would discuss what satire was with the

chorus because “there are a lot of sixth graders in chorus and they may not get it like we do.” (Production Notes, January 22, 2011).

Overall, Mrs. Peterson felt she learned a lot from this process. Her final survey detailed that the most difficult thing for her in this experience was worrying about what others thought about who she was relative to her character. At the same time, she ranked her biggest accomplishment as “being mean to every one of my friends onstage,” (Student Survey, April 1, 2011).

Rosie's story.

Despite her calmness in dealing with Mrs. Peterson's concerns about the satire inherent in the script, Rosie found herself dealing with a related issue with her song “Spanish Rose. “ During the musical number, Rosie decides to own all the Hispanic stereotypes Mrs. Peterson levels on her and then throws them back in her face.

As rehearsals of the number progressed Bea and I noticed that Rosie forgot lyrics, missed dance cues, and over time, seemed less and less enthusiastic. This was not in line with her demeanor during the rehearsal of other scenes where she always knew her lines and stayed in character. Further, other cast members, particularly a clique of eighth grade students from Maple Leaf, despite Rosie's mastery of other scenes and musical numbers, were beginning to identify “Spanish Rose” as a weakness and publicly stated that this girl shouldn't have been cast as Rosie- another student from Maple Leaf- always a friend of the speaker- would have been better choice. (Production Notes, February 19, 2011). Bea, feeling Rosie's hesitance was an issue of unfamiliarity with the dance began to work with her when she was not otherwise engaged on stage. When this still did not produce the desired results I sat down with her to see what she felt

was blocking her. Rosie's response was similar to what Mrs. Peterson had said earlier in the rehearsal process; the stereotypes made her uncomfortable. Further, she viewed discrimination as a result of stereotyping. How could she sing about these stereotypes and not be a hypocrite? (Production Notes, February 22, 2011).

The Greenwood group sat down together to discuss the topic with Rosie. In the end, they decided, it wasn't uncommon for minority groups to take ownership of negative words and stereotypes as a way to remove their power to hurt: Blacks now use the N-word, homosexuals proudly use the word queer. Wasn't Rosie doing the same thing by both owning and mocking Mrs. Peterson's stereotypes? (Production Notes, February 22, 2011). This discussion continued between those playing leading roles at the next full-cast rehearsal. A few of the Maple Leaf students, though not the one who felt another girl should have been cast, came up with visual cues from the wings that would help Rosie laugh at the song. The young man playing Albert was especially helpful in the process. (Production Notes, March 5, 2011). This discussion slowly changed Rosie's attitude toward the musical number, but it took quite some time. Her discomfort was so great that it wasn't until the final rehearsal week that she really owned the piece.

Other impediments to positive interaction in the structured setting

In the structured setting of rehearsals Bea and I, as choreographer and director, generally guided student interactions. Onstage and in dance rooms the students were supervised by adults; thus, impediments to positive interaction were few. However, there were some incidents, even when supervised, which impeded positive interactions between students. I have already noted

one such occurrence when a Maple Leaf student declared publicly that Rosie should not have been cast in her role. The negative comment was dealt with privately between me and the individual student. The issues related to performance were navigated by groups of actors from both schools, and at a joint-rehearsal where Rosie discussed her feelings. Some understandings across both school groups were reached, though not all students embraced this process.

Another incident that impeded interactions occurred right after the in-school preview at Greenwood Middle School. After a frustrating performance, one Maple Leaf student, unable to find her makeup case, ran through the backstage area, also part of the school's hallway system, yelling repeatedly, "Someone from this school stole my stuff!" (Production Notes, March 25, 2011).

Our backstage space was limited. Girls had one room in which to change, boys another, and there were two all access rooms where costumes were stored and hair and make-up were done. Students' personal items were kept in the dressing rooms which cast members had access to. Students were also given a procedure to follow if they felt something was missing. In these instances, students were to first look for the item, and then let one of the adults backstage know. The adults would get an item description and task crew members to help look and also work to keep an eye out for items throughout the day. As the backstage area was completely integrated, the student in question, by stating that someone from this school had stolen her make up case, made two public assumptions not missed by her Greenwood cast-mates. First, she was accusing students of a crime. Second, the students she was accusing of this crime were not from Maple Leaf.

I quickly took the student aside and explained how others were making sense of her comments. I also reminded her that other items that had been misplaced that day were found in minutes when the students really looked. She then paired up with another student to look for her make-up case which was soon found on the floor under a coat. However, found out not, damage to student interactions was already done. Two of the Greenwood students who heard her outburst commented to me that they were glad they weren't paired up with her to look because, "If we did and we found it, she might say it was because we took it," (Production Notes, March 25, 2011).

Student Interactions during Unstructured Time

Rehearsals allowed show participants some unstructured time where students were supervised but interactions were not directly managed by the director or choreographer. Some of the strongest student interactions occurred during this part of the rehearsal process. Examples of unstructured time included lunch, short ten to fifteen minute breaks and, during the in-school and final performances, down time between shows and the cast party.

Breaking the ice

At the first group rehearsal students from each school came in and sat with their friends. There was no immediate integration of the groups. Integration first occurred in a structured manner as students were staged for musical numbers. While there was some talking between Greenwood and Maple Leaf performers in their stage groupings, student-led integration did not occur until lunch.

Lunch was held in the same space as the rehearsal, and there was ample room for students to move around and interact. At the beginning of lunch the students positioned themselves according to Figure 1.

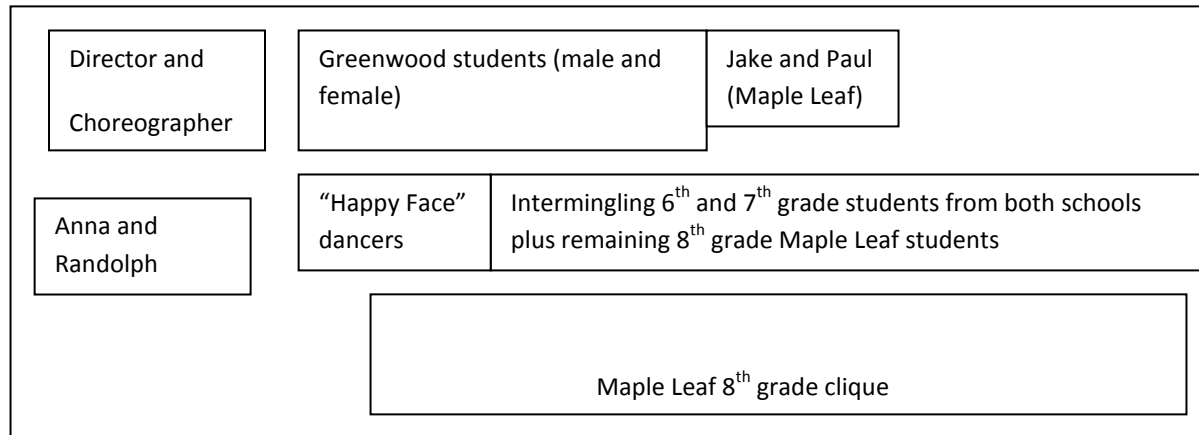


Figure 1. Lunch Positioning, January 8, 2011

The majority of Greenwood students, who made up one-third of the total cast, positioned themselves as a unified group in one area while an 8th grade clique, largely made up of girls from Maple Leaf spread themselves out along most of the front of the room. A strip in the center was left for 6th and 7th grade students from both schools as well as 8th grade students not involved in the Maple Leaf clique

Three interactions of note took place early in the first lunch hour. First, two female students, both sixth graders, one from each school, cast to dance together in the "Happy Face" number had become fast friends during the morning rehearsal. They immediately sat down together at lunch and each brought friends from their home school to sit adjacent to them. As the two amiably chatted, their friends found it easier to speak with one another.

Second, Anna, one of the Maple Leaf chorus girls, became a bit overwhelmed by the lunchtime chatter. She placed herself alone, a few feet in front of the adults. I approached her at one point to make sure she was feeling OK and asked if she wanted to sit with some of the other actors. I was told, "I'm fine. I just want to find a quiet place for a minute," (Production Notes, January 8, 2011). A few minutes later the young man from Greenwood playing Randolph reentered the room after getting a drink. Seeing Anna alone, he walked up to her, introduced himself and asked if he could sit and eat with her. She accepted his offer and they quietly ate and chatted for the rest of the hour. Unlike the "Happy Face" girls, Anna and Randolph did not become center point that students from both school gravitated around, but their partnering was a noticeable early student encounter.

The third interaction occurred between two male chorus members from Maple Leaf and the remaining members of the Greenwood group. Jake and Paul, both 8th grade boys generally seen by other students as socially awkward at Maple Leaf, took their lunches over to the Greenwood group in order to speak with, at first, two 8th grade girls. The boys were immediately accepted and began joking with all of the Greenwood students. After a few minutes, Jason, a Greenwood chorus member began running and tossing a ball in one of the open spaces in the room, taking Jake and Paul with him. The physical activity was noticed, particularly by the rest of the boys from both schools, and a brief game a catch/keep away was undertaken by all of them during the final minutes of lunch hour. The immediate friendship between Jake, Paul and the Greenwood students became one of the more enduring friendships of the production.

Physicality as a means of building interactions

Student positioning varied to a small extent during the first lunch hours and unstructured time periods. The 8th grade clique from Maple Leaf rarely let others in with the exception of a few of the Maple Leaf boys who largely interacted with everyone in the cast. The Greenwood students remained more fluid in their interactions, but always began unstructured time as their own group, with the “Happy Face” girls and Jake and Paul acting as the launch-points from which other interactions could spring. By the second joint-rehearsal, this time held in Greenwood’s auditorium, student placements during lunch took on similar groups albeit in different locations in the theatre space.

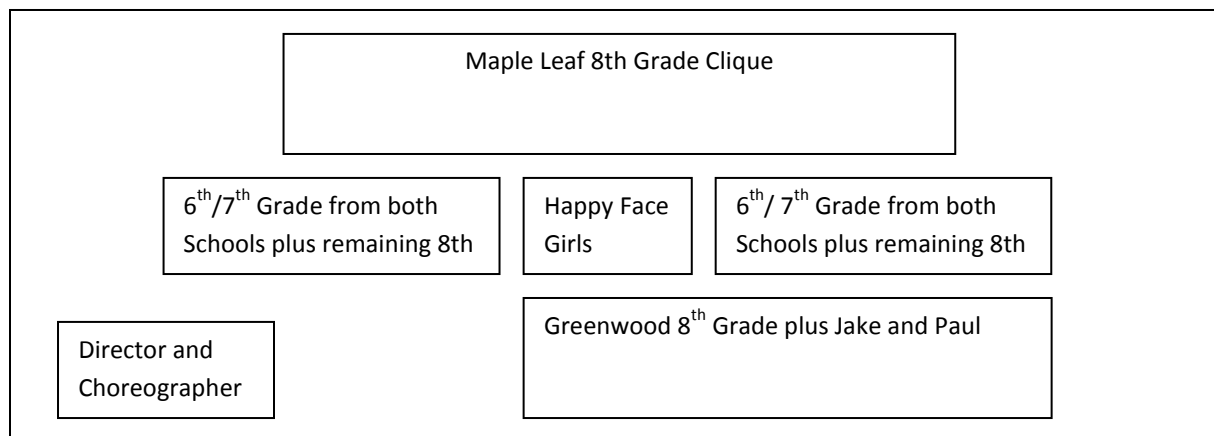


Figure 2. Lunch Positioning, January 22, 2011

The groups finally broke down when a few students, usually male, began some form physical activity in which other students could join, either as participants or spectators. During the January 8 rehearsal they played a game of catch. On January 22nd they engaged in a mixture of relay races up and down the auditorium aisles and arm wrestling. By the end of February and

into March, the students set up versions of some of the theatre games we played as part of the rehearsal process with “Baby, I Love You,” “Kitty Wants a Corner” and “Zip, Zap, Boing” being played in multiple rounds with students supervising each other and restarting games as needed to keep everyone active. Other childhood games made appearances. I was surprised one afternoon when making the trip from one rehearsal space to the next I found a group of 10 cast members engaged in a game of “Duck, Duck, Goose” in the theatre foyer outside the Maple Leaf Auditorium. After stopping to watch for a few minutes I commented on my surprise at their choice of game. An eighth grade chorus member from Maple Leaf responded that, “Once we found out that everyone knew how to play it, we decided it’d be fun,” (Production Notes, March 5, 2011).

Changes in lunch seating

At times lunch partners changed due to unforeseen reasons. The “Happy Face” dancer from Greenwood Middle School was forced to drop out of the show as a consequence of a disciplinary situation at home. The girls in the number had created a strong friendship that became the center of the integrated sixth and seventh grade interactions during unstructured time. At the rehearsal on February 19, 2011, the first rehearsal after the partnership was severed, not only did the lone “Happy Face” dancer forlornly approach the lunchtime seating dynamic, most of the sixth and seventh grade girls seemed unsure of where they should place themselves. It was almost as if students from each school were not sure if they were still friends without the grounding partnership that set the tone for their ongoing interactions. It took a bit of time, but the students involved did continue sitting with each other and maintained their developing

friendships. While a new dancer from Greenwood stepped into the vacant dance role, as an eighth grade student, she never entered the ongoing dynamic of this lunchtime group.

Impediments to interactions during unstructured time

Politics.

Beginning in February, state politics became a discussion point for adults and adolescents alike. The new governor introduced legislation that would eliminate almost all collective bargaining for public sector employees. The state was highly divided over the measure. Three eighth grade students from Greenwood, Leah, Martiqua, and Maria, were involved in the debate as their parents were union members. Leah had even attended rallies to protest the bill at the state capitol building. At the February 19 rehearsal each made multiple attempts to speak with students about these current issues, particularly with the Maple Leaf eighth graders, wanting to know their opinions on the growing unrest in the state. All of the Maple Leaf girls approached by Leah. Martiqua and Maria rebuffed their conversational overture. Some had no idea or interest in the topic responding with, "Politics are boring," (Production Notes, February 19, 2011). Other students, including one of the strongest voices in the Maple Leaf clique cut off conversations by stating, "My parents are OK with it and you should be, too," (Production Notes, February 19, 2011). Even in the face of these rebuffs, these Greenwood students did not abandon this conversational topic; they simply spoke about the pros and cons of the issue with other Greenwood students who were open to the exchange. Later that day, three boys from Maple Leaf engaged in this conversation with the entire Greenwood group.

Sex.

Topics that centered on sex and relationships also caused divisions in group interactions, more often than not making the students from Greenwood feel ill-at-ease with their counterparts at Maple Leaf. The first such incident occurred at the January 22 rehearsal. In one number, “Honestly Sincere,” Conrad Birdie sings the following lyrics:

When I sing about a tree,
 I really feel that tree!
 When I sing about a girl,
 I really feel that girl,
 I mean I really feel sincere!

(Stewart, Adams, & Strouse, 1960, p. 44).

During the rehearsal, it was obvious that our fourteen year-old Conrad didn’t understand the meaning of the lyric. Our vocal coach took him through it line by line, asking him to put together the content. Slowly, Conrad made the connection and he exclaimed embarrassedly, “Oh, I get it now!” (Production Notes, January 22, 2011). At the same time Conrad was going through this discovery, students from Maple Leaf were discussing amongst themselves how Conrad could not understand what he was singing about. Later one of the Maple Leaf boys asked him incredulously, “Don’t you date?” to which Conrad responded, shutting down the topic, “I don’t have time to date. I have other commitments,” (Production Notes, January 22, 2011). Each group was confused; Maple Leaf students could not believe dating was not an important part of the culture of Greenwood’s eighth graders while Greenwood students wondered why these relationships were essential at Maple Leaf.

One other conversation that involved sexual content was also eschewed by the Greenwood students. In the script, when the teen-agers of Sweet Apple want to run away with rock star Conrad Birdie, they describe the activities they will engage in once free from parental control: “Moonlight swims! Motor boat races! Loop the loop!” (Stewart, Adams, & Strouse, 1960 p. 81). During rehearsal, some of the Maple Leaf eighth grade students let the eighth grade Greenwood students in on a joke they had made up about the line, which equated each of the three utterances with a different sexual activity. The Greenwood students were confused by this and asked me if that was what the line really meant. When I explained that it wasn’t and that the kids were making a bad joke, which I later spoke with them about, the Greenwood students were perplexed as to why the line would be fodder for that type of joke in the first place. In their minds, innuendo was one thing, vulgarity another, and interaction between the students shut down on the topic. For these Greenwood students there was no joke present.

Performances

Dress rehearsals and performances automatically produce different types of interactions; first, the space open for contact between performers is more confined and second, because young performers typically become nervous and behave differently than they would in a more relaxed situation. Also, the timing of the show necessitates changes within the groups each student can interact with. If your best friend is onstage and you are not involved in that scene, you are left with a choice of either being alone or finding another friend to pass the time with. Dress rehearsals and performances in this instance not only affected the norm of interactions that had

been established up until this point, they completely rearranged many groupings of students and began new interactional cycles.

Until dress rehearsals, leaders of eighth grade cliques at both schools largely did not interact with one another unless onstage together. There was no direct animosity ever demonstrated between these students; they just never left the comfort of their own groups. Beginning at dress rehearsals it became the norm to see these group leaders creating new groups involving one another. The impetus for this change seemed to stem from stage requirements, but in a very short time students previously estranged from one another were performing their respective forensics scenes for each other, sharing snacks and discussing the courses they would take the following year in high school. (Production Notes, March 19, 2011)

New groups were also formed by other students, mostly based on activities they could engage in when confined to three rooms and a hallway. Students, especially nervous students who needed to move around before and during the show, gathered in the make-up and hair room at Greenwood (Production Notes, March 25, 2011), where they were able to play music at a low volume. Students from each school, particularly Maple Leaf sixth grade and Greenwood eighth grade girls taught each other different dances they had learned in school classes or after-school programs. Students shared conversations about different dance teachers they had worked with and the recitals in which they performed. Other actors who needed to fidget but who did not wish to dance, either helped others put on stage makeup, designed stage appropriate hair styles, or assisted the make-up and hair workers in keeping the space clean.

Despite our best efforts at keeping nervous middle school performers restricted to the green rooms during the performance, many would move to their entrance points a scene or two

earlier than we had hoped. This, too, caused new student groups to form. Those involved in the Shriners' Ballet now spoke with performers who were exiting the stage prior to their entrance, or to chorus members who were completing costume changes and were leaving the costume area adjacent to the house entrance (Production Notes, March 25, 2011).

On March 25, students completed a dress rehearsal, one in-school performance of Act I, and a public performance in the evening. On April 1, students completed an in-school performance of Act I, a full performance for upper-elementary and middle school students, attended a cast party, and performed publically later in the evening. Between shows students were allowed to stay in designated areas, usually the auditorium, the green room, and hallways linking these spaces. Students moved fluidly between the areas, some set up by the students to be reading/quiet areas, talking areas, or games areas. As students moved from space to space, most stayed with groups that were forged during dress rehearsals and performances. Groups were largely mixed between the schools with only one trio of Maple Leaf students (two girls and one boy) being the exception to the rule (Production Notes, April 1, 2011).

Outside Influences

Even in light of ongoing growth in the interactions between students from Maple Leaf and Greenwood, outside factors often influenced student behaviors. Attitudes and beliefs originating outside our partnership coming from family and community sources often impacted student behavior and informed how students approached one another. While the overriding attitude toward the production exemplified by both communities was positive, the outside

influences that pervaded the production process were, unfortunately, negative and at times divisive.

Family and community attitudes

Earlier, I discussed a vocal minority of parents in the Maple Leaf community who made it clear that they did not consider this project in the students' best interests. Three of these parents had students who ultimately were cast in the production. Some of the attitudes expressed in these households guided the interactions of the performers.

Throughout the rehearsal process we went through elements of comedy and how to make things come across as funny to the audience. In the middle of a discussion on timing one student, the child of one of the abovementioned parents said, "We don't need to know this. The easiest way to be funny is to tell a joke about race, sex or religion," (Production Notes, January 24, 2011). Before I had a chance to respond, another cast member wondered aloud if those jokes were really funny. The first student told her of course they were as they laughed at jokes like that at his house all the time. The second questioned whether or not, since jokes like this were funny, the first student would tell one in front of our friends at Greenwood. After a pause the student said that he wouldn't. The second ended the conversation by stating, "Then maybe, if everyone can't laugh at it, it's not all that funny." (Production Notes, January 24, 2011).

This conversation was not held with the students from Greenwood, but did carry over into interactions when both casts were together. The student who insisted that racial jokes were funny rarely interacted with any Greenwood students, doing so only to engage in large-group physical activities (Production Notes, February 19, 2011) or during final performances when pre-

existing groups were no longer adhered to (Production Notes, March 25, 2011). At all other rehearsals, this student rarely ventured out of the area where the eighth grade Maple Leaf clique sat.

All three children of the parents who made the core of the protesting group demonstrated fewer cross-group social interactions or even problematic interactions with Greenwood students; the girl who insisted her items were stolen also had a parent in this group. However, assumptions from the home, even homes where families were supportive of the production, could also inadvertently affect students' understanding of their cast-mates. One Maple Leaf parent who was helping backstage during dress rehearsals and performances, while in a large group complimented the costumer on one of Rosie's costumes by saying that the costume was very well-made and the student from Greenwood had, "probably never worn anything so nice before!" (Production Notes, March 25, 2011). Earlier in the production, this woman's daughter had been surprised that students from Greenwood wore clothes a lot like her own and that one girl even had the same athletic shoes (Production Notes, January 22, 2011).

There were other instances where parent beliefs may not be directly linked to student actions; however, the question of whether an attitude might color student interactions is worth considering. For instance, what attitudes towards her cast-mates might a student come in with when her parent openly says that this experience will be good for the Greenwood students because "we can show them what it's like to have real family support, (Production Notes, March 5, 2011) or when a parent insists that the t-shirts and posters should not use a certain color because everyone knows it is a gang color and shouldn't be used in the Greenwood community (Production Notes, February 23, 2011)?

Outside attitudes may have come into play when it came to offering and accepting home-stays during production weekends. To allow students to have more interaction with their cast-mates at other schools and to curtail late-night travelling between sites, we allowed students of the option of staying overnight, Friday to Saturday, with a family in the community in which they would perform. There was an expressed difference between those who took advantage of this opportunity at each school. Maple Leaf parents provided enough beds for all the Greenwood students to have a home-stay, and all but two students accepted these invitations. These two students stayed in a local hotel with their family members. Even though there were fewer Greenwood students involved in the production, families were able to accommodate twenty students for home-stays. Only six Maple Leaf students accepted the Greenwood invitations. Of the remaining students eight stayed in Greenwood hotels with family members. The rest traveled by bus back to Maple Leaf. Greenwood and Maple Leaf families were equally as willing to host students; however, Maple Leaf families were less likely than their urban counterparts to allow their students to stay overnight in a new location.

Regardless of invitation acceptance levels, students from both schools who did participate in the home-stay experience reported greater satisfaction with the joint-production as a whole. When asked on the final survey what they would like to change about the experience, all but one said they would like more time to explore their host's neighborhood or they would like to attend school for a day with their host (Student Surveys, April 1, 2011). Students involved in the home-stays also were more likely to demonstrate growth in their use of adjectives to describe their peers. For example, on the first survey all students, regardless of school, described their peers from the partner school in a generic manner: nice, happy, fun, etc. On the second survey, taken at the end of the production, 22 of 24 students who completed home-stays, used more specific

descriptors such as outgoing, brave, and hard-working, or determined when compared to the responses of those who did not complete at home-stay.

Greenwood in-school preview

Another example of how outside factors could test growing student interactions centered on the in-school preview held at Greenwood. We were informed early in the morning on March 25th that instead of having students who were in the performing arts department attend the performance that the audience was changed to be a reward for students who had perfect attendance. Immediately, the Greenwood students expressed worry to me, Bea, and the Maple Leaf students about this change. The Greenwood students reasoned that the students with perfect attendance were not necessarily well-behaved, they were actually more likely to be students who had difficult home lives and came to school each day because it was the safest place for them to be. Bea spoke to the building administrator responsible for the decision about the concerns, but the administrator decided to hold fast to the plan.

Unfortunately, the decision did not turn out well for the performers or for many audience members. The group had not been acquainted with audience etiquette, given a synopsis of what they were about to see, nor supervised by their regular classroom teachers as they were pulled from different classes to see the preview. The audience talked throughout the performance and was rude to the performers. At one point a student yelled out, “Boring!” at the top of her lungs. Chorus members making entrances through the house had to avoid attempts to trip them. Teachers and administrators pulled some of the instigators from the theatre, and at one point the house lights were turned on so supervisors had a better view of the audience. Even with these efforts, the one act preview was marred by disruptions.

The performers' reactions to this incident varied. We did discuss as a cast that we wished the audience had behaved better as well as what actors should do in situations where they were heckled. The Greenwood students were embarrassed that anyone from their school would behave in such a manner and apologized to the rest of the cast. One Maple Leaf student, an eighth grade girl, said that no apology was needed. She knew the whole school couldn't be rude because she knew the Greenwood cast members and they "weren't like that," (Production Notes, March 25, 2011). A large number of students used the incident to rally together as a cast and recommit their efforts to turn out strong performances despite of what happened earlier in the day.

This was not true of the entire cast. Some students, including all three of the children whose parents protested the joint-production, texted friends back in Maple Leaf with exaggerated accounts of what occurred during the preview. In the embellished versions the student who yelled "Boring!" now was attributed with yelling "White bitch!" The audience was accused of other things that did not occur including throwing multiple items at the students onstage and starting fights with actors making entrances from the audience.

The outside influence of members of this audience caused a new division between some of the cast. The adult production staff dealt with the parent phone calls that came in as a result of both the initial incident and the exaggerated stories, but the Greenwood students who were privy to the new commentaries now felt enraged that some of their cast-mates were telling lies about their school. The Greenwood students were in no way pleased with the behavior of some of their classmates, but exaggerating the incident didn't seem right to them either. We met as a cast again to diffuse the situation, but hard-feelings between some of the cast members remained throughout the rest of the weekend's performances. Students suspected of texting exaggerated

accounts of the incident were not immediately included in integrated conversations and activities (Production Notes, March 25-26, 2011), though by the following weekend's performances this behavior did not continue.

Distance

The final outside influence students had to overcome was the distance between schools. Students were able to invent some good ways to bolster their interactions even though they only met together every-other Saturday. Some students took advantage of Skype to rehearse scenes between meetings. Others logged on to Maple Leaf's website where the music director uploaded rehearsal guides and music. Many texted and used other social media such as Twitter and Facebook to keep in touch. Cell phone numbers were exchanged as early as the first joint rehearsal, and phones started to ring about five minutes after the bus taking students back to Greenwood departed. (Production Notes, January 8, 2011).

Although the students found innovative ways to keep in touch with one another, distance always intervened. Plans to get together on off-rehearsal weekends would be cancelled due to lack of transportation. Skype could become cumbersome, especially if someone else in the house needed to use the computer. On initial surveys, 22 students commented that they saw the biggest challenge of this production as not being able to work with students from the other school enough. By means of comparison, only 12 said they saw working with students from different backgrounds as the biggest challenge (Student Surveys, January 8, 2011). At the end of the production process, students still felt that the biggest challenge we had faced was the distance between the two schools, but also noted they believed we had overcome it. When asked about one thing they wish would have happened differently 24 students gave distance-related

responses: if we were closer we could have rehearsed more, we could have hung out more, gone to classes with, etc. In comparison only 7 students, the majority from Greenwood, recalled the in-school preview at Greenwood and wished the audience would have been better behaved (Student Surveys, April 1, 2011). Maple Leaf students largely forgot the earlier incident or did not find it worth mentioning on the surveys.

Long term friendships, as seen by some students, were also affected by distance. In their final surveys, while all but two cast members reported that they had made at least one close friend at the partner school, 11 noted that while they would try to keep in touch via Facebook and texting, they didn't see the friendship lasting long because everyone lived too far away.

Discussion

Following the final evening performance, after the rush to prep costumes for cleaning and strike the stage, most of the students gathered in the Maple Leaf theatre foyer to say goodbye to each other. Like other shows I have directed with middle school students, there were congratulations and hugs exchanged. There were a few tears, too, and though, generally, these tears would be from the graduating eighth grade girls, in this case students of both genders and from all grades were crying. Groups of students came to say goodbye to me and asked, "When are we going to do another show like this?" "Will we work together again next year?" and "Can you schedule a get together for us over the summer?" (Production Notes, April 1, 2011) Email addresses, Facebook profile names and phone numbers were exchanged again, and unlike other shows I had directed at Maple Leaf, some parents became mildly exasperated trying to shoo their kids from the building to their cars in the parking lot.

Finding Friends

In looking back at the nearly half-century of contact research, one can easily say that this endeavor, having students from different racial backgrounds get together as equals completing a project they all bought into, mirrored findings published for decades (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1978; Stephan, Renfro & Stephan, 2004; Molina & Witig 2006). The students did work well together, and not always through easy scenarios. They did produce shows in which they improved their performances as both individuals and as an ensemble. Additionally, as the interaction of the cast progressed throughout the production, student groupings and conversations, at first very much defined by a student's home school, expanded to include students from the partner school. Further, the basis for conversations changed for many students over time, progressing from technical conversations about the production itself to more personal friendly conversation between students. Social integration increased between most students in the cast.

The rehearsal process began with students from both schools selecting seating placements where they spent much of their unstructured time, and those placements followed patterns seen in other contexts, particularly those in school cafeterias where "students themselves focused on racialized spatial arrangements," (Pollock in Stoughton & Sivertson, 2005). Most sixth and seventh grade student from Maple Leaf and Greenwood began integrating immediately. Eighth grade students from both schools began the musical by choosing to sit in separate groups. This is not uncommon, but rather than explaining away the scenario by reasoning that these older students cannot or will not interact with each other, the situation may be better understood in terms of adolescent development. Students in this age group seek acceptance from those that share common interests, experiences and cultural understanding (Tatum, 1997). As the

production progressed, in these students eyes, the students who shared their interests came from their home school. Over time however, many of these same students found shared interests and experiences across school lines and moved into new and integrated groups. Since this process did not occur with all students further research might look specifically at the reasons of students who, despite shared interests and experiences, never risked leaving their initial grouping even for limited explorations in the artistic setting.

Students from both schools reported building friendships with students across school lines. On the same survey they were also asked to define friendship. Thirty-six students wrote definitions stating friends should be “nice,” “fun,” and that you should be able to “hang out with” or “talk with” them. Utilizing this definition of friendship, these 36 students did find friends in the cast. Another ten students also included that friends should have the same interests, which, loosely defined, would mean that these students also would find friends in this venture since everyone shared an interest in musical theatre performance. Fifteen students defined friends as people who are “trustworthy,” who will “be on your side” no matter what, or who can “empathize” with you when things are difficult. While students who penned these less easily achieved goals also said they counted new friends among their cast-mates, it is less obvious that these outcomes were actually achieved within this context, and more difficult as a researcher to say with any assurance that these definitions of friendship were observed in our particular setting. In light of this, it is fair to say that questions still remain concerning the depth of friendships built within this context as well as the longevity of impact projects such as this one have on developing friendships.

Discussions about Race

Though it was not an expected outcome of the production process, nor was it a comfortable topic, some students at both schools did engage in conversations concerning race over the twelve week production schedule. These conversations took on dual roles as both unifying and dividing points for the cast. Many students' interest was piqued when discussing the racial make-up of the MacAfee family and many students shared light-hearted explanations for the family dynamic. This conversation could be seen as a low-risk venture; the personal identity of the actor was not a factor in discussion. Other conversations were more complex and a few became transformational in nature with students creating and recreating what it meant to work with and build friendships with students from different racial backgrounds. When both Mrs. Peterson and Rosie had difficulty portraying their characters because of race-related issues, they didn't have the words immediately available to them to discuss the situation, yet many found the means to develop a new basis for understanding their cast-mates. This is consistent with the social and emotional understanding of race for this age group, as adolescents are struggling with their ability to "define their identities through interactions with peer reference groups and institutionally circumscribed roles, values and ideologies," (Murrell, p.4). However, once uncovering those verbal tools, different situations could alternately build group understanding or tear it down. In the case of Mrs. Peterson's story, many students from both Maple Leaf and Greenwood showed empathy for their peers, and through this experience created both stronger performances and friendships. However, even after an attempt to build communication and understanding in Rosie's story, while some students moved to a similar understanding as demonstrated in the previous case, a few students still preferred to question the talent level of a cast-mate and speak negatively about her behind her back. The impetus for this

action may or may not be because the student playing Rosie was Black; however, the starting point for understanding Rosie's difficulty and empathizing with her plight in did require an understanding of race-related constructs, and this caused difficulty for some cast members. Not every student was able to engage in interpersonal or transformational dialogues.

Influences of Attitudes and Assumptions of Outside Agents

For this group, patterns of interaction assisted students in developing conversations. A respect for perceived talent helped to open dialogue, even if just with a compliment. Reinforcing research on kinesthetic learning, activities that were grounded in physicality became ice-breakers for many students (Pijl, Frostad, & Mjaavatn., 2011). The ability to talk and work with new people, especially for those seen as socially awkward, was freeing enough to encourage new friendships. And, as the rehearsal process continued, imitating the roles of friendship that were first practiced by others led to spaces where students could interact freely with those a large majority first saw as "different" (Student Surveys, January 8, 2011).

There were miscues in the assumptions held by each group of students, and as demonstrated in the student comments, the Greenwood students had to overcome the more negative of these stereotypes. Looking back on the beginning of the production process, Maple Leaf students professed, "We thought they would be pretty mean," or surprise at the idea that Greenwood students "weren't all 'gangster,'." (Stepleton, 2011). Comments made early in the production noted that Maple Leaf students held more negative assumptions about their Greenwood cast-mates: they had less money, were less academically inclined, were more violent, and more sexually knowledgeable. These generalized assumptions were proven false and were discarded by some students in order to create new descriptors including: "talented,"

“hilarious,” and “a lot like us,” (Student Surveys, April, 1, 2011). Greenwood students also held assumption about Maple Leaf students. Initially, they were classy and overly-competitive (Student Surveys, January 8, 2011). These beliefs also evolved over time, but their initial basis was qualitatively different than those held by Maple Leaf students who were much more negative in their original assessments. In a similar manner to the students seen in Schonmann’s (1996, 2000) research, in order to create together, individuals needed to struggle through the process of discarding previously held images of the ‘other,’ and not all students were ready or able to accomplish this task.

Throughout the production process students challenged their racial assumptions, a positive step in developing cross-cultural group relations (Hammond-Stoughton & Sivertson, 2005), but outside agents such as peers, family and community members impacted the cast’s ability to overcome some of these beliefs. Even after working with and getting to know students from the partner school, outside commentaries could cause fragile alliances within the cast to crumble. The poor behavior of some members in the Greenwood preview audience led a number of students back to the concept that a diverse student population would hate them because they were White (Student Survey, January 8, 2011). Lower than expected attendance at the first Greenwood performance resulted in students believing those who said there was little community support for Greenwood schools or their children- despite the fact that Greenwood parents sewed costumes and provided home-stay locations during the course of the production. It took time to change previously held assumptions, and only one piece of evidence supporting discarded beliefs often was enough for some students to fall back on stereotypes.

Broadly, over the course of the joint-production, all students at both schools increased their ability to interact in a positive and productive manner across racial lines, both terms of

technical and social conversations. Their overall fluency with this action was mitigated by outside influences and the individual's ability to overcome these negative inputs. At this point students either went on to strengthen burgeoning friendships in spite of outside influences or they reverted to previously established norms and assumptions held by their original social groups.

Conclusions

We want [classrooms] to be articulate, with the dialogue involving as many persons as possible, opening to one another, opening to the world. And we want our children to be concerned for one another... We want them to achieve friendships among one another, as each one moves to a heightened state of craft and wide-awakedness, to a renewed consciousness of worth and possibility (Greene, 1995 p. 167-8).

Creating contexts that allow students be open to the world necessitates opportunities that involve people, places and experiences beyond the limits of the traditional classroom. To know each other, be concerned for each other and to become friends requires being present and engaging in dialogues addressing a range of topics. Greene's wide-awakedness does not occur in isolation or in absence. Schonmann (1996, 2000), has asserted that short term theatrical endeavors can indeed help students challenge their perceptions of different groups, and the experiences of students from Maple Leaf and Greenwood see this premise to its fruition. Students were present in an environment that led them to reassess previously held beliefs about their cast-mates and often, this reassessment yielded new understandings of individual students and their communities. Should the friendships continue between the Maple Leaf and Greenwood students, what was once fragile may gain strength and exist independently and indefinitely.

Questions still remain concerning the factors that guide how young adolescents approach discussions of race with one another and how adults can support students as they engage in these

conversations as they arise. This study did not address the role of adults in assisting students in understanding how their previously held assumptions affect social interactions with students from different racial or ethnic groups, as to do so would have necessitated a complete understanding of the prior beliefs of all students. However, once there is an established baseline of student beliefs, conversations of educators' roles in this process might prove to be beneficial for both students and the adults who work with them. Finally, there is an ethical dilemma embedded in this discussion. If outside factors, including family and community belief are paramount in establishing student-held assumptions, and further experience bears out that these assumptions are incorrect, what is the educator's role in challenging these beliefs? A wider question emerges of the role of the school in supplanting that which is embraced by family and community.

Since the close of the production of "Bye Bye Birdie" students from Maple Leaf and Greenwood are still in contact with each other and with me. Students have gone bowling together on the weekends. Greenwood students have come to Maple Leaf to spend the weekend at a cast-mate's farm. Facebook and texting remain a popular means of continuing communication. At some points, these friendships have been difficult to maintain; both distance and, for the graduating eighth grade students, the adjustments associated with high school matriculation have taken time away from fledgling social relationships. Despite these difficulties, artistic opportunities such as this joint-production provide a strong opportunity to build dialogue between and challenge the perceptions of different groups of students; however, while they provide the opportunity for conversations to begin, working to mediate outside voices, attitudes and experiences cannot be divorced from the process if the experience is to be productive for those involved.

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