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### Does Participation in Extracurricular Theatre Productions Influence Emotional Wellbeing?

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DOES PARTICIPATION IN EXTRACURRICULAR THEATRE PRODUCTIONS  
INFLUENCE EMOTIONAL WELLBEING?

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
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The State University of New York, Buffalo State

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## **Introduction**

The performing arts are a crucial and key component of a well-rounded education. Not only do they provide a wide array of skills for students, but they also have an impact on their emotional wellbeing. Middle and high school students are faced with many challenges that come with being a teenager, such as struggling to find one's place, feeling inadequate, being shy, and often lacking confidence in themselves (World Health Organization, n.d.). I believe, from my personal experience, that participating in performing arts activities has a very unique role during middle and high school and can be very beneficial. It can provide a safe space for students to explore their interests and talents with others who share them.

A unique aspect of the performing arts is that it brings together students of different ages, backgrounds, and academic performance levels. A student who might not be a high academic achiever in school could prove to be an amazing performer. Likewise, it provides a safe space for students to express themselves and create strong bonds and friendships with others.

According to Holochwost, Wolf, Fisher, and O'Grady, the arts in general provide an environment that is conducive to social emotional learning (2017). The authors also mention that while much emphasis is placed upon academic excellence, not enough emphasis is placed on the social-emotional side; learning through the arts is continually decreasing, with few (if any) opportunities for it (Holochwost et al., 2017).

Despite the known benefits of the arts in relation to students' social-emotional learning, it is clear that the arts department is not a priority for most schools. Fine arts classes tend to be the first to be removed with budget cuts.

As a former "theatre kid" and current drama teacher, I understand the importance of exposing students to the fine arts and can appreciate their benefits on a personal level. As a

middle school student, I was painfully shy, introverted, and had few friends. I struggled with feeling like an outsider with my peers, and I felt that “fitting in” came so much more easily to everyone else. Other people seemed more confident in who they were than I did. However, this changed when I discovered drama. Ever since my first experience in a drama class, I felt that that was a safe place and also a place where I needed to be.

I soon began auditioning for school productions and this was what changed my entire school experience. Through theatre productions, I was able to gain more confidence in myself, I uncovered and enjoyed talents that I had, and I felt more comfortable with being myself. I also made lifelong friends and worked on my confidence and self-esteem.

As a teacher, I have also noticed how many students, who tend to struggle in the core subjects, often shine in drama class. Theatre has provided an opportunity for them to showcase their strengths. This may be in contrast to other areas of study such as math, science, and English, which might sometimes leave them feeling like they are not good enough to succeed at a high level.

For this study, I will examine the confidence and self-esteem of middle and high school students at the American School Foundation of Monterrey (ASFM) who are active participants in theatre productions. This will be done through the use of a survey that includes both closed and open-ended questions. The questions will focus on confidence and self-esteem in order to obtain a wide picture of the students’ perception of themselves. I am hoping to shed light on these students’ experiences in the drama department as well as the strengths or benefits that they feel they have attained from it. Hopefully, these results will provide evidence of the importance, benefits, and most important necessity of a fine arts education so as to change the minds of those who do not consider the arts, specifically theatre, to provide useful skills to children.

## **Review of the Literature**

As I began researching the effects of theatre on students and their overall well-being, I was surprised at how little information and research I found. I realized that most of the material came from blogs or articles, but there aren't very many academic texts, specifically research studies, that speak to this topic. What all of the literature appears to agree on is the fact that there is a transformative power in the theatre.

“Dramatic difference: how one teacher showed her students the spotlight”, an article from WE Charity, described the effects of theatre on a group of girls at a Kenyan school (WE Charity, 2021). This school had long struggled with students feeling confident in themselves, speaking out, and participating in class. A new teacher decided to enter a play competition, held auditions, and despite the many hardships and lack of experience of the students and herself, they managed to win first place. The school mentioned they saw a significant change in the students' ability to participate in class. They mentioned that before the competition, the girls would provide monosyllabic answers to questions in class and this was no longer the case after the theatre competition (WE Charity, 2021).

In 2017, a study was conducted on college students training to be primary school teachers (Savatgy, 2022). This study intended to see the effects of a drama education on college students. When first interviewed, most of them mentioned they had never had any kind of drama experience or education. After the study, once they had received drama training, the results showed an increase in the college students' self-esteem. The study even went so far as to say that it would highly recommend formal drama training for two semesters for every college student in order to increase self-esteem and confidence. This would also prove convenient once the students became teachers and had to stand in front of a classroom every day (Savatgy, 2022).

Brianna Vitands, a Communications Specialist from the University of Minnesota, wrote an article called “A Spotlight on Mental Health and Theatre”, in which she relates the effects of theatre on mental health (Vitands, 2021). The article was published by the Medical School of the University of Minnesota. She mentions Dr. Michelle Sherman, Ph.D., professor at the Medical School of that same university, and her work as a clinical psychologist. Dr. Sherman and some of her colleagues published a paper in the journal of Professional Psychology that delved into the mental health impacts of theatre on professional actors (Vitands, 2021).

In the study, Dr. Sherman and her colleagues found that theater has the potential to help both the actors and audience by “providing information about mental illness, challenging stereotypes, reducing stigma, decreasing the sense of isolation, providing role models, and instilling hope” (Vitands, 2021). Some of the reasons listed in the article for this include seeing portrayals of people with mental illness on stage, sparking discussion, conversation, and personal reflection about mental illness, reducing stigma, and building empathy for those living with mental illness (Vitands, 2021).

Similarly, the American Alliance for Theatre and Education (AATE) mentions on their website the multiple benefits of theatre activities in middle school, starting with academics. However, for the purposes of this study, the focus is on the mental and emotional aspects. The AATE states that involvement in drama courses foments social and communication skills, as well as improving students’ self-esteem and confidence in their academic abilities (Putnam, 2020). Some of the conclusions the AATE mentioned are: an elevated self-concept from students involved in drama activities compared to those not involved and higher recognition of their potential for success from students who had previously performed (Putnam, 2020).

## **Research Purpose and Questions**

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to identify the social-emotional benefits that students consider they have gained from participating in theatre productions. With this information, it was my hope that the education community would recognize the importance and validity of a fine arts education.

### **Question**

Does participation in extracurricular theatre activities influence students' emotional wellbeing, which leads to higher self-confidence and self-esteem?

### **Hypothesis**

Students demonstrate higher confidence and self-esteem after participating in extracurricular theatre activities.

### **Definition of terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following terms were defined as:

#### **Variables:**

The variables I worked with were as follows:

Dependent

The dependent variables were:

1. Confidence
2. Self-esteem

Independent

The independent variable was participation in extracurricular theatre productions.

**Theatre productions:** extracurricular theatrical productions including staged plays, musicals, and skits.

**Social-emotional learning:** the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (National Association for Music Education, 2020).

**Emotional wellbeing:** this term was used in this research paper as a general term for a high level of perceived confidence and self-esteem by an individual.

**Self-esteem:** a confidence and satisfaction in oneself (Merriam-Webster, 2021).

**Confidence:** the feeling that you can trust, believe in, and be sure about the abilities or good qualities of somebody/something (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, 2021).

## **Methodology**

Timeline

### ***August 2021 - September 2021***

Inform administration.

Identify potential students to be surveyed and speak to them about participation in the study.

Inform parents of the research.

### ***October 2021 - April 2022***

Conduct surveys with 20 students.

### ***April 2022***

Analyze the information.



*May 2022*

Draw conclusions and write the report.

### **Data Collection Plan**

For this research project, I used surveys to collect quantitative and qualitative data from middle and high school students that were enrolled at ASFM during the 2021-2022 school year who were either actively engaged in a theatre production or had previously been engaged in a theatre production. The students were between the ages of 11 and 18.

The survey had both closed and open-ended questions. I used a Likert scale to assess the different variables. The survey also included multiple-choice questions. The questions revolved around students' previous experience with theatre productions, including how many years they had been involved in them. The first few questions of the survey encompassed basic information about the student, such as age, grade, and gender. The interview also asked about their emotional well-being, as well as any differences they noticed from before and after having initiated participation in theatre productions. I asked them to rate themselves on their level of confidence, how comfortable they felt talking to other people their age and adults, if they considered that they were very sensitive to criticism, if they considered they had high levels of anxiety, etc. to get a basic understanding of their personalities. Then, the questions asked the children which aspects of participating in extracurricular theatre productions helped them in their wellbeing as well as benefits they considered to have gained by participating in theatre productions. Lastly, the survey allowed them to add any final comments or notes they wished based on their experience.

Sample questions from the survey

## Confidence

On a scale of 1-5, rate your level of confidence (1 being not very confident and 5 being very confident).

On a scale of 1-5, how confident do you feel talking to your peers or other people your age?

How likely are you to reach out if you don't understand something?

## Self-esteem

On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate your self-esteem?

Do you frequently compare yourself to others?

Do you feel anxious or uncomfortable in social situations?

After I informed their parents of the goal and purpose of the research, I attended several rehearsals of different theatre productions in order to survey students. At first, I had a hard time since there were no theatre productions due to the pandemic and distance learning. However, once we were back on campus, theatre productions slowly started coming back. It took me several months to survey enough students for this study.

## **Data Analysis Plan**

I analyzed trends to find out how students perceived themselves, their level of confidence, and self-esteem, and if there was a correlation between that information and how long they had been participating in theatre productions. I then identified significant similarities and differences in these trends.

I also took a look at the comments and notes that each student left on the survey in order to attain quotes for my final research paper as well as get a deeper understanding of why they felt

the way they felt, as well as what their personal opinion of theatre productions was and how it had impacted their life in general.

The data collected came from a variety of students of different ages and genders, so I also identified and analyzed trends between people of the same age and people of the same gender. I considered that this could also play an important role since many students in the performing arts struggle with coming to terms with their gender identities and sexualities, which could also affect the results of the survey. A student who is heterosexual in a very conservative and Catholic society might find that they have higher self-esteem and higher confidence than a student who might be struggling to come to terms with who they are, or who might fall under a different gender identity or sexual orientation than what that student might consider to be what is expected of them.

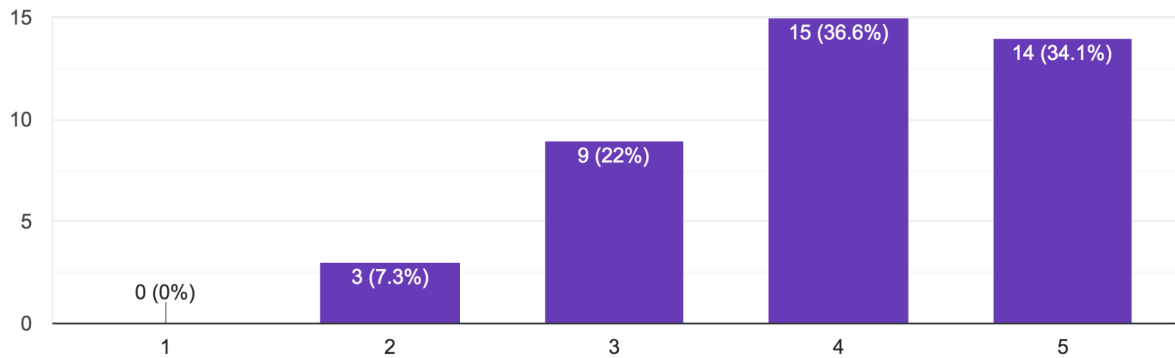
## **Findings**

After carrying out the investigation throughout the 2021-2022 school year, I was able to recollect the responses of 41 students that were involved in at least one extracurricular theatre experience during the school year. Out of the 41 students who took the survey, 34.1% were in 6th grade. This was the highest percentage of the grade levels (6th-12th). 73.2% of the total number of students who took the survey were female, while 19.5% were male, and the other 7.3% preferred not to say. The data also showed that the highest percentage of students (34.1%) were participating in an after school theatre program for the first time.

When asked how they rated their level of confidence on a scale of 1-5 (1 being not confident at all and 5 being very confident), the majority of the students placed themselves in

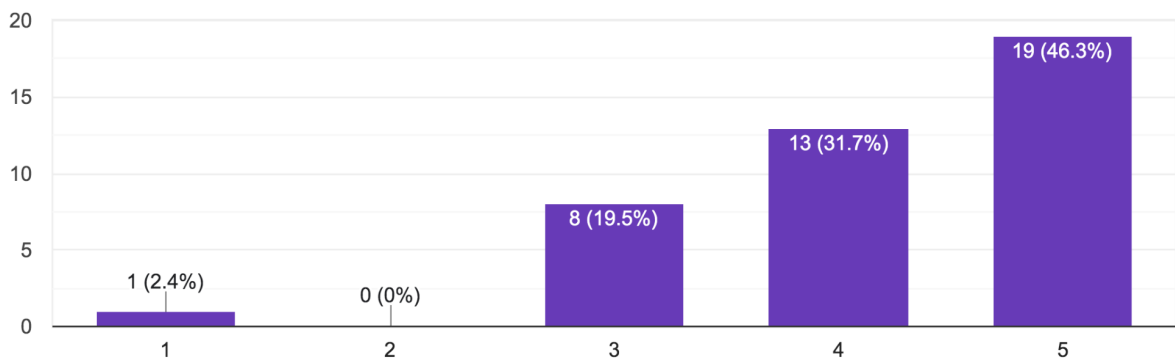
either a 4 or a 5 on the Likert scale, as shown in the graph below. A total of 70.7% of the surveyed students mentioned that they felt confident or very confident.

On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate your level of confidence?  
41 responses



The majority of them also mentioned they felt highly confident speaking to other children their age, as shown in the graph below.

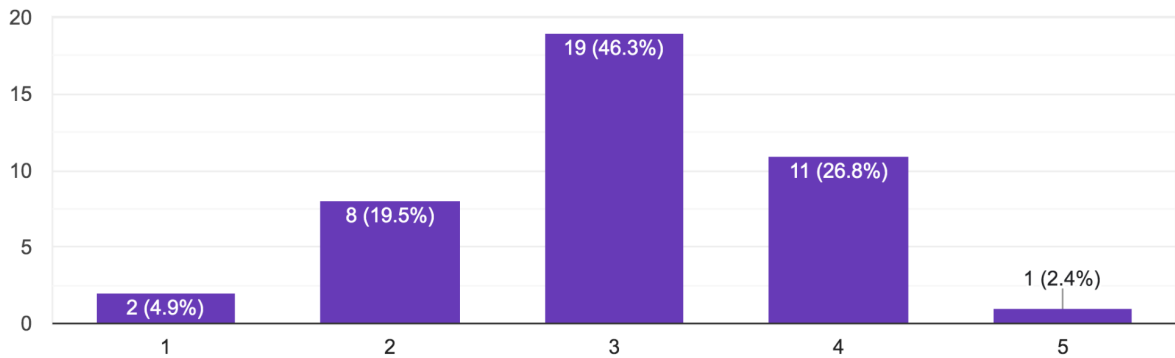
On a scale of 1-5, how confident do you feel talking to your peers or other people your age?  
41 responses



However, the question which showed more students placing themselves on a 3 in the Likert scale was the question that asked them how often they focus on their weaknesses, with

only two students mentioning they almost never focused on them, 46.3% saying they occasionally did, and 29.2% saying the almost always or always did. (The results can be seen in the graph below.) This could be a result of the age group in which they find themselves, considering that teenage years can be an emotional and sometimes turbulent period in a person's life because of the physical and emotional changes one undergoes.

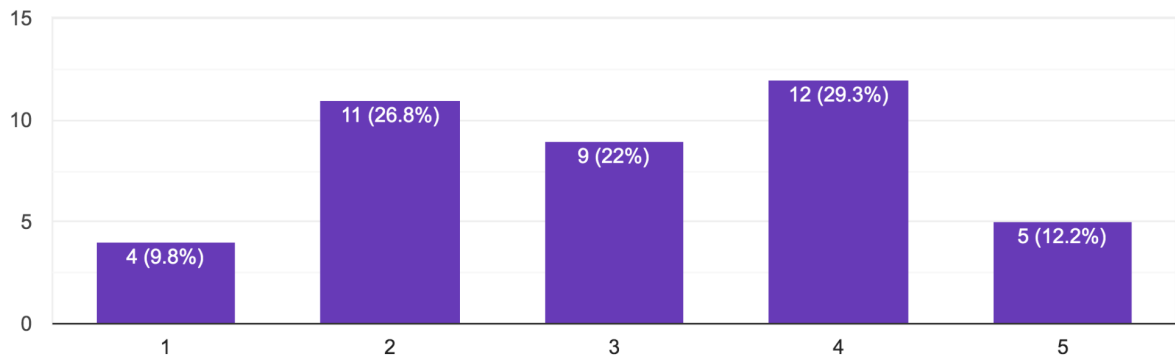
On a scale of 1-5, how often do you focus on your weaknesses or things you feel you cannot do?  
41 responses



One of the questions that had the most divided answers was the question “do you frequently compare yourself to others?” as can be seen in the graph below, with 1 being never and 5 being always.

Do you frequently compare yourself to others?

41 responses



The survey also included four open-ended questions, as well as a section for any extra comments the students wanted to express. Out of all of the information, I found the open-ended questions to be the most insightful, because they provided an understanding of what the students thought regarding extracurricular theatre and their participation within it.

Two of the most recurring answers that came up when asked what factors contributed to them wanting to participate in extracurricular theatre was that students believed it to be fun and also the other people that they were introduced to and the friendships that they created. A lot of them also agreed that some of the benefits included higher confidence and self-esteem, and also better social interactions. Two of them even compared the theatre to having a family.

In general, the results of the qualitative data proved to be mainly positive. Students felt that participating in theatre programs had multiple benefits both socially and emotionally, and that this too helped them be more confident in other areas of their lives. A few of them mentioned that they could not yet comment on an increased confidence because this was only their first time participating and they had not been involved for long. The quantitative data

seemed to be also positive but was more divided than the opinions expressed in the open-ended questions.

### **Other Project Considerations**

When I first embarked on this journey, I believed this study would reveal that students who participate in extracurricular theatre productions had attained higher self-esteem and confidence in themselves since first getting involved. I believed the interviews would show that students love participating in these activities and that they recognize and honor the value they hold.

I also thought it would benefit the school because we would have more concrete evidence of the positive impact that a fine arts education has on a child and of the great necessity for the fine arts in schools. I hoped it might change the minds of some skeptics, but was unsure if it would.

One of the challenges I predicted while working on this study was not getting answers from students quickly enough, since some students might forget about the survey or take a long time to complete it. Another challenge I predicted was that some students could potentially not take the survey seriously, not answer with complete honesty, or feel uncomfortable being asked some of those questions. Finally, a third challenge or difficulty I thought of was that I might not obtain consent from all of the parents, or might have a hard time contacting them.

After I began carrying out the surveys, I realized that the challenges I had originally predicted were not an issue. Since I myself went to each rehearsal in order to collect answers from students, I made sure that all of the students present at the rehearsal had answered; I did not

leave it up to them as homework. I also discovered that, at least from what I could see, it seemed the students all took the survey quite seriously and were honest and truthful in their answers.

This study is limited because it focused only on students who participated in extracurricular theatre productions, and did not involve students who might be involved in different fine arts activities (such as choir, band, art, etc.) I might have gotten a more well-rounded view of the impact of all of the fine arts if I had interviewed students from each of the different disciplines, however, because of time constraints that was not possible. In this manner, the study could potentially be transferred to the other content areas of the Fine Arts Department with the proper adjustments to the survey questions.

Another limitation of this research was that it was conducted nearly two years into the COVID-19 pandemic. The well-being of students might have also been affected by the global situation and the fact that they had been home for over a year when I surveyed them. We had spent more than a full school year at home with little to no theatre performance opportunities. Their results might have been different if we had been under “normal” or “regular” circumstances for the past two years.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Study**

After analyzing the results, the information gave me important insight into a small group of teenagers’ view of themselves, however, I do not believe it provides sufficient information to make a claim regarding how extracurricular theatre activities impact a student’s overall wellbeing. There were several challenges when carrying out this study. The first of them was the fact that the school year started online due to the pandemic, so there were no extracurricular theatre activities, or extracurricular activities of any kind. Another challenge was the fact that I



did not hold a pre and post-test to measure the students' change after a full year of extracurricular theatre activities, because many of them did not participate throughout the entire year. Some students started participating in the after-school drama club but then did not participate in the big school musical, and vice versa. There were also students who ended up dropping out of one or both of these activities due to schedule conflicts with other classes or activities.

The data that provided the most relevant and important information, in my opinion, was the qualitative data, rather than the quantitative data. Some of the comments made by students really shed light on their thoughts and feelings regarding participating in extracurricular theatre activities. Some of the most important learnings were that most of them truly enjoy participating in these activities mainly because it provides a community of like-minded people where they feel comfortable, and it also creates impacting friendships for them. The conclusion that I can draw from the qualitative data is that the students who participate in extracurricular theatre activities do so because they enjoy it and feel that they have a talent to share, but also, and most importantly, because theatre is like a family to them. This, to me, has made the entire purpose of this research paper worthwhile, even if the data did not prove to be statistically significant.

In the future, my recommendation would be to carry out a similar study in which both a pre and post test are implemented. I would also recommend that an entire class of students is surveyed, not just those students that participate in extracurricular activities, so that a more significant comparison can be made regarding the differences between the students involved in theatre and the students not involved in theatre.

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