

# A Welcoming Space for Whom?



## Race and Inclusion in Suburban High School Theater Programs

### A Review of Literature by:

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This literature review presents evidence that many theater programs, especially at majority-white schools, struggle to support and include students of color, but that little research exists on how best to address the struggle to create racially inclusive theater communities. Because of this gap, this review also explores the existing literature on students of color in majority-white schools that points toward potential underlying causes, solutions, and areas for additional inquiry.

## Research Questions

Does the discourse and ideology around inclusivity in theater programs match the material practices in theater programs?

### Sub Questions Included:

- How are racial minorities included or excluded from these programs?
- Is the theater program seen as a "safe space" for all students, regardless of race?
- How does the race of students affect text selection and potentially limit the empathy-building power of theater, given that students are potentially only able to create work featuring predominantly white casts?

## Narrative of HS Theater

- Overwhelmingly positive narrative of inclusivity in high school theater programs (McCammon, Saldaña, Hines, & Omasta, 2012)
- Programs are "safe environments" (p. 31) that gave them "a sense of belonging when I didn't fit in" (p. 34).

## Changing Practice Through Teacher Training

Schroeder-Arce (2016, 2017) explores how theater educators can interrupt the centering of whiteness and the erasure of students of color on high school stages and discuss the related implications for teacher training.

## Calls for Further Research

**Why solve this?** If theater teachers can create this space for students to feel connected to each other and the school, it could provide a much-needed model for schools as a whole to see what change is possible and provide a haven for students to use theater pedagogy to heal from the traumas they face in predominantly white spaces.

**What to do?** Ultimately, it is impossible to know if students of color feel welcome in our theater programs, and if they do not, what conditions could interrupt that reality if research is not conducted that centers student voices and experiences and uses those voices to guide teachers toward equitable practices. Suburban schools are only becoming more diverse (Florida, 2019), making this a challenge more and more theater teachers will need to tackle quickly.

## Overall Trends in Research

- Teaching drama in "urban" contexts or using drama to teach other subjects to support marginalized populations (Gallagher, 2007; Gallagher, Yaman Ntelioglou, & Wessels, 2013; Medina & Campano, 2006).
- Using Drama experiences and pedagogy to talk/teach about race (Edmiston, 2012; Tanner, 2014, 2015, 2016; Tanner, Miller, & Montgomery, 2018).
- Reflective/Theoretical pieces discussions racial inequality/centering of whiteness in educational theater - discussed below
- General research on students of color in suburban schools - discussed below

## Race in HS Theater

- Garcia (1997) - Twenty years old, small number of teachers surveyed, highlights same gap in literature I'm exploring: "little is known about the extent that drama/theatre programs in elementary and secondary schools promote appreciation for cultural differences, and even less is known about their effectiveness" (p. 88).
- González (2015) and González, Cantú, & González (2006) - practitioner reflections that support initial assumptions - provide ideas for changing practice but not student-centered research

## Race in Suburban Schools

- An overview of recent scholarship centering student voices is instructive to inquiries into why high school theater programs remain centered on whiteness and are potentially inhospitable to students of color
- Show that students struggle to feel a connection to their schools and to the teachers and counselors within due to perceptions of unequal treatment and, materially, less access to the resources that make predominantly white schools so attractive (Chapman, 2013; Diamond & Lewis, 2019; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Lewis-McCoy, 2014, p.; Thandeka K. Chapman, 2014).
- Common solution offered: grapple with the ways that race is impacting actions, whether consciously or unconsciously, and those in power being willing to make substantive changes to practices that uphold inequality and white supremacy.