FURSCA 2020: The Effects of Extracurricular Theatre on Youth Mental Health

End of Summer Report- Karen George

This summer, under the guidance of Dr. Ian MacInnes, I researched the effects of extracurricular theatre on youth mental health, inspired by my work with Mar Lee Drama Club. The right kind of activities have been found to improve students’ confidence and social skills. These activities have also been credited with keeping students out of trouble, as their time and energy is focused on a more productive outcome. The goal of this project was to gain further understanding of how theatre can benefit young people, and how the Mar Lee Drama Club is benefitting these particular young people.

Dr. MacInnes and his family have been running the Mar Lee Drama program at Mar Lee School for 12 years. The Mar Lee Drama club is open only to middle school-aged students, and participants range from ages 11-14. The first few months of the program take place at Mar Lee School, where the students take part in acting exercises, designed to get them comfortable moving and speaking in front of their peers. Eventually, all of the participating students are cast in a show, which is performed in May at Albion College’s Herrick Theatre. This program was the basis for my research, as this was my second year helping Dr. MacInnes with the program.

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Mar Lee Drama program was cut short this past spring, and will be returning, in a limited capacity, in the fall. This fall, I will interview past and present participants of the program, to gauge the effects that Mar Lee Drama had on their lives. This summer, I prepared and submitted an IRB, in preparation for those interviews. I also prepared the interview questions that will guide my conversations with the drama participants. These include questions about the participant’s overall mental health and social experiences, as well as simple questions about their favorite experiences in Mar Lee Drama. I tailored different questions for the past participants than for the present participants, as the present participants are minors, who may be less able to reflect upon their present experiences. It is important to note that the students currently participating in Mar Lee Drama will have a different experience than the students in the past, because of the Covid-19 pandemic and its effects on social interactions.

As a part of my preparation for this fall, I also conducted a literature review this summer, reading approximately fifteen academic studies about extracurricular activities, specifically about theatre. I also researched adolescent mental health and socialization. I found that puberty is often when “many mental health disorders become more apparent,” making it more important for adolescents to experience positive socialization and mental health intervention (“Yardsticks”)(Mental Health America). Broadly, extracurriculars can provide that positive socialization, as they have been associated with higher self-esteem and lower rates of depression (Barbara, Eccles, Stone 2001). More specifically, fine arts programs have been seen to help adolescents develop “emotionally diverse experiences,” as participants develop stronger senses of empathy and self-expression (Ennis, Tonkin 2018).

Moving forward into fall semester, I will be completing this project as a Directed Study with Dr. MacInnes, where I will continue to work with Mar Lee students, and conduct my participant interviews. My research will culminate in a thesis, and an Elkin-Isaac presentation in the spring. As a theatre major, this research has been incredibly important to me, as, on a personal level, I know how experiences in theatre and the arts can improve a young person’s life. This research has allowed me to better understand those effects and to better understand how I, personally, can help the Mar Lee students.