

AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF A
SUBURBAN HIGH SCHOOL MUSICAL THEATER PROGRAM

by

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CERTIFICATION OF PROJECT WORK

We, the undersigned, certify that this project entitled AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF A SUBURBAN HIGH SCHOOL MUSICAL THEATER PROGRAM by Benjamin T. Wendell, Candidate for the Degree of Master of Science in Education, Curriculum and Instruction in Inclusive Education, is acceptable in form and content and demonstrates a satisfactory knowledge of the field covered by this project.

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Abstract

The high school musical is a common activity for many high school students in the United States. This study presents a contextually rich historical analysis of the high school musical at one suburban school in western New York. The literature review consists of three major sections: the role of extracurricular activities in schools, the importance of music education, and an analysis of theater and drama programs in schools. The literature includes academic benefits of extracurricular activities, the social and emotional growth experienced by students in music and theater activities, case studies of productions, and analysis and criticism of show choices. This study is presented in two parts: document analysis and qualitative interviews. The document analysis includes review of past programs, newspaper articles, and other important documents to analyze the development and continuation of this particular school's musical program. The qualitative interviews were conducted with key members involved in the history of the musical including past directors and alumni spanning the forty years of the production. Findings and discussion center around three major themes: the importance of having a strong musical theater program, dedication of the team and creating high expectations, and the ability to deal with challenges and manage transitions.

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Introduction

The high school musical is an annual event for many high schools across the United States. At the suburban high school in this study, the spring musical has been a cherished yearly tradition since 1973. I conducted a document analysis supplemented with recollections and reflections from key people involved in the program to present a contextually rich history of the forty-year tradition of the high school musical at one suburban school in western New York.

The purpose of this study was to provide a comprehensive overview of this particular high school's musical theater program including the historical context of why shows were chosen and performed, the role of the musical within the school culture and time period, the numbers of participants in the program over the years, and the perceived impact of the musical as described by key alumni including past directors.

The methodology included a document analysis of past programs, newspaper articles, and yearbooks as well as interviews with alumni and staff members involved with the program in the last forty years. The alumni were chosen based on their direct connection to the program and they included past directors, current staff members, and former cast members. Questions in the interview were related to reflections on the musical program from alumni and current participants. There were also questions related to the role of the high school musical in a broader sense. Participants were asked to reflect on how this experience had impacted their lives and the lives of others. The interviews provided qualitative information to supplement the document analysis.

This study is important to the field of education because it looks at the importance of extra-curricular activities in an era when they are constantly on the chopping block due to tightening school budgets. According to the National Center for Education Students (2013), 23% of high school students participate in extracurricular music or performing arts activities. The

Educational Theatre Association (2012a) reported that 89% of schools offer some type of extracurricular theatre program while the average cost for putting on a musical at the high school level is \$7,394. Non-mandated programs and activities such as the high school musical and other music and drama programs seem to be in constant danger of being cut at this school and across the nation. Part of this thesis will look at the impact this particular program has had on alumni which could serve as an indication about what qualities and lessons could be lost if such a program is cut by the school district.

According to the American Alliance for Theatre & Education (2012), students involved in theatre at the high school level receive higher SAT scores, attend school more consistently, and demonstrate greater self esteem than their peers. Research has also shown the benefits of extra-curricular music involvement in high school. Kuntz (2011) studied high school band students and their desire to continue in music programs beyond graduation. Kuntz cited the importance of performing in an ensemble for personal growth and development of perseverance. Studies such as this demonstrate the importance of music and theatre arts and the need to continue them even though they may not be mandated by state and national education standards.

There are numerous studies related to the role of the high school play or musical within youth culture and the community in general. There are also many case studies of the impacts of particular theatre productions. Larson & Brown (2007) discussed how a high school production of *Les Miserables* led to emotional growth and development for the student participants. In fact, the high school in my study has performed many emotional shows including *Les Miserables*. It is quite possible that this emotional growth was felt and experienced by students in this school's productions. There are also studies related to play selection at the high school level. Some authors such as Urice (2004) are very critical of the standard fare that high schools traditionally

offer such as *Guys & Dolls*, *South Pacific*, and *Brigadoon*, all of which have been done at the high school presented in this thesis.

This topic is important to me as a current director of high school musicals and because of my nearly life-long love for the musicals. I first became interested in musicals by going to see a high school production of *Oklahoma!* in third grade. My mother and I began a tradition of going on opening night for the next six years. We always sat in the very back row so I could stand up and see better. When I was in eighth grade, I job shadowed the director of the local high school musical for a Careers class project and got my first glimpse of the directing life.

Needless to say, it was a thrill to finally get the chance to appear in the musicals when I reached high school. I performed in *Oliver!*, *Les Miserables*, *42nd Street*, and *Crazy for You* and loved every minute. I initially went to college to study music education, primarily so I could direct high school musicals. It was not reason enough to stay in the field when I did not want to actually teach music, so I switched majors and hoped I could still get involved with the musicals wherever I ended up teaching. When I was appointed musical director at my local school district, it was a dream realized. When I got a teaching position within the district a few months later, I knew I would be able to do the two things I love most: teach and direct.

It is almost surreal that at age 27, I am able to direct a high school musical. While I am thrilled to have this opportunity, I also feel a deep sense of obligation to keep building the program. I want this program to survive and thrive for the next 30 years and beyond. I want to do everything I can to build the program even at a time that the arts in schools are constantly in danger and the overall school population is shrinking. I am committed to giving current and future high school students the opportunity to participate in a production that is consistently a very high quality production. I believe that the comprehensive contextualized history of the

musical at the school in this study has better informed me as a director. It will also hopefully inform the school community about the value of the program and how best to support its continuation as a cherished part of the school's culture and tradition.

This project is based on qualitative interviews that reveal recollections and reflections from key people involved, supplemented with a document analysis. These two pieces are used to present a contextually rich history of the forty-year tradition of the high school musical at one suburban school in western New York. In order to analyze this particular school's musical program, it is important to look at studies related to other high school theater and music programs in schools, and the benefits of extracurricular activities in general.

Literature Review

The high school musical is one of many extracurricular programs offered by high schools across the country. In order to discuss the musical at the suburban school in this study, it is important to look at research related to theater, music, and extracurricular programs at the high school level. This literature review will first establish a theoretical framework focused on the importance of the role of tradition and the arts in sustaining positive school culture before discussing research related to the benefits of extracurricular activities in general. Then it will narrow to looking at specific music programs, and theater programs in high school. Some of the research also includes case studies of specific schools' programs as well as commentary on the role of the high school play or musical in school culture.

Theoretical Framework

The importance of the arts in schools and their effect on school culture has been researched by a number of theorists. As far back as the early twentieth century, John Dewey (1900) wrote of the importance of the arts in school stating they are as important as anything else

in school. He wrote, “I know of no work in the school that better develops the power of attention, the habit of observation and of consecutiveness, of seeing parts in relation to a whole” (p. 125).

In more recent years, theorists have looked more closely at music education and its role in the school from a theoretical standpoint. Gruhn (2006) stresses the importance of students learning music and not just learning about music in their classes. Learning about music can be the same as learning about history and not interactive. Gruhn encourages schools to develop a curriculum focused on music learning with teachers who are experienced musicians and in tune with musical interpretation, basically advocating for a more hands-on approach.

Regelski (2005) talks about music being a value added education and says it can be “acknowledged as promoting values that are both *basic* to life and *special* in their unique contribution to the good life” (p. 22). He further explains the basic and special approach by stating music education is basic in that music education should be part of a well-rounded education. However, he argues it is special because it is different from other subjects and “makes a special contribution to individual and social life in comparison to most other school subjects” (p. 21).

The arts in schools and extracurricular activities can also promote a positive school culture. Deal and Peterson (1999) write about a positive school culture and list elements of successful school cultures. These include “a rich sense of history and purpose,” shared leadership that balances continuity and improvement,” and “rituals and ceremonies that reinforce core cultural values” (p. 116). A positive school culture can have an effect on a successful musical/theater program but it is just as likely that a successful musical/theater program can have a positive effect on a school culture. The importance of extracurricular activities including music and theater has been well-researched.

The Role of Extracurricular Activities in School

Extracurricular activities are a common part of the high school experience. The non-mandated programs such as athletics, music, art, clubs, and many other activities play a pivotal role in students' journeys through high school and adolescence. These activities are routinely in danger of being cut because they are not mandated and therefore are an easy place to trim the budget. Yet, most schools continue to find ways to fund these programs. In fact, the Educational Theatre Association's (2012a) finding that 89% of schools have an extracurricular theater program is up from similar studies done in 1970 and 1991. However, budgets are tighter than ever, and it is important to continually reexamine the role of extracurricular activities, specifically music and theater programs, in high schools.

The benefits of extracurricular activities. Much research has been done on the benefits of extracurricular programs at the high school level. Broh (2002) used empirical data from the National Center for Education Statistics to connect extracurricular involvement to achievement. He stated that there has been a lot of research related to the benefits of sports, but it has not focused on why sports boost achievement. He also said there has not been much research done on extracurricular activities besides sports. He found that the extracurricular activities most linked to achievement were interscholastic sports and music. Turner (2010) argues the importance of extracurricular activities goes beyond the grades and student achievement. He asserts that the intangible factors learned from extracurricular activities such as building character, learning social skills, and reducing risks are just as important as academic skills learned in the classroom. In analyzing the benefits of extracurricular athletics, a major component of this improved academic achievement is due to the social connections athletes

make with peers and educational staff. Research found that the most impactful extracurricular activities are ones that have structure, supervision, and involvement from parents (Broh, 2002).

School administrators often look to extracurricular activities when it comes to cutting the budget because these programs are not mandated by state or federal law; however, there is growing research to suggest the important role they play in high schools. According to Kronholz (2012), “extracurriculars also make school more palatable for a whole lot of kids who otherwise find it bleak or unsatisfying” (p. 11). Kronholz (2012) further discussed an interview done by Tony Wagner from Harvard’s Graduate School of Education. Wagner interviewed high school alumni from a top public high school in New England. They all remembered their experiences with extracurricular activities best and stated they simply started over in college with academics. The alumni stated that extracurriculars provide life skills needed as an adult including leadership, self-discipline, and time management. Kronholz (2012) took a similar question unofficially to facebook and got the same types of responses from college students about their experiences in high school.

There is also research to suggest that being involved in an extracurricular activity might have an immediate impact on students’ grades and attendance (Silliker and Quirk, 1997). Silliker and Quirk conducted a study of high school soccer players (male and female) and their academic performance during and after soccer season. Their study showed that participation in soccer did not negatively impact academic performance and may have enhanced it. The students’ average GPA was slightly higher during their soccer season and their attendance was basically the same. Limitations in this study that likely extend to other studies include variables such as family values, peer influence, and community size.

Some research notes the importance of extracurricular activities but argues there is not enough extensive data to support the cause and effect relationship. Shulruf (2010) conducted an analysis of 29 studies related to extracurricular activities and educational outcomes. He found data to support associations but not causal effects. He suggests that more research is needed and that too many studies are using the 1988 study by the Department of Education (DOE). Shulruf (2010) added that the DOE study does not have enough depth and is a secondary source in these studies.

Prevalence of extracurricular activities. There is a great discrepancy in the number of extracurricular activities offered by different high schools. Kronholz (2012) discussed a suburban school district with over 100 extracurricular activities. That school district had 96% of students go to college and a median income that was three times above the US average. Further, the kids involved in the most activities had the highest test scores. In contrast,, there are often very few extracurricular activities offered for inner city youth. Carr (2007) stated the number of extracurricular activities offered by Milwaukee Public Schools averaged five extracurricular activities and three music activities, a huge contrast from the suburban school in Kronholz's (2012) findings. She further stated that only 1 in 10 students in Milwaukee participated in these activities and pointed to a case study of one specific high school that had lost many activities in the last few years including a school newspaper, yearbook club, and drama club.

It is worth mentioning that urban schools may have more opportunities for students outside of school but the discrepancy between wealthy suburban schools and poor urban schools is noticeable and troubling. Broh (2002) stated that the lack of extracurricular activities in inner city schools may make the disadvantages for those students even greater as extracurricular sports can be used to improve social mobility and achievement. He further stated that economically

disadvantaged students are less connected to their schools and parents are less active. He suggests that his study shows that the lack of extracurriculars only makes it harder to improve social capital and, in turn, improve students' academic achievement.

Ebie (2005) looked at the reasons students participated in extracurricular activities. Using 160 students, the author employed a questionnaire and found the top reasons for participation were social/integrative reasons and self esteem reasons. The author said many students stressed the importance of teamwork for both athletic and musical activities. This is consistent with Krunholz's (2012) finding that students want to find like-minded peers who cause them to be more engaged in school. Krunholz (2012) argued this can lead to students achieving better scores. While the above findings show the benefits of extracurricular activities in general, there is also research to support the importance of music and drama education in particular in schools.

The Importance of Music Education

Meyers (2012) looked at the attitudes of students performing in solo or ensemble music groups. One of his findings was that students tend to keep going with these experiences once they get involved initially, so, according to Meyers, "the first step in affecting change... is to simply get them involved in the activity" (p. 41). One potential area for research would be to see if this is true for the other performing arts such as the musical. This topic was also explored by Adderly, Kennedy, and Berz (2003) who found that students considered the music classroom a second home and the classroom was key to building relationships and social connections.

Campbell, Connell, and Beegle (2007) looked at the significance of music education for adolescents through interviews with music and non-music students. The authors found that music was significant in meeting social needs and keeping students out of trouble. This is consistent with earlier findings in this literature review that position extracurricular activities such as music

education or activities as a driving social force (Broh, 2002; Kronholz, 2012). Adderly et al. (2003) also discussed the social importance of the music classroom. Many of the music students interviewed stressed the friendships made within music ensembles. The students in the study indicated they would not have necessarily had a chance to meet others in the greater school population were it not for the music groups.

Music education and personal growth. Gooding (2009) expanded on the association between social connections and music with her study on teaching social skills through music classes. Using research that showed the social aspect of music participation, Gooding developed activities for a music class that would have social benefits. She argued that teaching social skills in music classrooms could promote future involvement in music activities. She stated that promoting these social connections would lead to better retention in music ensembles because of the positive peer relationships students could develop.

Research also suggests that students in extracurricular music activities were high achievers in other areas. A study of Massachusetts all-state musicians by Tobin (2005) found those students were also strong performers in other areas such as academics, athletics, and student government. The author suggests that this information can be used to promote music education programs in all communities. Though, like Shulruf (2010), he did not determine a specific causal relationship, Tobin (2005) concluded that these all-state students can have a very positive effect on the music program as a whole as their successes in all areas, specifically music, can be used for recruiting new music students.

Despite the many advantages presented by the research, the literature was not fully supportive of music education as it is currently enacted in schools. There were findings that students thought music education should be more catered to their interests and more stimulating

(Campbell et al., 2007). The authors argued that the music programs may not be far reaching enough to the entire school population because their content is not relevant enough to current high school students. This may explain why only 23% of students participate in extracurricular performing arts activities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). While music education is the foundation for a school musical, it is important to look at the wide range of theater and drama programs in schools and related research.

Theater and Drama Programs in Schools

Cousins (2000) talks about the importance of the school play, ranking it up there with the Prom and Homecoming Game as essential parts of a high school experience. She states that being a part of a school play “builds confidence, discipline, and teamwork skills” (p. 86). She further discusses the benefits to the whole school and the buzz that happens when a play is about to open at school. Urice (2004) said school productions create “a sense of unity and focus to a school in ways most often associated with higher-profile athletics” (p. 12).

Lazarus (2005) expanded on the topic to discuss the ethics of theater programs in schools. She wrote that it is important for a program to be “physically, emotionally, and socially safe for students naturally and appropriately to grow into adulthood” (p. 21). Lazarus stressed the role of the director/teacher in this process and how this adult should make a theater group very inclusive and encouraging, not exclusive. She said it is important for a theatrical production to be a collaborative process between students and adults because a dictatorial style does not help the students grow and prepare for adulthood.

Case studies of theater programs. Several investigations found in the literature are in the form of case studies detailing the experience of producing specific shows. Poliniak (2010) interviewed several directors about the challenges and benefits of putting on a school musical. Of

particular relevance to the importance of extracurricular activities were the discussions about the budget. The directors interviewed talked about doing fundraisers, using PTA funds, and having honest discussions with administrators. One director interviewed discussed the importance of making this a school-wide activity with school-wide support from the administration, faculty, and community as well as the students. He said the skills learned in a musical are important for any career path students may take.

Larson and Brown (2007) studied a high school production of *Les Miserables* to determine the emotional development of the teenage performers during rehearsals and performances for that challenging musical. They found that this particular theater program allowed for positive emotional development including direct experiences with emotional content and an understanding of serious context and culture within the musical. The authors stressed the importance of adults in this process as they “promoted emotional management and coached the students in care, respect, and openness to emotions in themselves and each other” (Larson & Brown, 2007, p. 1097). The authors found that students were able to manage and understand their emotions and learned new strategies for handling these feelings through performing in *Les Miserables*, a very serious musical.

Another case study was of a British secondary school’s production of *Anything Goes*. Pitts (2007) asked student participants what they learned from being in the production and the word “fun” was overwhelmingly used. There were further connections to the social importance of being in a program like this as a common answer had to do with making new friends. Pitts (2007) found that the students in the production had great pride in their show and valued their involvement. Many students expressed an excitement for doing another show while others indicated they would like to continue to be involved in music and drama programs in adulthood.

The author also touched on the emotional side of the production despite the fact that *Anything Goes* is a much less emotional show than *Les Miserables* in Larson and Brown's (2007) study. Pitts (2007) discussed the many emotions that students in a production experience from the lows of stressful rehearsals to the highs of a successful performance. He found that students believe the benefits and high points outweigh the low points significantly.

Kleinman (1990) wrote of a partnership between a junior high school and a touring professional opera company presenting *The Mikado*. Kleinman, a local teacher, contacted the director of the opera and together they presented a full length operetta featuring professionals and students. The production was very successful and Kleinman stated that the benefits from this program were seen in both her students and the community. She wrote that there has been more respect from the community for the program and greater enrollment from students in the school. She said that working with professionals taught students the importance of preparedness and hard work.

A fourth case study looked at a unique program model in New York City. Simon and Grosso (2009) looked at the Urban Assembly School for Law and Justice (SLJ), a non-profit school run by the Urban Assembly for low-income students. The school uses an outside group, *The Essentials*, to run their theater program because they believe in using experts in the field to teach students who otherwise would not receive this type of instruction. The authors wrote that it took five years and three major productions to create a replicable model for other schools. Despite struggles at times, the authors advocate for this type of program when available to schools because it builds relationships between students, faculty, and professionals. This may seem like a costly option for schools and the authors addressed that by saying SLJ and *The Essentials* came up with creative solutions including free use of the school as a practice venue

for other productions by *The Essentials*. This model may only be possible in schools where there is a strong theater arts community (such as New York City) to draw from or where there is a significant budget for Performing Arts.

The four case studies presented by Larson and Brown (2007), Pitts (2007), Kleinman (1990), and Simon and Grosso (2009) all depict very different models of a high school theater production, yet they all emphasize the benefits. The students at the three schools profiled benefited immensely from these productions and showed emotional and social growth. Larson and Brown (2007), Kleinman (1990), and Simon and Grosso (2009) stressed the role of adults in this process, whether they are teachers or members of an outside theater company. These authors arrived at the same findings as Lazarus (2005). The adults involved in a high school production are key players to the development of a program and the growth of students involved.

Criticism of theater programs. There is research that criticizes schools for picking the same standard shows without stretching their actors and audience. According to the Educational Theatre Association (2012b), a mix of classic musicals such as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Anything Goes*, and *Guys & Dolls* and contemporary musicals such as *Hairspray* and *The Drowsy Chaperone* made the list of the most produced musicals at high schools for the 2011-12 school year. Cousins (2000) argued that the traditional choices such as *Oklahoma!*, *Bye Bye Birdie*, *Annie*, and *The Music Man* are not as relevant to students' lives. While those musicals emphasize traditional American values, Cousins (2000) argues that these choices do not reflect the increasingly diverse student populations in the United States. She suggests that current issues such as violence, gangs, and teenage pregnancy could be addressed through student-created plays. The author reasoned that unconventional performances such as street theatre can reach a wider audience and make theater more exciting for the public. These statements are similar to

Campbell, Connell, and Beegle's (2007) findings that music students need more relevance in their courses, which may boost participation.

Lazarus (2005) expanded on the importance of teaching topical issues in theater. She stated that directors should find material that "challenges [the students] to think critically, stimulates their imagination, and encourages them to consider the nature of what it means to be human" (p. 23). Lazarus believes that there are old and new scripts that meet these standards so something conventional is not necessarily too safe. She says it is important to find material that will challenge the students and stretch their thinking but at the same time, she does not advocate for poor behavior that might be deemed acceptable through a performance (such as stripper roles for high school girls or excessive alcohol use in a production).

Urice (2004) had a similar criticism of the traditional show choices. He said that the safe choices keep everyone in a comfort zone where there is no controversy or criticism. He argues that the main purpose for theater in high school is to "enrich students' knowledge and talents and to provide a substantive artistic experience" (p. 15). Given that, Urice (2004) argues that the political correctness of choosing safe shows from the 1940s and 50s do not challenge high school students. He concludes that each school needs to consider the purpose of their production and make their play selection accordingly. However, these decisions may not always be up to the director. The Educational Theatre Association (2012a) reported that 18% of drama teachers have gotten criticism or challenges from the school or community due to content. They claimed the musicals performed in high schools that generated the most controversy were *Rent* and *Urinetown*.

Gonzalez (1999) states that a major challenge facing directors is how to present classic shows in light of today's culture. For example, she asks can *West Side Story* be performed as it

always has been without addressing the prevalence of gang warfare in inner cities. She says that audiences come into a high school production hoping to have expectations fulfilled but that may be in contrast at times with encouraging critical thinking. Gonzalez discusses ways to make these “cultural treasures” meaningful and engaging to a modern audience. She encourages finding new selections or new interpretations of classics. She argues that these classics should not be handed down from past productions which are often imitations of the original productions. Rather she states they should be striving to find new meanings and relevance. It is possible to do that through alternate and unique presentations.

Alternate presentations. Not all theater programs need to necessarily be full scale high school productions. Banaszewski (2001) looked at a case study of invisible theatre (using the public as participants without their awareness in a non-theatrical setting) with high school students. Banaszewski used two high school students in a cafeteria and courtyard and had them interacting with the other high school students using an actual script but behaving as themselves. A scenario was played out involving littering and one student asked the public or “spect-actors” (p. 19) their opinion. According to the case study, the result of these scenes was an increased awareness among the “spect-actors” and a willingness to engage in public conversation from the actors. Banaszewski writes of the potential benefits of invisible theatre in high school programs. He believes it allows actors to “see the power of theatre in action and show them that their efforts can make a difference in the world” (p. 25). He encourages theater teachers to experiment with this process in their programs.

Turning to a traditional approach, there are issues that can be presented and portrayed in some of the more conventional high school musical choices. Chmielewski (2009) discussed directing musicals at a nearly all-black high school and how a theater program can be used to

teach about racism and other relevant issues. She discussed performing shows with race issues such as *Once on this Island* and *West Side Story* as well as traditionally white musicals with an all-black cast such as *Guys & Dolls* and *Grease*. She encourages directors not to shy away from race issues in productions and to not “pretend the world is only sunny and bright, even the music theater world” (Chmielewski, 2009, p. 353). She encourages schools to use these types of productions as teaching tools in other disciplines such as literature and history. While her show choices are mostly standard selections, she was able to explore themes that are important for high school students.

Improving theater programs in schools. Brown and Urice (2003) state that high school productions are the most recognizable type of theater in the United States. As a result, they say that has both helped and hurt secondary theatre programs. While it may be the only theatre experience for many performers and audience members, it has been plagued by “inconsistencies, uneven production values, and inadequately trained teachers” (p. 25). As exemplified in case studies by Larson and Brown (2007), Kleinman (1990), and Simon and Grosso (2009), Brown and Urice (2003) found that teachers are the biggest key to success in a high school theatre program. They further argue that trained theatre teachers are essential for improving the quality of arts in schools. This of course implies that schools would hire theater teachers, which is not currently a reasonable assumption given it is a non-mandated subject and there are tightening school budgets.

Wright (2000) discussed the need for national theatre standards, arguing that arts education standards typically only include music and visual arts. However, she pointed to the Goals 2000 arts standards including theatre and discussed how theatre education could be improved in schools. Some specific goals she identified include: changing administrations’

attitudes so they see the importance of arts education as an integral basic education subject, adopting state or national standards and curriculum, mandating graduation requirements, and funding professional development opportunities. Just as Brown and Urice (2003) stated, Wright (2000) stresses the importance of qualified theatre teachers in school districts but also acknowledged the lack of such teachers. She stated that patience is important so “we can slowly chip away at community attitudes, readjust school priorities, support teacher development, and teach more efficiently so that time and money are conserved” (p. 17).

The benefits and ethics of theater programs. Brym (2006) wrote of the benefits of a high school drama program in his personal life and future career as a sociologist. He discussed how playing the role of Tony in *West Side Story* was “by far the most important event of [his] youth” (p. 252). One of his many reasons behind that statement was an improved social status as well as self confidence. Just as it was discussed in relation to music activities and extracurricular activities in general (Campbell, Connell, and Beegle, 2007; Broh, 2002; Kronholz, 2012; Adderly et al., 2003), it is evident that social growth can be a major component of a high school theater program. Brym (2006) further discussed emotional growth experienced on *West Side Story* as he said the role of Tony “taught me the role that I might be capable of a virtue I hadn’t even recognized before” (p. 253). Emotional growth seems to be particularly prevalent when there is heavy-handed subject material as in *West Side Story* and *Les Miserables*, as shown in Larson and Brown (2007).

Lazarus (2005) concludes that there are key questions that a drama director or teacher must consider when looking at the ethics of a theater program. Some of these questions can be very relevant to old and new theater programs alike. Questions such as, “who is my program for?”, “what is the nature of this learning community?”, and “how am I using the implicit

political nature of theatre to engage students and the community?” (p. 24) are important questions to consider when attempting to create or maintain a theater program and some of Lazarus’ questions were used in the qualitative interviews included in this study.

There is little doubt that theater programs including the musical program in this study are important in school culture and in the future of arts and drama education in general. As Wright (2000) stated, “the arts reflect this world and predict the future. Theatre educators and theatre education can and should be leading the way” (p. 17). The literature review looked at the importance of extracurricular programs, music education, and theater/drama programs. This study will look at the importance of one particular musical theater program at a suburban high school in Western New York that has been successful for 40 years.

Methodology

I set out to develop a contextually rich history of a forty-year tradition of the high school musical in one suburban high school. The methodology consisted of both document analysis and qualitative interviews of key individuals. I began with a document analysis of available public documents connected to the musical. These documents included school and local newspaper articles, programs, yearbook entries, and personal correspondences. This analysis provided insight into the number of students and adults involved in the productions, the public support and advertisement of the program, and trends and issues over the years. These documents were obtained through people formerly and currently involved with the musical, archives from the school, and microfiche articles from the local newspaper through the local college database.

The second part of the study consisted of qualitative semi-structured interviews with people who had been instrumental in the history of the musical. The details of these qualitative interviews are described in the rest of the methodology section. The semi-structured interview

style was selected because it starts with inquiry and allows relevant findings to develop from there (Hand, 2003). Dearnley (2005) stated semi-structured interviews follow the same format as formal interviews but have no set order of questions because those interviewed are “encouraged to talk about their experiences through open-ended questions” that are “aimed to encourage depth and vitality and to allow new concepts to emerge” (p. 22).

Barriball and While (1994) described a semi-structured interview as “well-suited for the exploration of the perceptions and opinions of respondents regarding complex and sometimes sensitive issues” (p. 330). Due to the nature of this study, much information was received through anecdotal discussions that extended beyond the initial interview question. A semi-structured interview allowed responders to feel free to give thoughtful and reflective responses with the question asked as a guide to further discussion. As the interviewer, I asked follow-up questions where appropriate, which I was free to do within this format. I also did not ask every person the same questions or in the same order as I allowed the conversational style of the interview to guide my questions.

Setting and Participants

After receiving consent from the Institutional Review Board, I interviewed the participants for the study in a one-on-one setting. The interviews lasted between 20 and 45 minutes. There were eleven people interviewed for this study. All have been involved with the musical for more than one year and were specifically chosen due to their connections with this school’s musical. The people were chosen to represent a wide range of eras, roles, and opinions.

There were six men and six women who were interviewed for the study. Participant A (female) was the director of the first three musicals (1973-1975). Participant B (male) was involved in the productions from the first musical and directed the shows from 1980-2003.

Participant C (male) was the director from 2004-2008 and has worked on over thirty shows in roles including conductor, set designer, lighting designer, and pit orchestra member. Participant D (male) was the director from 2009-2011. Participant E (female) is the current costume and prop designer and has worked on thirty shows. Participant F (female) is a past costume and prop designer who retired in 2003. Participant G (male) has been the set designer and stage manager since 2000.

There were also five former cast members whose involvement represents different eras of the musical. These cast members have played both chorus and lead roles. Participant H (female) is a member of the Class of 1977 and was a student director her senior year. Participant I (female) is a member of the Class of 1991. She was a cast member for three productions and had two lead roles. Participant J (male) is a member of the Class of 2005. He was a cast member for four productions with two lead roles. Participant K (male) is a member of the Class of 2008. He was a cast member for four years and is the current rehearsal accompanist. Participant L (female) is a member of the Class of 2010. She was a cast member for five years and is the current hair and makeup designer. This information is presented in table format in Appendix B.

Design

The participants were interviewed to gather qualitative data to provide detailed information about the history of the musical including its origins, benefits, and reasons for success. The interviews were conducted using a questionnaire (Appendix A). The questionnaire has open-ended questions adapted from other empirical studies using qualitative interviews (Gould, Voelker, & Griffes, 2013; Hamann, 2010; Hoffman, 2002; Horn, 2008; Lazarus, 2005) as well as open-ended questions that I developed specific to this study. Some of these studies were not related to music or theater but had questions that I felt were suitable. For example,

Gould et al. (2013) was based on interviews with coaches about best coaching practices for selecting team captains. Questions like “What are the biggest issues and challenges high school captains face today?” (p. 24) were adapted to “What are the biggest issues and challenges facing high school musicals today?” Another valuable study to glean questions from was Horn (2008), which was an interview about the origins and development of the Institute for Popular Music. I used some of the questions asked in that study to develop questions asked of Participant A, who was a part of the beginning of the high school musical program in this study.

The interview questions were all related to the history of the musical as well as opinions about the program. Not all participants were given every question if it was not relevant. For example, a recent alumnus was not asked about the origins of the musical. The past staff members were asked specifically about the history of the program, while both alumni and staff members were asked directly about the importance of the musical. Due to the semi-structured interview approach, the questions listed were asked in varying order as not all questions were asked to all participants. The participants were free to add to any question if they had a specific detail or anecdote note to share. The goal of this study was to provide a contextually rich history and the questions asked were guidelines to encourage thoughtful and detailed responses from the subjects.

Data Collection

Interview data was collected by recording the in-person interview using a voice recorder. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim. I read each interview multiple times and coded for common themes. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) describe the steps needed for a coding process, comparing it to sorting a gymnasium full of toys. They said there could be many ways to sort data so it is important to look for regularities and patterns and then find key words and phrases to

support those patterns. They state the key words and phrases become the codes. For this study, after reading the interviews multiple times, I arrived at three primary findings described in the findings section. I coded responses related to each of the three findings with different highlighter colors. At the conclusion of the study, the interview transcripts and audio recordings will be stored in a locked box for three years before being destroyed.

The document analysis provided important context to the interviews. Shank (2002) talked about the importance of documents in fieldwork and research. He said they can be formal or informal and they “give you a richer picture of your topic” (p. 142). That was certainly true for this study as the document analysis was done before the qualitative interviews. The analysis provided a rich contextual history that helped me organize the interviews and ask further questions when necessary. I used the documents to create a template (Appendix C) for each musical put on at the school in this study. The template included raw data such as show dates, the number of cast members, and the genre. It also included a space to record the documents connected to that particular show. The template helped to organize the many newspaper and yearbook articles obtained during the fieldwork.

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were used to provide insight into the rich history of the musical at this suburban high school including the origin of the musical, significant events and trends over time, and reflection on the importance of the musical to the overall school history and culture. Any relevant specific anecdotes revealed during interviews were included as appropriate. The responses were coded to find specific themes as highlighted in the literature and connected to the document analysis. The qualitative data was important to understand the history of the musical and the importance of the musical to alumni and the community.

The responses were coded in two ways. The first was by grouping those interviewed both by role within the production (on staff or a student) and then by the era in which they participated. The participants were selected because of their varied involvement in role and era with the musical and their answers were grouped accordingly. The second way the answers were coded was by common themes and words used to describe the musical. Commonalities in answers were found to highlight themes and words used to describe the musical and its success over forty years.

Limitations

There are limitations with this study, even though it is intended as an historical analysis. This study is related to one specific suburban school's musical in western New York. The benefits for students and the community stated in interviews may not necessarily apply to other school districts depending on their program, enrollment, and community/administrative support. Furthermore, the alumni and key people interviewed for this study were all heavily involved in the musical and the benefits they have seen and experienced may not be a universal feeling from all musical alumni. The qualitative interviews reflect their own opinions, which are not necessarily shared by everyone.

Findings

The following findings were based primarily on the interviews conducted with people involved in the musical. The document analysis was used to contextualize the answers and provide support material when necessary. The document analysis provided a large amount of statistical information.

Contextual Factors through Document Analysis

The school in this study has been performing musicals every spring since 1973. Prior to 1973, there was an annual play put on by the school's extracurricular drama program. According to Participant A, the vocal director of the first seven musicals and director from 1980-2003, the high school principal was the person who initially wanted a spring musical. The board committed \$1,000 to the program to get it started and it has been self-funding ever since.

An evaluation of the first musical, *The Sound of Music*, was obtained through Participant A. It detailed the pros and cons of the first musical. Much of it focused on problems related to the production including: lack of communication, a drop in participants' grades, and more music rehearsals needed than anticipated. However, the end of the document said "... the committee understood at the beginning that we could not have produced the show we did without doing a great deal that was RIGHT. The events that aggravate are the negative ones; and we learned much that will make the next time easier." It went on to state that they did not know if it would happen again but one reason it worked was the use of elementary and middle school students. The evaluation concluded by saying, "... we felt that one of the strong factors for the success of the play was that the cast crossed district lines and included students from all three schools. Whether this kind of show will ever be possible again we do not know."

There were four directors in the first seven years, but there have only been four directors since 1980. There have been many other key staff members who have been on board for many years in the same position including: Conductor (1985-2003), Costume and Prop Designer (1986-Present), and Stage Manager (2000-Present). Students have had leadership roles in productions including, at various points: assistant director, stage manager, choreographer, house manager, and lighting designer.

Thirty different shows have been performed in the 40 years; 13 shows have been performed twice, and one show has been performed three times. There were three years in the early 1980s that a small fall musical was performed in addition to the large spring musical. Of the 30 different shows, 13 were dramas and 17 were comedies. The school has mostly done musicals with both a book and score though there have been a few sung-through shows (*Les Miserables*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*). The vast majority of the shows had their original theatrical productions on Broadway or somewhere else between 1940 and 1980. Only a few recently performed shows since 2000 have been an exception. Two of those exceptions - *Crazy for You* and *Thoroughly Modern Millie* - are both old fashioned in style and historically set in the early twentieth century. The only truly modern musicals performed at this school to date have been *Les Miserables*, *Into the Woods*, and *Ragtime*. Those three musicals were originally produced on Broadway in 1987 (*Les Miserables* and *Into the Woods*) and 1998 (*Ragtime*). While *Crazy for You* (1992) and *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (2002) are also more contemporary in terms of the original production, *Les Miserables*, *Into the Woods*, and *Ragtime* are much more contemporary in their style, music, and themes. They are not traditional musical comedies, rather, they are shows with dark themes and an edgy and modern sounding score.

This school has shied away from controversial titles that are starting to be seen at other schools such as *Rent*, *Chicago*, or *Legally Blonde*. These three shows may be considered controversial for high schools to perform due to their sexual themes and language. All three shows are more explicitly sexual and vulgar than any show that has been performed at the school in this study. There are a few examples of controversial shows done at this school. In 1990, the program produced *Jesus Christ Superstar* and Participant A recalled a local man from the Jewish

community visiting him and expressing the many inaccuracies in the story. He stated that both *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell* received some controversy due to their religious nature. The program for *Jesus Christ Superstar* featured a note from the director where he addressed the anti-Semitic criticism of the show as well as the human elements of Jesus Christ presented in the musical. He concluded by stating “like any good dramatic production, it allows you, the theater-goer, to expand your thoughts, to look at something in a new light, and to involve you emotionally in the story.” Personal correspondence to Participant A from local pastors showed a very positive response to the production.

These were interesting documents because in addition to the Jewish community, there was initial push back from conservative Christian and Catholic churches the time of the original production. The show’s attempts to humanize Jesus Christ as well as the lack of a resurrection and a hint of a sexual relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene fueled the controversy. According to Miller (1996), lyricist Tim Rice said he did not believe Jesus was the son of God and that made his story even more amazing, but churches vehemently opposed the musical when it opened. It is interesting that there was not as much controversy from local Christians when this school put on the musical. It is possible that people were more aware and less shocked by 1990 (when this school performed than production) than the original production in the early 1970s. It is also possible that people in the small community knew the director (Participant A) as a church-going man. The letters from local pastors seemed more appreciative of spreading the Christian message in a school production than anything else.

In 2007, the school produced *Ragtime*, which had many controversial elements including several black characters played by white actors (and represented through costumes), racial slurs, and violence. Participant B (director at the time) recalled having to go to the Board of Education

to get approval of the *Ragtime* title. He brought a Social Studies teacher with him to the Board and a plan to address the historical topics so the production could be a learning experience.

Write a conclusion or transition sentence to the next paragraph.

The largest cast ever was in 1976's *The Music Man*, which had 64 students. The smallest cast ever was 2011's *Godspell*, which had 27 students. However, the next year doubled the cast size to 54 so this was not a downward trend. Excluding the three small fall musicals, the cast size has averaged 45. Many of the larger casts over the years have been shows that have included children such as *The Sound of Music*, *The King & I*, *Annie*, and *Fiddler on the Roof*. When including the cast, crew, and pit orchestra, most shows have involved over 100 students from the district. It is important to note that the overall class sizes have gotten smaller over the years while the musical numbers have remained relatively constant. For example, there were over 200 students per grade in the 1970s and there are just over 100 students per grade today.

The presentation of shows has varied over the years. Traditionally, the show was done on a Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night over one weekend in March starting from the very first show in 1973 until 2002 with one exception. In 1988, for the kid-themed *Annie*, they opted for a matinee performance on Saturday in place of the Thursday night show. In 2003, with *Les Miserables*, they began doing four performances instead of three. The fourth performance was (in different years) on Wednesday night, Sunday afternoon, and Saturday afternoon. Starting with *Ragtime* in 2007, the school began doing two weekends of performances with Friday and Saturday shows each weekend. This helped attendance as weekend shows were better attended and the show could build word of mouth during the week in-between. Most years have continued to have the show in March though a few years have had April performances depending on when the Spring Break occurred.

These contextual factors helped provide a backdrop for themes that emerged from the interviews with key people involved in the musical. Three themes emerged as reasons why this program has had such success for forty years: the importance of having a strong musical theater program, dedication of the team and creating high expectations, and the ability to deal with challenges and manage transitions.

The Importance of Having a Strong Musical Theater Program

A theme that came up many times in the qualitative interviews was the importance of having a strong musical theater program in schools and the belief that a hallmark of the particular school in this study is its strong musical theater program. Participant A said there can be good schools without musicals but it feels like there is something missing. He further stated that he feels it is a natural outlet for schools with strong music programs as the school in this study had. Participant B, the director from 2003-2008, said musicals bring together many people at different levels with different abilities on stage and off stage. He said he cannot think of anything else in schools that encompass so many students. Participant C, the director from 2009-2011, said musicals give kids a purpose and a place to fit in. He said the musical "... gives a camaraderie. It gives them a purpose, it gives them a place to fit in, a place to belong, and a place where you can excel... many life lessons can be learned by being a part of a musical."

Participant D, the costume and prop designer since 1986, said there are many skill developments that occur during a musical. She noted that involvement in the musical teaches work skills, cooperation skills, and life skills. Participant E, who worked on costumes and props before retiring in 2003, echoed that statement from a backstage perspective. She said the way people have to work together and get along with each other is life changing as they put something on together. Participant F, who has been the stage manager since 2000, also talked

about the inclusivity of the musical. He said it involves kids who are sometimes on the outsides of their classmates. Participant G, who has worked on costumes and props since 1997, said the basic human interaction skills learned are essential for life. She said the musical is a team-oriented program and the skills students learn about putting things together and solving problems will help later in life when they encounter a situation that requires a team-oriented approach or solution.

Former student cast members echoed these issues of community connection and importance of the musical emphasized by the adult advisors. Participant H, a cast member and student director in 1976 and 1977, also talked about the team approach and importance of building something together. She said they are integral to a high school experience stating "...it's a time when you are finding what's interesting to you, you're finding what's important, you're finding yourself in different ways, and a musical can really make that happen for people" Participant I, a cast member from 1989-1991, said the musical teaches teamwork but not in a competitive way like sports. She further added that the musical hones artistic skills in students that might otherwise be ignored and therefore the school would be alienating part of the student body.

Participant J, a cast member from 2002-2005, said it is important to have a musical the community can take part in and one that will make a school community proud. Participant K, a former cast member and current rehearsal accompanist, said it is an important way for the arts to be supported in an extracurricular environment. Participant L, a cast member from 2006-2010, echoed the idea of involving a community saying it is a way to connect a community. She further stated "I feel like it's really accepting of everybody and it's a place where anybody can find a

home. If they're looking for something they want to call their own... it's just a place where they can find belonging and acceptance.”

Dedication of the Team and Creating High Expectations

A theme that was stated over and over again in interviews was the dedication and commitment of the team, both students and adults, and the high expectations created and demanded of students and adults. Participant A talked about how the director was not above other staff members when it came to casting and his vote was just counted as one like everyone else. Participant J used the word “community” when asked to describe the musical in one word and he said there was a strong feeling of being a part of something bigger.

Participant C said the commitment of the team is essential to keeping the program alive and thriving. He said it takes organization but it also requires people to put their heart into it. He said if you put your whole heart into it, you get the benefits of that. Participant H said that many people who have been in their positions for a long time have gotten very good at what they do. Participant G said the dedication of the adult team is essential because there will always be talented kids. She said, “It’s a matter of whether you can draw that talent out, keep them engaged, and direct it so that it’s really a productive process where the kids... can shine.” She further stated that every director and the support staff are so committed and passionate, so the kids can be a part of something they’re proud of. Participant E stated, “It’s a well-oiled machine but it’s a super caring machine.” Participant D said the team is committed to seeing the excellence continue and not falter. She said the staff is not satisfied with mediocrity and that is a driving force.

Many commented that the dedication of the team created high expectations for students and a sense of pride for all involved. Participant H said the commitment to quality has been

present from the very beginning. She said that it was fun but people worked hard. Participant A said the most meaningful thing to him about the musical was seeing the kids develop and blossom. He pointed to specific examples of kids who rose to the occasion even when they were considered to be problems by other teachers in the district. He said the musical at this school was not just memorable for many students but life changing for some.

Participant J said the quality of the productions is what has allowed it to survive and thrive. He said it creates a feedback loop where a quality production gets more students interested. Participant J further stated that the productions at this school were held to an adult professional standard and the students were never treated with kid gloves. Participant C stated that there has been a desire for the shows to continue to improve as the years have gone on. Participant I said the shows at this school are not typical high school shows and the director at the time (Participant A) evoked a sense of pride from the students thanks to the quality of production. In defining the high quality of the production, many participants compared the high school musical at this school to a professional production. They specifically highlighted the vocal talents, staging, sets and costumes, and professionalism in terms of behavior and commitment.

Ability to Deal with Challenges and Manage Transitions

No program that lasts for 40 years is without challenges. At this school, there have been transitions between staff members that led to uncertainty, which was touched on in interviews. There were also mistakes made and other controversies with the musical over the years not related to the titles as described earlier. There were also issues that happened before, during, or after the production and that often included casting decisions. All three directors interviewed discussed the difficulties related to casting with Participant A stating he was once accused of

accepting a bribe from the parents of a student who earned a lead role. He further said that one reason he retired when he did was because he was tired of the drama that happened when the cast list was posted.

Participant A discussed the most challenging year in the history of the musical one year before he took over. The director that year only did it for a single year. The director was unorganized and Participant A, serving as the vocal director at the time, said the show barely came together despite talented students. He said he went to the principal and said he would not participate again if the director was back. When the director moved away, Participant A took over and stayed in the position for 23 years. It is very likely things would have turned out much differently if Participant A had indeed quit as he threatened to. This story was offered in response to the question, “Was there ever a time the future of the musical was in doubt?”

The document analysis revealed another controversy. A collection of letters written from parents to the principal, board of education, and music department in 1980-1981 (*West Side Story*) revealed anger over the use of non-student musicians in the pit orchestra. They were questioning why the pit orchestra was invitation-only and not by audition. The parents stated that as taxpayers, they should not be paying for a production that is not open to all students for the orchestra and a difficult title like *West Side Story* should be reconsidered. They wrote “Is the school equitably offering to all musically interested students... an extension of its music education program, or is it supporting an annual Show Biz production that entertains our own and neighboring communities, but is fraught with politics, back scratching, discrimination, and scabbing?” The music department responded with a lengthy letter that ultimately emphasized “it is our intention to use as many students as possible in the pit but to bring in outside help when necessary to cover an important part.” There was a student petition to not use non-school

personnel in the orchestra and local newspaper articles/letters covering the controversy. While the music department pledged to include more students, the issue died down and outside musicians are still used sparingly to this day.

Many of the participants interviewed could not think of any major mistakes that have been made as they pointed to what a consistently strong program it has been over forty years. Most of the mistakes mentioned were casting related or elements that were beyond their control. Participant E said when mistakes are made, they are fixed, and that is one thing that has allowed this program to continue to thrive.

There have been several transitions over the years from different directors to turnover of staff in other positions. Participant A was involved from the very beginning but did not feel like he could direct the show until the only rocky year in the history of the musical happened. He said that year was the only time the future of the musical seemed in doubt. When the next year came, he was approached about directing and agreed to do it and ultimately held the position for 23 years. Participant B took over for Participant A. He said it was mostly a smooth transition because he had spent years working with the previous director in what he described as a “training program.” He said he kept many of the precedents including the scheduling and the professionalism. Participant C stepped in as director without having been involved in any previous show. He stated that the many people who stayed on in other positions were the “backbone” of the production and it helped smooth the transition.

Several of those people were also interviewed and talked about the transition from director to director. Participant K said the shows have remained consistent and the support staff staying in place has been essential in keeping up the quality. He stated that if the staff works well together, the kids will too and the whole production will come together. Participant L said

different directors can be beneficial because of different styles. She did say that as a cast member during a transition, it was difficult at times because there was not as much time to build a relationship with one director.

Participant F has worked with four different directors and said it takes a couple years to get used to a new director. Participant G echoed the benefits of new staff members saying that it is important to have new and younger blood in the program to keep it going as many of the backstage team members are close to retirement. Participant D has also worked with four different directors but said the consistency has remained the same and nothing has had to be reestablished. She said it was interesting to work with different directors and observe their styles of directing. She said that regardless of the different organizational styles, the commitment to making it really good has continued. Participant E said there were many questions about what would happen when Participant A left but what has happened is the “excellence has remained and the shows have continued.”

The qualitative interviews revealed the three major themes: the importance of a strong musical theater program, the dedication of the team and creating high expectations, and the ability to deal with challenges and manage transitions. These findings coupled with the document analysis paint a rich portrait of why the musical at this school has been so successful for an extended period of time.

Discussion

Interpreting Data

The musical at the school in this study has a rich history that has helped it to thrive for forty years. The three findings gathered from qualitative interviews and document analysis support the rich history and provide insight into why this program has been successful. Both the

literature and interviews discussed the importance of having a strong musical theater program. Every person interviewed for the study was asked about the importance of such a program in schools and there were consistent themes in the answers. Two major ideas emerged under that finding: the importance of inclusivity and the importance of teamwork.

Many participants talked about the inclusivity of the musical and how it involves students from all walks of life. Several responses alluded to the fact that the musical involves a wide range of students including those who may be marginalized in other areas such as sports. It is also a unique program at this school because of the sheer number of students it involves. The documents revealed over 100 students were involved many years between the cast, stage crew, and pit orchestra. It is hard to imagine another singular extracurricular activity at a school the size of the one in the study that involves that many students and utilizes contributions from all of them. Many responses also alluded to the importance of teamwork and the life skills taught by the musical. While it is an extracurricular activity, many commented on the valuable life lessons learned such as working together to solve problems, building an entire production from the ground up, and being a part of a team where everyone has an important role

The second finding was the dedication of the team and creating high expectations. The documents show a remarkable consistency from the adults involved in the productions. Three adults in key positions have been involved in over 30 productions while several other key staff members have been involved in 10-20 productions. Many participants interviewed, regardless of their role, talked about the dedication of the adult staff. Those interviewed who were or are on the adult staff talked about the amount they have cared and how the dedication and commitment of the adult staff was a reason there was the same type of dedication and commitment from the students. Those interviewed who were cast members talked about the inspiration and leadership

of the adult staff. It is clear that this program has a level of respect between students and adults that is necessary for a successful program.

This school also has a high level of adult participants, both paid and unpaid. In the most recent production, there were 106 students involved and 17 adults in direct leadership roles (roughly a 6:1 ratio) with many other parents helping in other areas such as organizing the cast party, preparing a banquet table, and helping distribute t-shirts. Of the adults involved in direct leadership positions, four were former cast members. The ages of adults helping ranged from very recent graduates to retired school employees, making the production an intergenerational undertaking.

There was also frequent mention of not settling for anything less than excellent quality. Participants interviewed talked about how this program has always strived to push forward and not see the program fall apart. Former students interviewed talked about their appreciation that they were treated like adults and how the adult staff during their era instilled a sense of pride and commitment to creating a high quality production. It was apparent throughout the interviews that the adult staff is a key reason for a successful program because they set the tone for how a production will go.

The third finding was the ability to minimize mistakes and manage transitions. Every participant asked about mistakes took awhile to come up with an answer because they could not think of any glaringly obvious mistake. One reason for that was alluded to by one participant who said when mistakes are made, they are fixed and people move on.

Even though there has been much stability, there have been transitions over the years including eight different directors. Nearly every participant asked about transitions talked about the importance of the support staff to smooth a transition. The documents revealed that the

support staff including backstage workers remained fairly constant every time there was a new director (1976, 1978, 1979, 1980, 2004, 2009, and 2012). This further supports the idea of teamwork and the importance of dedication from an entire staff, not just the director, to creating a quality production.

Conclusions and Inferences

The interpretation of the findings lead to the conclusion that each theme found in the qualitative interviews are reasons the musical program at this school has been so successful for so long. While it cannot be stated that every similar program needs all of these elements, a program that emphasizes a commitment to excellence, dedication of the team, and the ability to minimize mistakes and manage transitions is likely to lead to a successful program.

Perhaps the most important piece in a successful program is the dedication of the adult staff. Every school in the country has talented students – good performers, hard workers, and enthusiastic participants. But not every school has a strong musical theater program. It is a matter of leadership and not just from the director. It is important that the entire adult staff is committed to making it the best program it can be and that they have the skills to bring out the talents and abilities of these students in meaningful ways. Having adults on board who care will have a trickle-down effect to the students in the cast, crew, and pit orchestra.

From a leadership standpoint, it is also important to make good decisions regarding the program – good decisions with show choice and good decision with casting. A hallmark of the school in this study is the ability to pick shows that maximize student talents. That piece is what Participant A recommended for future directors: always pick shows that fit the students available. Too many times schools will pick shows that are not fitting for the student body or not appropriate for the specific community.

Casting concerns were discussed by all three former directors interviewed. When a director takes the advice of Participant A and selects a show based on the students currently involved, there can often be accusations of pre-casting which Participant A alluded to. He said it is important to make it a group decision. On one hand, it is important to keep an open mind when it comes to casting so that the show is cast with the best possible students. On the other hand, it is important to not pick a show where there are not students who can play key roles (for example, a director should not select *Fiddler on the Roof* if there is not a student very capable of playing Tevye). It is important for directors to have administrative support when it comes to casting as there may be angry parents or students involved. There was very little discussion of administration in the interviews – none of the staff members explicitly talked about administrative support, aside from starting the program in 1973, nor did they have anything negative to say about a lack of administration support.

The importance of managing transition times in programs like the one in this study cannot be overstated. It was a theme that came up again and again in interviews and a key element of a successful program. There are schools that have had brilliant productions at one point in time due to the leadership but then there is an upheaval and the program is not nearly as strong even just a few years later. Another hallmark of the school in this study has been its ability to manage such transitions. No matter who has been at the helm as director and no matter what the leadership looks like among support staff, the consistency of quality has continued.

Part of the reason the consistency of quality has continued is a shared leadership vision and that has become more apparent in recent years as Participants F and G discussed when talking about working with different directors. While the director is the formal head of the production, there are many people involved in the production who have been doing their jobs for

many years and can run their own departments without a need for micromanagement. From the students' perspective, it is very much a shared leadership and collaborative process, not just among adults but among students as well. This was not always the case. Participant F said that when Participant A was the director, it was less collaborative as he was very clearly in charge. However, his departure left a vacuum and that was filled by a more shared approach to leadership which has helped with subsequent transitions among directors and staff.

Relation to Literature

Many points brought up in the qualitative interviews and in the document analysis were connected to the literature presented earlier in the study. Many of the participants interviewed for this study talked about the importance of the musical for students. The literature on extracurricular activities supports the notion that these activities teach life lessons to students, making it a valuable experience. Turner (2010) said extracurricular activities build character, teach social skills, and reduce risk for students. This was consistent with participants' responses to the important qualities learned in the musical. Participant C said, "Many life lessons can be learned by being a part of the musical." Participant D said you need, "discipline and commitment and cooperation skills and social skills" in order to be in the musical. This was also found in Gooding's (2009) study of the association between social skills and music ensembles.

Kronholz (2012) wrote that extracurricular activities help make school a much better experience for students who otherwise may not enjoy it and this theme was echoed by responses as well as many alluded to the way the musical includes students who may be marginalized in other areas. Participant F said music and drama can include, "...people who are on the outside of their classmates." He further said, "...they're included more than... in other activities... here's

something else where they can go to and then become a family and learn working as a team and how important everybody is on a team.”

Cousins (2000) described the school play or musical on the same level of importance as Prom and a Homecoming Game. Many of the former students and cast members interviewed in this study described the musical as the most important and most memorable part of their high school career. Participant K said the musical was, “The one thing I remember from anything else. It’s the only thing from high school I have pictures from, I have stories from.” Participant I said, “It was a giant portion of who I was. It was part of my personal identity as a student.”

Lazarus (2005) talked about how the musical provides a place for students to grow into adulthood. Participant A talked about the thrill of seeing students blossom during their experience. He took it one step further noting, “I think some of the shows actually had powerful, maybe even life changing impacts on some of the kids.” Participant F said, “I like to watch the kids grow and mature, put on a show, and realize that what they’re putting on is something really remarkable.”

Limitations

There are limitations with this study, some that were apparent from the beginning and some that were discovered over the course of the study. All of the participants interviewed have positive memories of the musical due to their long time involvement with the program. There is no doubt that there have been some disgruntled cast members or staff members over the years but none would be considered “key people” connected to the program.

An unforeseen limitation was the way the musical has developed a group narrative among the people interviewed for this study and others. The group of people interviewed are part of a closely knit team and many have worked together for years. There is an element of “group

think” associated with the musical at this school because so many people have poured their heart into it for years and are, naturally, biased towards the narrative created by the group. This is not necessarily a bad thing and the responses are not necessarily inaccurate. It is just worth noting the perspective behind the people interviewed.

Future Implications

There are many future implications for this study and future studies that could be done. This was one specific school and one specific program. Similar case studies could be done of other schools’ musicals or plays. Of particular interest for a different but related case study may be a school that has had more down years and a study could be done on how a school was able to revive a dormant or even dead program.

Additionally, there were many specific issues raised in the literature and in interviews that could be studied all by themselves. For example, there was a lot of literature on show choice and the debate of doing classic titles that have been done for years like *Oklahoma!* versus newer and edgier titles like *Rent*. There was discussion in interviews in this study about controversial shows performed at this particular school such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Ragtime*. An entire study could be done analyzing controversial shows at area high schools and the community reaction associated with them.

The high school musical is a cherished annual event of the school in this study and in schools across the nation. This study showed that with lots of dedication and heart, a program can thrive for 40 years and beyond. Times have changed since 1973 at this school: student population has declined, the music program regularly finds itself in danger of absorbing cuts, and students have many more opportunities to participate in other activities. Yet, the high quality of the musical has continued and the event is just as beloved by students and staff members in 2013

as it was in 1973, if not more-so. The musical teaches life lessons that cannot be learned in a classroom: lessons about working together to create something special and lessons about everyone being able to contribute their particular gifts in meaningful ways. The musical allows students to use music and theater to grow and develop emotionally and socially. On top of that, it is often the most memorable and most fun part of high school for those who choose to participate. Those reasons should be ringing endorsements for this school and other schools to continue to invest in programs like this one. The school in this study has a beloved tradition that continues to thrive. Without our traditions, our lives would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview Questionnaire

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**Not all questions will be given to all interviewed, just appropriate ones for their role.
Follow-up questions or clarification questions may be asked as appropriate.**

Tell me about how the musical started. Where did the idea for a high school musical come from? (Horn, 2008)

Tell me about the first year of the musical. What did you do to establish the musical as a tradition? (Horn, 2008)

What role did school personnel play in the development of the musical? Were they supportive? Involved? (Hamann, 2010)

Tell me about how different shows were selected. Was there significant debate over the titles? (Horn, 2008)

How were the individual musicals tied to significant historical and community events? (Hamann, 2010)

Tell me about the transitions between directors and other staff members. Was there ever a time that the future of the musical seemed in doubt?

How did the musical at this school compare with other area musicals? (Hamann, 2010)

What was meaningful to you about the musical? (Hoffman, 2002)

Tell me about your view on the role of the high school musical in this community and in schools in general. (Gould, Voelker, & Griffes, 2013)

What are the biggest mistakes that have been made? What were the most challenging times? (Gould, Voelker, & Griffes, 2013)

What elements of the musical at this school have made it survive and thrive for forty years?

What do you think are the biggest issues and challenges facing high school musicals today? (Gould, Voelker, & Griffes, 2013)

Tell me about the importance of musicals and theatre programs in high schools. (Gould, Voelker, & Griffes, 2013)

What recommendations do you have for future directors and participants? (Gould, Voelker, & Griffes, 2013)

If you could use one word to describe the musical at this school, what would it be and why?

How does the nature of theatre productions engage students and the community? (Lazarus, 2005)

Should censorship be a concern in high school musical productions? (Lazarus, 2005)

Appendix B

Interview Participants

Participant	Role within musical	Years involved
A (male)	Director (23 years), Vocal Director	1973-2003
B (male)	Director (5 years), Conductor, Set Design, Lighting Design, Pit Orchestra Member	1976-2013
C (male)	Director (3 years), Consultant	2009-Present
D (female)	Costume & Prop Design	1986-Present
E (female)	Costume & Prop Design	Retired in 2003
F (male)	Set Design, Stage Manager	2000-Present
G (female)	Costumes, Props, and Photography	1997-Present
H (female)	Cast Member, Student Director	1976-1977
I (female)	Cast Member	1989-1991
J (male)	Cast Member	2002-2005
K (male)	Cast Member, Rehearsal Accompanist	2005-Present
L (female)	Cast Member	2006-2010

Appendix C

Show Template for Document Analysis

YEAR:	SHOW:	WAS IT DONE BEFORE?
GENRE/SETTING:	DATES & TIMES OF PERFORMANCE:	YEAR OF ORIGINAL PRODUCTION:
# OF CAST MEMBERS:	MALE/FEMALE RATIO:	
DIRECTOR:		CONDUCTOR:
OTHER KEY STAFF MEMBERS:		
ARTICLES (SCHOOL PAPER/LOCAL PAPER/YEARBOOK):		
OTHER DOCUMENTS RELATED TO THIS PRODUCTION:		
SPECIFIC ISSUES AND/OR EVENTS ASSOCIATED WITH THIS SHOW AS DISCOVERED IN INTERVIEWS OR DOCUMENTS:		