Benefits of Extracurricular Participation for Youths: a Musical Theatre Production and Proposal

A Special Activity Project Report

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Abstract

Producing a musical theatre production at an elementary school is a major undertaking requiring commitments of hundreds of hours of volunteering, and an investment of several thousand dollars by the school's administration. For those reasons, few teachers embark on such projects. Research, however, shows that there is a wide breadth of benefits for the participants: academic, psychosocial, and developmental, while there are few risks associated. This project was two-fold: to keep a detailed record of the steps taken to produce such a musical (*The Aristocats, Kids*) in order to create a road map for future productions, and to develop a proposal for a school board whereby multiple schools could collaborate in producing the same musical, reducing the cost, preparation time, and sharing costumes, sets, props, directions, choreography and expertise.

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Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to examine current research on the effects of participation in extracurricular activities. Its intent is to provide research-based support for a project of producing a school musical at an elementary school, and a proposal for the English Montreal School Board to approve a multi-school production approach, which would increase the number of students who benefit from extracurricular musical participation. The literature review has been organized into five broad categories: academic benefits of participation, psychosocial and developmental benefits, participation of students with exceptionalities, benefits from participation in musical extracurricular activities, and negative effects and risks of participation.

Two major constraints were found in preparation of this literature review. First, a relatively under-researched field hindered the ability to narrow this literature review to one or two specific areas of research. Rather, this literature review aims to cover a broad spectrum of the research that does exist. Second, an overwhelming majority of the research conducted on extracurricular activities presents findings on adolescent (high school) participants. These findings are nonetheless relevant, and will most likely apply to the elementary school population this actual project targets, although the correlations are impossible to predict or measure in the scope of this project. Any study that included participants of elementary school age was emphasized in the literature review.

Introduction to Extracurricular Activities

A child or adolescent's day is taken up by sleep, schooling, and discretionary "free" time. The use of such time can be taken up by a variety of activities, from playing, watching television,

reading, to participating in organized activities that are not part of the required school curriculum. Bartko and Eccles (2003) found that 40% of teenagers' time (excluding sleep) is spent on activities of their choice. As students enter adolescence, it becomes important for them to delve into new interests, to explore their identity, and to create new networks and friendships, all domains in which extracurricular activity participation can foster growth (Dworkin et al., 2003). Recent investigations of patterns of participation in the US have shown that adolescents on average participate in two to three extracurricular activities (EAs) (Fredericks & Eccles, 2010).

These extracurricular activities can be sponsored by and take place at school, or by a faith-related organization, prosocial organization (e.g., Scouts), or be privately organized (sports teams, music lessons, etc.). Eccles and Barber (1999) classified EAs in five general categories: prosocial activities, team sports, performing arts, school involvement activities, and academic clubs. Although private, individual music lessons or sport training can be considered EAs, an important factor at play is the group interaction with peers and adults, therefore for the purpose of this literature review only studies looking at group activities were taken into consideration.

Other terms used for "extracurricular activity" found in the literature and used for the research of this literature review include: "after-school activities, nonacademic activities, out-of-school activities, youth programs," and "youth activities."

Theoretical Support for Extracurricular Research

In 1979, Bronfenbrenner presented the Systems Theory, also known as the Bioecological Model, which described an individual's development in an interactive context known as the microsystem (peers, family, siblings), mesosystem (school board, neighborhood, mass media, extended family) and macrosystem (culture, laws, history, socioeconomic factors)

(Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). This model can be used to describe the developmental interactions facilitated by EA participation between these systems, leading to developmental benefits. Feldman and Matjasko (2007) described this system as best suited to guide research on extracurricular activity participation "because it not only includes the contextual levels surrounding a developing individual but emphasizes the bidirectional processes by which the individual and particular contexts affect each other" (p. 196).

Another theory that can defend the need to study the outcomes of EA participation is the Positive Youth Development approach (PYD). Damon (2004) described the need to describe youth development in terms of abilities rather than deficits. Just as we describe mental illness by the presence of certain factors (symptoms), well-being should be described by the presence of a set of factors (Keyes, Lopez, & Snyder, 2002). EAs can help to nurture these factors, therefore should be considered as a valid contributor to for development and its research. Some of these factors include resilience, cognitive and social aptitudes, self-determination, prosocial involvement, and bonding (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004).

Academic Benefits

According to Shulruf (2011), extracurricular activities' relation to higher achievement has been studied since the 1930s. In the 1980s and 90s, research on the correlation between EA participation and academic achievement began to gain interest, and several studies showed that students who get involved tend to have more academic benefits over those that do not (Barnett, 2007). In the last decade, this investigation continued to intensify, and demonstrated the significant relationship between EA participation and improved academic performance, even in studies that controlled for ethnicity, immigration status, socioeconomic factors, gender, and academic ability (Wickery, 2010). Shulruf's meta-analysis of 29 peer-reviewed and non-peer-

reviewed studies confirms the consensus reached over the last decades that participation is indeed related to positive educational outcomes (although causes for this cannot be reliably explained in the literature). The studies found focused on high school participation in eight categories of activities (sports, academic club and journalism, performing arts and cheerleading, student council, vocational club, mentoring, non-athletic activities, and general EAs, where no detail was given).

Two areas of academic benefits can be found: improved grades and test results, and lower drop-out rates.

Grade point averages and test results. The obvious measure to determine academic benefits is student grade-point averages (GPA) and standardized tests results, which often can be available anonymously through access to governmental surveys of such data, leading to large-sample studies. Several studies demonstrate this positive relationship (e.g., Showalter, 2008).

In a study of 424 students in grades 6 to 12, Cooper, Valentine, Nye, and Lindsay (1999) found a significant prediction of academic achievement (test scores and class grades) for students who participates in EAs. The study analyzed different types of possible after-school activities: watching television, EAs, homework, jobs, and other structured after-school groups. Spending more time on homework was linked with increased achievement. The study statistically controlled gender, grade level, ethnicity, level of adult supervision, and still found this predictability to exist.

One study focused on grade nine students in Missouri, and found higher grades and lower drop-out rates in those who participated in EAs than in those who did not participate (Boatwright, 2009). Using student records and coaches' data, 1,992 were found to be EA "participants" and 3,104 "nonparticipants," for a total sample of 5,096 students. The average

GPA for non-participants was 2.60, while the participants' group scored 3.11. Some limitations of this doctoral dissertation study were that it only measured data in one academic year, all the participants were from southwestern Missouri, and only state-sponsored athletic activities were used to measure participation.

In a frequently cited article, Eccles and Barber (1999) found "clear evidence that participation in EAs during the high school years provides a protective context in terms of both academic performance and involvement in risky behaviors" (p. 25). Highlighting five types of EAs, those who participated were more likely to be enrolled in college full-time when they were 21 years old. Eccles and Barber highlighted a variety of reasons for this, such as increased school attachment, association with peers, exposure to academic values, etc. However, this study also found that participation in sport activities, specifically, also increases the consumption of alcohol and other risky behaviors (marijuana, hard drugs, and skipping school).

Analyzing surveys from 424 students in grades six through twelve, Harris et al. (2012), supported the hypothesis that more EA participation (and less unstructured activity participation, such as television viewing) is associated with higher grades and improved test scores (as was time free time spent on homework).

Interestingly, one study found that the positive effects on academics and their correlation with EA participation increased as school size also increased (Killgo, 2010). This study also demonstrated that for students from an economically disadvantaged status, EAs acted as an incentive to achieve better academic performance.

Drop-out rates. Another area of academic progress affected by participation in EAs is drop-out rates. Studies have demonstrated that EA participation acts as a protective factor from dropping out of high school.

Mahoney and Cairns (1997) found, in a longitudinal study in which 392 students were interviewed annually over six years (starting in the sixth grade), that students who participated in EAs were less likely to drop out of school, particularly for those students flagged as being at high drop-out risk, and who started EA participation in early high school. Mahoney posited that the reason why this effect was less pronounced for more competent students may be because such students already have other school positivity opportunities, which also act as protective factors (Mahoney & Cairns). In this study, participation was measured at no involvement, one activity or more than one activity. Participation in more than one activity led to greater protective effects against dropping out.

Mahoney later found, in another longitudinal study (this time following 695 participants from the fourth grade until the twelfth, and again at ages 20 and 24) that participation before the eleventh grade not only diminished risks of dropping out, but also risks of engaging in criminal activity (Mahoney, 2000). This point, however, is only a correlation, and it is difficult to isolate the causalities involved. For example, mere physical presence in school reduces the time where opportunities for truancy exist. It is also possible to assume that those students who are naturally less inclined to gravitate towards criminal activities are likely to also be naturally inclined to stay in school. This study also found that whether an individual's network of friends also participated contributed to a prediction of reduced antisocial patterns and drop-out rate. A study of at-risk grade eleven students confirmed that those who participated in EAs more than once per week were twice as likely to complete high school (Roeser & Peck, 2003).

Killgo (2010), using a mixed-method design investigated the mechanisms that lead to protective factors of EA participation at all Texas high schools in 2007-2008. The study used standardized test results and statistics about participation (from the Education Agency and the

University Interscholastic League), and for the qualitative portion of the study, surveys filled out by the principals of the high schools. Better behavior, found to be sponsored by participation in EAs that performed well, led to helping students stay in school. EAs were "found to be an incentive that gave students the initiative to remain in school rather than dropping out" (Killgo, p. 4).

A 1999 study following 2,621 adolescents found that those who participated in EAs were 2.3 times (Hispanic students) and 2.41 times (White students) more likely to be enrolled in school (Davalos, Chavez, & Guardiola, 1999). Boatwright's 2009 dissertation found that, aside from academic benefits, drop-out rates for students who participated in extracurricular activities were 0.50%, while those of non-participants were 3.67% (n = 5,096). This data focused only on athletic EAs.

Psychosocial and Developmental Benefits

Aside from academic achievement benefits, research on EA participation has demonstrated a wide breadth of developmental and psychosocial benefits such as school connectedness, positive youth development, self-concept, diminished substance abuse, post-secondary effects, personal development, participation, decreased violence, and improved behavior, which are described below. A meta-analysis of studies investigating these effects confirmed that EAs are positively related with psychosocial and developmental benefits, although the type of activity and its structure can moderate the extent of this relationship (Durlak, Weissber, & Pachan, 2010).

Some of the reasons why EAs are believed to nurture healthy development in youths are that, by design, they occur in contexts that contain factors known to encourage developmental health: structure, supportive relationships, sense of belonging, skill building, integration of

family, school, and community, and physical and psychological safety (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Bartko and Eccles (2003) found a positive correlation between adolescents' participation in various activities and psychological and behavioral adjustment (as well as academic). Boatwright (2009) found, aside from its aforementioned main area of study (grades and drop-out rates) other benefits: physical fitness, promotion of lifelong activity, mental health, friendships, character development, personal growth, travel, fair play, and acceptance of others (p. 29). These self-reported benefits were implied by the participants, but not submitted to statistical analyses or measurements.

Several possible differences in causality exist to explain various benefits. Some come from the nature of the activity itself. Sports activity, through exercise and team building, are likely to lead to better self-image, mood, and team work. Performing arts activities will lead to the development of talents, self-esteem, overcoming performance anxiety, etc. On the other hand, some of the causalities may lie within the individual. Some youths may be more likely, intrinsically, to respond positively to the skills required and challenges presented by participation in EAs.

School connectedness. School connectedness describes an emotional attachment to school (peers, adults, teachers, and school community) which leads to engagement, which in turn has been linked to academic and non-academic benefits (Juvonen, Espinoza, & Casey, 2012). Research has shown that students who feel unsupported and disconnected from others see their levels of motivation and achievement also lowered (Juvonen, Espinoza, & Casey, 2012). On the other hand, students who participate in EAs have been found to have more positive attitudes towards their learning and their school (Eccles et al., 2003; Davalos, Cavez, & Guardiola, 1999). A positive correlation between students' sense of community (connectedness) and improved

levels of attitudes, motivation, and achievement was demonstrated in a 4000-participants study (Battistich et al., 1995).

Showalter (2008), measuring higher GPAs for participants in ECAs over nonparticipants explained these results through the concept of school connectedness. Students who feel they have a connection with the school are more likely to perform in all areas of their school life. Through intimate relations with coaches and activity supervisors, who are caring and supportive, who monitor their attendance, behavior and grades, students develop personal skills, learn to set goals, and learn the needed skills to meet those goals (Showalter, 2008).

Brown and Evans (2002) assessed whether a connection could be made between school connectedness and EAs, in 1,755 high school students. Such a connection was found, and the authors deduced that through the creation of positive experiences at school (EAs), connectedness is built, as well as commitment. The study intended to focus primarily on non-European American students, but found that the association existed regardless of ethnicity. However, European-American students showed greater levels of participation.

Students who do not experience school connectedness tend to also suffer from "isolation, bullying, rejection from peers, and loneliness," which has been found to be directly related to risks of suicide and suicide ideation (Mata et al., 2012, p. 348).

Positive youth development. As described earlier, Positive Youth Development theory (PYD) emphasizes the developmental strengths in individuals as markers of well-being. No consensus exists to list these markers, but they include confidence, competence, character, connection, a sense of meaning and purpose, feeling that one lives up to his or her true potential (Bundick, 2011). Bundick investigated the relationship between ECAs, PYD, and the role of meaning in engagement. Two hundred one grade 9 students were surveyed on these topics in

2006, and resurveyed in 2008 (61% retention). Participants were asked to say not only if they participated in ECAs, but also how engaged they were in the activity, and how meaningful the activity was to them. Those involved in student leadership and volunteering activities showed a significant association with positive development, while, interestingly, the association was negatively related for those involved in creative arts (Bundick).

Self-concept. How an individual views him- or herself is important, especially as negative self-worth has been associated with depression and delinquency (Hay, 2000; van Welzenis, 1997, as cited in Blomfield & Barber, 2011). Several studies exist to support the assumption that participation in EAs leads to an improved sense of self-worth (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Fredericks & Eccles, 2006; Gadbois & Bowker, 2007). Mahoney and Cairns (1999) showed that self-concept (academically and socially) mediates EA participation's effects as well as academic achievement.

One study of Australian youths enrolled at a disadvantaged school (Blomfield & Barber, 2011) found that adolescents from low socio-economic status schools had better self-worth and social self-concepts if they participated in EAs than those who did not participate. Some 1504 participants in grades eight and ten responded to a survey, which listed 30 sports and 24 non-athletic activities. Low SES factor was found to significantly predict non-participation in ECAs, and of those who participated, predicted that participation in the sports-only category was more likely. The categories used to describe the possible benefits were listed as: identity exploration and reflection, experiences of success, experiences of goal setting, experiences of peer interations, general self-worth, and academic and social self-concept.

It should be noted that for activities where admission is competitive and not guaranteed (teams, performing groups, etc.), there can be negative effects to being denied membership.

Barnett (2007) found positive self-concept effects (as well as school performance and attendance), for girls admitted into cheerleading teams ("winners"), and longer-lasting negative ones for the "losers" who were denied admission.

A direct effect of self-concept is self-esteem. Research has shown that participation in EAs can positively influence the growth of self-esteem (Kort-Butler & Hagewen, 2011). This study compared age, self-esteem and extracurricular activity "portfolios" (sports, sports and clubs, clubs, or none) in 5,399 students enrolled at 80 high schools and 52 middle-schools in the US. The results showed that although self-esteem grows over time (the study was longitudinal from ages 14 to 26), those who were involved in EAs started out with higher self-esteem, and that participation "contributed to the growth and stability of self-esteem into young adulthood" (Kort-Butler & Hagewen, 2011, p. 579). Interestingly, the non-participants had the most growth in self-esteem, which can be explained by the fact that they started with the lowest measures at the start of the study, thus the highest potential for growth available. Undeniably, though, growth in self-esteem and participation in EAs are related.

Substance abuse. Several studies have found that participation in EAs is negatively associated with alcohol, marijuana, or cigarette use (e.g., Harrison & Narayan, 2003; Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992; Costa, Jessor, & Turbin, 1999).

An interesting additional factor (religious sponsorship) was used to compare the effects of ECA participation in teens' alcohol use (Adamczyk, 2012). The study analyzed data from 2,530 respondents to a telephone survey, aged 15 and 18, in two waves of interviews. Adamczyk found that religion-supported activities are associated with less alcohol use, while time spent in secularly-supported ECAs was associated with comparatively higher uses of alcohol. The study's lacunae included self-reporting, relying on the respondents to name what they considered

to be any "regular organized activity", and the possibility that adolescents may have misunderstood the meaning of "religious" and "secular" activities (p. 422). Educational institutions in the United States have stated that EA participation can lead to less and less substance abuse among teenagers (Killgo, 2010).

Other studies, however, have found increased substance abuse from participation. Participation in activities held at youth centers was related to increased rates of alcohol use (Helmersson Belmark & Andersson, 1999, cited in Mahoney & Stattin, 2000) and participation in athletic activities specifically led to an increase in alcohol consumption (Eccles & Barber, 1999). Another study found a decrease in alcohol use related to EA participation, but also an increase in smoking (Simantov, Schoen, & Klein, 2000).

Socio-economic status as a factor that affects participation. In a study that used a large sample of grade 3 students, Covay and Carbonaro (2010) examined the relationship between socio-economic status (SES) and participation in EAs, with the thesis that participation, by improving noncognitive skills (task persistence, independence, working in groups, fitting in with peers, following instructions, etc.), also facilitates academic achievement. By examining data from a sample of over 10,000 participants in an early childhood longitudinal study, they established that although participation occurred at all SES levels, as those levels increased, so did EA participation. The authors suggested that there were also relationships between race, participation, and SES. Participation in some EAs (in particular dance and sports) was related to increased development in noncognitive skills. The prediction that EA participation would have a greater effect on academic outcomes of students from lower SES was moderately supported by the analysis of the data. Low-SES students enrolled in sports activities had higher math scores than low-SES students who did not participate (Covay & Carbonaro, 2010).

Herbert Marsh found, in a 2002 study of grade twelve students, that EAs led to benefits for students socioeconomically disadvantaged at least as high as or higher than those for advantaged students.

Life skills. As activities that encourage peer-relations, problem solving, team work, and competition, EAs can also help in personal development through the development of important life skills. In one study, adolescents reported learning more such skills in organized activities that in two other contexts: academic classes and hanging out with friends (these three contexts representing the majority of the waking time in a typical adolescent's regular day) (Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003). The reported areas of learning were personal development (learning initiative, goal setting, problem-solving, effort, and time management) and interpersonal development (teamwork, group process, feedback, leadership, and social skills). As can be expected, different levels were reported for different types of activities (faith-based, sport, creative, etc.) (Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin).

Protective factors. Aside from the benefits listed above, EAs can also provide protective factors against a variety of negative life effects. One study found that among youths exposed to domestic violence, those who participated in EAs were less likely to develop internalizing problems (depression and anxiety) related to violence (Gardner, Browning, & Brooks-Gunn, 2012). A 2011 study also found that participation in EAs acted as a protective factor against depression and substance use in Ontario youths who had been under guardianship of child welfare agencies, after suffering maltreatment at home (Guibord, Bell, Romano, & Rouillard, 2011). Participation in EAs was also found to be a protective factor against negative body image in late teen subjects (Joshi, 2011).

Participation in EAs has also been found to be one of the protective factors against youth suicide (ages 11 to 20), through improving school belongingness (Mata et al., 2012). Through analysis of a sample of 13,997 youths from the National (US) Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, significant relations between different types of EAs (academic clubs, sports, creative activities, language and agricultural clubs, and music activities) and the effects were found. Suicide ideation and attempts both peaked at the 8th and 9th grades, regardless of the type of EA the youths participated in, however participants showed better school belongingness than non-participants, and higher school belongingness was negatively related to suicidality (Mata et al., 2012). This study, however focused strictly on participation versus non-participation, it did not investigate the effects of duration or intensity of participation, nor did it investigate the affective connection to their activity in the participants. Further research is needed to isolate how much participation leads to such an effect. It is possible that students who were engaged more frequently and for longer periods had less risks of suicidality through having enough time to build more significant bonds with their peers and the adults facilitating the activity.

Participation in other activities. Another benefit of participation is that students who already have a history of participation may be more likely to continue doing so, and even attempt new activities outside the realm of their existing skills and comfort zone. Denault and Poulin (2009) conducted a five-year longitudinal study looking at predictors of adolescent participation, from the seventh until the tenth grades. 272 adolescents participated in the study, which found that participation remains stable as students age. One of the five factors that predicted participation during high school was indeed prior participation (in grade six) in EAs.

Violence. One longitudinal study examined the link between EA participation and involvement in violence, for immigrant children and children of immigrants (Jiang & Peterson,

2012). Using a sample of 1,233 first generation immigrants, 2,080 second-generation (children of immigrants) and 9,923 third-plus generation youths in high school, this study revealed that higher rates of violence were lower for third-generation students who participated EAs. However, first- and second-generation youths who participated in EAs had a higher probability of participating in violent acts, when compared to non-participants.

Post-secondary effects. The positive effects associated with EA participation continue beyond the high school life. A significant association between consistent participation in high school and a variety of young adulthood factors (such as attending college, participating in elections, and volunteering) was found in a 2003 study (Zaff, Moore, Papillo, & Williams, 2003).

In an article wittily titled "Whatever Happened to the Jock, the Brain and The Princess," a longitudinal study that followed 900 individuals from grade six until six years after high school searched for effects of EA participation into young adulthood (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001). The data came from a 10-district Michigan state self-administered questionnaire that measured self-assigned identification to one of five characters from the then-famous movie *The Breakfast Club* (Hughes, 1985), as well as activity involvement, substance use, academic outcomes, job characteristics, psychological adjustment, family demographics, and academic aptitude. This study introduces an interesting concept: how students view themselves based on their attachment to particular groups through participation in their activities, in this case the Princess, the Jock, the Brain, the Basket Case, or the Criminal. The statistical analyses of these perceptions, as well as actual EA participation yielded significant results, the reason for this, the authors argue, was that tenth graders not only choose what groups they belong to based on their activity choices, but "they also are to some extent *assigned* to crowds by peers in recognition of their behavioral choices and personalities" (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, p. 450). Overall participation was

positively related to rates of college graduation and college completion, and sports participation related to having a "job with a future" at age 24 (p. 440). Activity involvement was not related to depressed mood, while sports participation led to lower isolation, and participants in any activity reporter higher self-esteem. As for levels of worry, participants in EAs had higher worry levels at the start of the study, but increased less over time than those not involved, except for students in the performing arts (Barber, Eccles, & Stone).

Benefits for Students with Exceptionalities

Thus far, the literature reviewed has demonstrated links between EA participation and a variety of benefits. Although it is reasonable to assume that these benefits would also apply to students with exceptionalities, there is a clear lack of research specifically aimed at evaluating whether the benefits differ for students from those populations.

Social anxiety.

Dimech and Seiler (2011) examined the effects of extracurricular sports participation on primary school children, as a potential buffer against social anxiety symptoms. Social anxiety disorder is described as "marked and persistent fear of social or performance situations in which embarrassment may occur" (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 450), symptoms which can be alleviated through exercise (Dimech & Seiler). However, in a study of 169 children, who participated in two rounds of data collection (interviews), a direct link between team sport and reduction of social anxiety was made (Dimech & Seiler). The study also found gender differences: boys were more involved in sport activities than girls.

Attention deficit hyperactive disorder.

Students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity (ADHD) can suffer from a range of symptoms that interfere with their academic and social development, such as impulsivity and hyperactivity (APA, 1994). Research has suggested that participation in EAs can be means for these students to learn necessary skills that can help them

cope with their difficulties (Gentschel & McLaughlin, 2000). Morrison (1996) suggested that EAs with fast-moving, action-based avenues to spend their energy, or where they can exercise control over their behavior, may be best suited for students with ADHD.

Behaviorally challenged students. Problem behaviors can be a symptom of an underlying disorder, such as ADHD, oppositional defiant disorder, or conduct disorder (Matthys & Lochman, 2010). Research has shown that problem or antisocial behavior found at the early elementary level tends to have a "high degree of continuity" as the child ages when protective factors or interventions are absent (Catalano et al., 2003, p. 144). Randall Brown's 1999 Doctoral dissertation found that participation in EAs, through mediating increased school connectedness, predicted a decline in youth problem behavior for students in grades six through twelve.

Shyness. Although shyness is not in itself a developmental handicap, its symptoms can be associated with anxiety, and can hinder a student from participating in EAs. One study investigated the relationship between participation and parental psychological control in 153 grade five students (Miller, 2012). It found that shy students participated less in EAs, and those who perceived their parents as psychologically controlling participated in even less EAs, particularly music EAs. The study suggests that shy students should feel that they have a choice in participation, which is relevant to this particular project (forcing shy students to participate may lead to even less chances of participation).

High-risk students. Students considered "high-risk" can be protected from developing antisocial patterns of behavior, dropping out from school and criminality by participating in EAs (Mahoney, 2000). Mahoney suggested that extracurricular activities acted as developmental experiences that can "interrupt the trajectory" of high-risk youths on their way to dropping out or

criminality. This study found that the decline "was dependent on whether the individual's social network also participated in school EAs" (p. 502).

Autism spectrum disorders. Autism is a pervasive developmental disorder that affects communication, social skills, and repetitive behaviors and limited interests (Gold et al., 2010). The social skills impairments students with autism can be obstacles to participation in a variety of EAs. Relevant to this project, research has demonstrated that children with autism respond unusually well and more frequently to musical than other sound stimuli, although the reasons for this are still unknown (Thaut, 1992, as cited in Brownell, 2002).

Grandin (who suffers from autism) has claimed that musical activities are important to an effective program of education for individuals with autism (1988, as cited in Brownell). Several studies exist demonstrating the effectiveness of music therapy and participation in musical activities, resulting in benefits in socialization, improved inclusiveness in regular classrooms, communication, and behavior modification (though they do not specifically address participation through EAs) (Duffy & Fuller, 2000; Gold et al., 2004; Kern, 2004). It has been suggested that these benefits may rise because musical participation exercises joint attention, an area of deficiency for individuals with autism, which is a necessary element of language acquisition and development (Bono et al., 2004; Wigram & Elefant, 2006).

A video-documentary entitled *Autism, the Musical* provided an account of a musical theatre production in which the entire cast was made of children and adolescents with various levels of severity of autism spectrum disorders (Regan, 2008). Although they do not constitute empirical research, the testimonies from the parents, participants, and the director shared the consensus that participation in this project improved a wide breadth of symptoms and difficulties

(anxiety, communication, lack of connection with peers, self-esteem, etc.), and that creating this EA opportunity was good for the participants (Regan).

Gifted students. It could be assumed that, based on the archetype of the academically gifted student as a "nerd," gifted students would participate in a more restricted range of activities (less sports and more academic activities), therefore limiting their exposure to aforementioned benefits. However, one study disputed this assumption and found that, among nine areas of activity types, athletics was the most commonly adopted type of activity (n = 1,172) (Bucknavage & Worrell (2005). Another study supported this finding, and found, interestingly, that gifted students chose to participate in computer science clubs the least often (Olszewski-Kubilius & Lee (2004). One benefit for those gifted students who participate in sports activity is higher physical abilities self-concept (Rinn & Wininger, 2007).

Ozturk and Debelak described the various benefits that can be found from participating in extracurricular academic competitions: motivation, nurturing a healthy self-concept, coping with subjectivity, and role modeling (2008).

As will be described below, one potential risk of participation is the overscheduling theory. Gifted students that are particularly enthusiastic about school could be exposed to this risk if they take on too many activities.

Research Specific to Musical Extracurricular Activities

It should be noted that research on the beneficial effects of musical education and extracurricular activities suffer from a lack of well-structured empirical studies, where most of the existing studies are based on anecdotal, biased, or poorly executed designs (Root Wilson, 2009). A result of this is a lack of empirically demonstrated links between musical EAs and benefits.

Over the course of the last three decades, several benefits have been attributed to musical instruction or participation (improved mathematical learning, improved reading decoding skills, improved short-term memory after listening to a Mozart sonata, improved spatial-temporal skills, etc.), studies which Root Wilson finds to have had various levels of validity (many of the data in different studies could not be replicated). Nonetheless, participation in musical activities has benefits that reach beyond musical aptitudes (Root Wilson, 2009).

Park (2010) researched the relationship between EA participation and various developments in gifted youth. In this study of data accumulated over four years on 15- to 19-year-old students, only participation in musical activities could be shown to be significantly related to academic improvements: it predicted benefits in reading, language, math and science (Park). This study also looked at responses to negative life events, and found that music and dance/sport participation predicted higher life satisfaction, positive affect, self-esteem, and lower levels of negative affect. However, the study assessed participation in only three types of EAs: chess, music and dance/sport. Other limitations of the study were a possible ceiling effect due to the gifted students sample, and the sole use of self-reporting.

Dagaz (2012) focused strictly on students participating in high school marching band at two US Midwestern schools. Using ethnographic data and interviews (students, parents, and band directors), Dagaz's qualitative findings found positive outcomes in trust, connectedness, friendships, and acceptance of individuality. The study attempted to describe how commitment to such activities developed using three elements of the identity theory: having the choice to join strengthened the commitment to the activity, as well as "the development of interactional and affective commitment, and the relationship to identity salience" (p. 456).

Root Wilson, in her 2009 doctoral dissertation, found higher levels of healthy behaviors (healthy diet, exercise, sleep, dental hygiene and seatbelt use) in students engaged in musical activities (band and choir) than those who did not participate. The 207 participants were in grades five to eight, enrolled at two different middle schools.

Barber, Eccles, and Stone (2001) found that participation in performing arts was a predictor of more years of post-secondary education. However, it also predicted increases in drinking behaviors during the ages of 18 to 21, as well as higher rates of suicide attempts, and visits to the psychologist by the age of 24.

A study of 898 adolescents in Australia supported a theory that students who participate in extracurricular activities (particularly out-of-school activities) are more likely to attend performing arts event outside of school, demonstrating an emerging curiosity and engagement towards the arts (Martin et al., 2012).

Mata et al., 2012, were not able to find a theorized significant link between participation in performing arts EAs and lowered risks of suicidality, though indirectly, through improving school belongingness, participation was found to have a mediating negative effect on suicidality.

The overall state of knowledge in this field, in spite of some poorly designed study, is that musical education and participation in musical activities has a wide range of benefits, which extend beyond those of talent development. Combined with the other areas of benefits described above, it becomes clear that a project of a musical theatre EA such as the one described within would be beneficial to the participants.

Negative Effects and Risks Associated with EA Participation

While EAs provide contexts where various benefits can develop, they also provide contexts where negative effects can take place, or expose participants to certain risks. For

instance, in competitive activities, students can experience heightened stress and anxiety (Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003). Participation in sports activities has been linked to higher rates of alcohol consumption, and students can be exposed to negative peer co-relations or interactions with adult organizers, coaches, or directors (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Smoll & Smith, 1989).

For students who are engaged in highly competitive activities (sports, performing arts, or academics), increases in anxiety and stress can be negative effects (Fredericks et al., 2002). Students who cannot perform well enough to stay on competitive teams become at risk of a decline in school attachment and motivation (Barnett, 2007). Partly for this reason, boys have been found to gradually enroll less in EAs as they grow older and approach the end of high school life (Barlow, 2008, as cited in Killgo, 2010).

Risky behavior. In other activities, set in less structured environments, there is a greater chance that adolescents can be recruited into a peer group involved in high-risk behaviors (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). Attendance at unstructured recreational centers is linked to increased problem behaviors (Mahoney, Stattin, & Magnusson, 2001). Participation in activities run at government-sponsored youth centers (also less structured) has been linked with an increase in alcohol consumption (Helmersson Belmark & Andersson, 1999, cited in Mahoney & Stattin, 2000).

In a previously mentioned article, Eccles and Barber (1999) found an associated correlation between participation in sports EA and increased alcohol use. Four years later, the same two authors (with Stone and Hunt) published a study which supported the same findings (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003).

Overscheduling theory. The overscheduling theory looks at breadth (how many activities) and intensity (how many hours of participation per week) of EA participation and claims that at a critical point, too much participation becomes harmful to youths' development (Luthar, Shoum, & Brown, 2006). Fredricks (2012) found that declines in academic adjustment did occur in twelfth grade students over their tenth grade prior assessment, but only for those who were involved in high breadth and intensity of participation. While all scores improved with the number of activities registered for, mathematics scores declined after five or more activities, while educational expectations and status started to decline after seven activities. As for intensity, standardized scores increased with each weekly hour dedicated to EAs overall, until the 14th hour, when a decline appeared. This describes a curvilinear pattern in the academic benefits gained through EA participation.

The same curvilinear pattern was found in a study that assessed a large, multi-ethnic sample of students in the 11th and 12th grades (Knifsend & Graham 2012). Measuring breadth of participation, Knifsend and Graham found that the students moderately involved (two activity domains) benefited the most (sense of belonging and academic achievement), compared to students who participated in no, little or high (three or more) number of EAs.

Fredricks (2012) cited reasons why the overscheduling theory needs to be examined. As activities become more competitive in high school, more time must be dedicated to mastery and keeping up. High school students are faced with an increase of EAs available, and a wide breadth of participation can cause difficulties balancing one's schedule and responsibilities. Also, in some high SES areas, participating in EAs is viewed as a way of boosting up one's curriculum vitae rather than for intrinsic motivational reasons, thus losing the positive benefits of

engagement, school connectedness and motivation (Fredricks). However, none of these issues is relevant for elementary students choosing to participate in a school musical.

Farb and Matjasko (2012) surveyed 52 research studies on the effects of ECA participation between 2005 and 2009, and found three that examined overscheduling hypotheses: that by enrolling their children in too many activities, negative effects would be found in family time and well-being. However, none of those studies found data that significantly supported the theory.

One study, however, examined the effects of EA participation on first graders. Using a community sample of 761 children in first grade in Korea, Ju Hong et al. (2011) were able to demonstrate that students involved in more than four hours of daily extracurricular participation showed "a sharp increase in depressive symptoms as well as a decrease in the amount of time spent with caregivers" (p. 861). However, in this study, tutoring was considered an extracurricular activity.

The overscheduling theory has been refuted in a number of studies. For instance, Mahoney et al. (2006) found a positive relation between number of hours to improved academic achievement, school completion, access to postsecondary education, and psychological achievement. More research is needed in this area to define how overscheduling (if it exists) takes place, and how it can be avoided.

Adults' negative behavior. Smoll and Smith (1989) looked into the relation between coaches' behaviors and young players' reactions to them. It brought out the overlooked possibility that adults in charge of EAs can be over-stressed and model a variety of undesirable behaviors: being overly competitive or critical, coerciveness to participate, undue puninshment,

non-cooperative behaviors, nonreinforcement, etc. (Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003; Smoll & Smith, 1989).

Teachers overwhelmed. One final negative effect of school-based EAs affects not the students, but the teachers. With an already heavy burden, most teachers feel that they do not have the time or energy to dedicate to supervising EAs. One study in British Columbia found that more than 70 percent of high school teachers surveyed "found their workload unmanageable during the semester" (p. 6), and consequently teachers often do not take on any extracurricular activity supervision duties (Whitely & Richard, 2012).

The fact that few teachers agree to organize EAs has led to some independent, for-profit activities (dance instructors, Mad Science, etc.) to be proposed in schools during the lunch hour, at a cost. This can cause disadvantage and discrimination between high- and low-income families in terms of ease of access.

The difficulty in accessing additional preparation time to lighten the burden of running EAs is exactly the purpose of the proposal emitted with this project: extra time given by the school board so teachers could collaboratively delegate a variety of tasks, and the dilution of technical production work as well as volunteer demand and costs over several teaching institutions.

Conclusion

Participation is EAs is an encouraged part of most Canadian children's lives. Studies on the effects of participation have appeared more frequently over the last decades, and although some negative risks can be associated with very specific types of participation, it has been demonstrated that participation yields benefits beyond those specifically addressed by the nature of the activity. Academic and developmental benefits are positive side-effects of participation,

regardless of the type of learner involved, or the type of activity proposed. Although most studies performed to date have focused on adolescents, it is reasonable to assume that these benefits exist also for elementary-age children. The literature reviewed herein supports the thesis that providing more opportunities for extracurricular participation, in particular participation in a musical theatre production, will expose the participants to a wide variety of academic and developmental benefits. Ultimately, for the English Montreal School Board to support a proposal that will assist more schools in taking on a similar project would also be beneficial for the participants at those schools.

Part Two–The Production

This part of the project report will describe the process of producing the musical *The Aristocats, Kids* at Bancroft Elementary school. It will be divided in four sections: preproduction, production, performance week, and general reflections. Because this project aims to provide a road map for future productions, particularly for teachers and staff who may not have much experience in producing a musical, the narrative will contain not only anectodal records of the chronological process of this particular production, but also general advice on pitfalls to avoid and best practices. The advice is based on this particular production, and my experience producing ten shows so far in the course of my career.

Pre-production Phase

This phase is from the moment one makes the decision to produce a school musical to the start of rehearsals. It started in the Spring of 2012, and continued through the summer and first weeks of school.

School approval. Three areas of school governance need to approve a project of this size. The school administration (principal) must obviously give the green light, particularly because a school show needs to disrupt school activities. In the last two weeks, mass rehearsals and performances take place during school hours and students must be pulled out of class. The principal needs to pre-approve a minimal amount of substitution for at least one teacher to supervise these activities. The use of the facilities for rehearsals and performances needs to also be approved by the school administrator. In our case, the music room was used for rehearsals most of the year, but in the final month we started to use the gymnasium, where performances take place. This meant canceling or rescheduling soccer practices, as well as forewarning the MIND high school (with whom we share the building) that they would lose access to the gym for their physical education classes.

The governing board is the parent-teacher committee which must approve any fundraising activities in the school. Several fundraising activities took place for this production: the walk-o-thon in the fall which raised seed money for expenditures, the sale of tickets to performances and to the dinner-theatre, as well as sales of DVDs of the performances, of photos, and of t-shirt souvenirs. This approval was granted at the first meeting of the governing board in September.

Finally, the staff council is an advisory body made of teachers which must give its approval for class-time disruptions. For this production, disruptions occurred in the final two weeks. At Bancroft School, a handful of teachers has grown resentful of these disruptions over the years, and has threatened to convince the staff council to vote against the school musical. However, the staff council doesn't have actual authority, and a principal is entitled to go against

the advice of its council, if he or she can give a legitimate reason for doing so. For The Aristocats Kids, the staff council approved the project in June of 2012.

Choosing the script. Musical Theatre International (MTI) is a company in New York which holds the rights of performance for the majority of English-language plays and musicals worldwide. Over the last decade, they have developed a department (called "Broadway Junior") which takes movies (most usually by Disney) and musicals, and rewrites them for youth performers. These "showkits" are sold as a very convenient package which includes performers' scripts, a director's script, a piano-vocal score, a choreography DVD, and two CDs: one with just the orchestral accompaniment for performances, and one with voices of children singing all the scored parts, for rehearsals.

There are two types of packages: "Junior" musicals which are intended for high school performers and typically last 60 to 90 minutes. "Kids" musicals are intended for elementary school productions, and last 45 to 60 minutes. I have produced and directed both types of musicals at Bancroft Elementary. The disadvantage of the "Kids" shows is that they are overly simplified. They often offer only one verse and chorus per song, and complex plot twists are removed. The "Junior" shows, on the other hand, stay closer to the original versions, but require very good singers and actors at the elementary level. The dialogues for "Junior" shows can be quite lengthy.

MTI offers the possibility to order up to three musicals for perusal, which makes deciding on the best show to produce much easier.

Several elements must be taken into consideration when chosing which show to produce. How many male and female leads does the script call for, and does one expect to have enough talent for that many roles? How many different sets will be required, and are there enough

volunteers to create these different sets? Are the costumes complicated to put together, and if so will there be enough help to create them? How many props will be needed, and will those be difficult to come by? Are there lengthy musical numbers that will require choreography, and is there someone willing and able to tackle that task?

It is easy to underestimate how much time, money, and energy these elements will require. In my case, over the years, I have assembled a wonderful team of volunteers that have different areas of expertise. Having worked with them before, I also know how reliable they can be.

Finally, an important reason for choosing one musical over another is personal taste. As one should expect to spend close to one hundred hours in rehearsal, it will be much more bearable to do so with a show that features music and a story that one finds enjoyable. For this production, I chose The Aristocats Kids for several reasons: the jazzy score is fantastic, I have an amazing team of seamstresses that I knew could handle the very difficult task of making animal costumes, I have great carpenters that I knew could help build the walls needed to create the three sceneries the show calls for. Negative elements which I accepted to tolerate were: a ridiculous plotline, an anticlimactic ending and a short play.

Securing starter funds. From year to year, we always use whatever profits were made from the previous show as "seed money". As well, the principal authorizes a special account in what is known as "fund three", which is where monies from fundraising activities are kept. The understanding we have with the principal is that expenses will be incurred throughout the year, and receipts submitted for those expenses are reimbursed within a week by the secretary. The funds used are replenished by the various fundraising activities described above. For a school producing a show for the first time, I would advise to secure a commitment from the principal to

authorize a certain amount of spending. By calculating projected profits based on expected cast size, ticket price, and number of performances, it is possible to forecast at least one or two thousand dollars in income, which the principal should be willing to give access to, during the pre-production and production periods.

Summer scripts and CDs. I ordered the show kit from MTI at the end of May 2012. I made copies of the scripts and of the CD with sing-along voices. In June, I hosted an information meeting for the students over one lunch hour. I described the show, the lead roles, and sampled some of the songs for them. Those who were interested in auditioning for a lead role in September were given a script and CD package, regardless of my opinion as to whether or not they would be capable of performing a lead role.

In previous years, I held the auditions at the end of the school year, so that those playing lead roles could memorize their part over the summer. The major drawback to this is that when new students arrive in the fall, some could have been better cast in a lead role than the student to whom it was already assigned the previous June. This in particular happened for our production of *Alice in Wonderland* where a formidable young actress joined our school for grade 6. In the end, I allowed her to share the role of the Queen of Hearts, but that caused a minor storm of drama for the girl who had assumed since June that she alone would perform that role. The advantage to letting the students familiarize themselves with the script over the summer months is that many come with a lot of it memorized. Also, because most students are familiar with the songs by September, it makes the audition process more reliable: if the material is brand new to young auditionees, some of them hold back out of insecurity, thus clouding their real abilities.

Securing the necessary staff. In the very first days of the new school year, I sent home a letter to parents asking who would be interested in helping out with the production, and in what

manner. This allowed me to confirm which of my regular parents would be available this year, but also to discover a few new parents, with or without theatre experience. I passed this list on to Mrs. Roberts, my main parent volunteer. She contacts parents at various times of the year when different tasks are at hand.

I also took advantage of the first staff meeting to describe the musical, and our history of productions with the new staff members. Every year, new teachers will volunteer to help in a variety of ways. This year, one teacher with dance experience volunteered to help with choreography (Miss Maria) and another without theatre experience with the direction (Miss Corinne). We also formed a school play committee, which is responsible for advising me on scheduling rehearsals, organizing and running the dinner-theatre, as well as creating the programme and t-shirts. Six teachers volunteered to be on the play committee.

Over the years, I have had to personally take on some of those responsibilities, whenever I couldn't find volunteers to accomplish certain tasks. It goes without saying that unless one is willing to sacrifice costumes, props, or sets, the tasks can amount to a monumental time commitment. During my first musical production, ten years ago, I would arrive at school two hours before class and stay until the caretaker would close the school, around 8 p.m., for 6 weeks. I would advise new directors to err on the side of minimalism if they are short in help, at least for the first production.

Set design. Getting a set design ready early on is crucial. I have found that elementary school aged actors learn their parts faster and more efficiently when they are taught the actions that will accompany their lines as early as possible. That means that they should know exactly where they will enter from, how they will move, cross other actors on the stage, handle props, and exit. In order to do this, one must know well in advance of the first rehearsals what the stage

will look like. I drew sketches of the sets during the summer, so that I could mark my script with 'blocking' notes, ready for the first rehearsals ('blocking' means they physical stage directions).

The script for The Aristocats Kids calls for three sceneries: a Parisian well-off apartment, a country scene under a bridge, and a Parisian back alley scene. I planned for one set of flats to be permanently on the stage (back wall), with a set of double-sided flats to be hung on top of the back wall. They would be brought on with the country scene facing out, then to be flipped to reveal the alley scene on the other side. Our carpenter designed a system that locks the flats into place easily and safely. I also planned for a small kitchen area to the left of the stage, where some secondary scenes with the butler could take place.

Directors' meeting. Early in September, I met with my two assistants (Miss Maria and Miss Corinne) to discuss the production. We divided the script into eight scenes. We set up the weekly reahearsal schedule: Tuesdays at lunch for dogs (boys), Wednesdays at lunch for geese (Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten), Wednesdays after school for leads, and Thursdays at lunch for cats (girls). We left Mondays and Fridays open for impromptu rehearsals as needed, but also because holidays and professional development days tend to fall on those days, which would take away rehearsal time. We decided which dance numbers would be choreographed by whom, since our choreographer didn't want to commit to the full show. We also created a rehearsal schedule for the after school Wednesdays, so that each director could be working on different parts of the show simultaneously, with different actors. We found this task to be difficult because this particular show has a core of lead roles that are more or less in every scene. However, it was still possible, for at least 45 minutes per rehearsal, to have one or two singers with me working on music while a small group would work on choreography with Miss Maria, and the other actors would be practicing dialogues with Miss Corinne.

Production meeting. During the second week of September, I invited all available parent volunteers to come for a production meeting. Seven parents came, including Mrs. Roberts, my head volunteer. We went over the script and the technical demands of it. I was happy to find out that Mrs. Dias already had created sample costumes for the animals (leg-warmers and forearm-warmers made of fun-fur, accompanied by ears, and a tail on an elastic belt). We discussed my set designs and some ideas for construction. We chose a day for our parents' blitz in the spring (a Saturday where an army of parents who can't volunteer during school days come to help). We created a list of props that would be needed, and initial ideas for finding or making them (motorcycle, sleep potion bottle, pots and pans, serving tray, giant strips of fabric for the water in the drowning scene, etc.) We then went upstairs to a classroom that for several years now has been transformed into the "parents' room," and is where our volunteers gather to work. I introduced the new volunteers to the task binder. Whenever a job needs to be done, it is described on a separate sheet in the binder, with detailed instructions. As volunteers decide to tackle a particular job, they sign their names on that page to reserve the task.

The Production Phase

This section covers the work accomplished from the start of rehearsals (end of September) until the week of the performances. It has been divided in two chronological subsections: rehearsals with the students and production work.

Auditions and callbacks. At the end of September, we held the auditions for the fifteen lead roles. Twenty-six students from grades 2 to 6 came to the music room for the lunch hour auditions. Having worked with most of these students previously, I can admit that I already had a general idea of which student was likely to receive what role. As usual, however, there were surprises as some students came out of their shells more than in the past. The difficulty with this

production is that there are relatively few large roles, and I had more talented girls than needed. Four boys also stood out in their audition for the role of Edgar, the villain. Edgar, allergic to cats, must sneeze repeatedly on stage and I expected to find just one boy who could convincingly and comically perform a sneeze, but they were all hilariously frightening. We decided to poll the students for which roles they would like to have. This helped to guide us for a few roles that could have been assigned to several talented students (e.g., Duchess and Marie).

The next day we posted a list of students we needed for a callback audition. For this audition, I photocopied several dialogue excerpts from the script (p. 24, 42, and 46) to try and see the chemistry of different actors together. In particular, the combinations Madame and Edgar, as well as Duchess and Thomas O'Malley require actors that fit well together on stage. We posted the final cast list on the music room door the next day.

There was one case of tears from a grade 4 student who didn't get the part he was hoping for. In the end, Miss Corinne and I had to meet with this student and his father to explain why we had chosen to give him a different part than that which he expected.

The script calls for a group of alley cats which act as narrators for the play, and can be used during the scene changes. The script doesn't specify how many alley cats there should be. This was a difficult decision: on one hand the bigger the group, the stronger the singing and the stage presence. On the other hand, the bigger the group, the more difficult to manage the cast becomes at rehearsals. We chose to offer six students to be the alley cats.

First read-through. On October 3rd, we had our first after-school rehearsal, which was a read-through of the play. The students were very excited, and most of them impressed us with their singing, and how well they already knew large sections of their parts. Having had the scripts over the summer proved very helpful indeed. In all, with the leads and alley cats, there

were 17 students at our first read-through, and as mentioned above, it became clear that managing such a large group after school hours would prove to be a project-long struggle. We gave the students the deadline to be off-book (December 1st) and left 20 minutes at the end of the session for questions and suggestions. The three of us (directors) left energized and excited with the level of talent in the cast.

Including the preschool. I decided this year again to offer for the students in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten to participate in the play. In September, in a letter to parents about auditions, I mentioned that preschoolers would be able to participate, and that a sign-up form would be sent home later in the school year. The advantage of including those students is (aside from the benefits of participation for those students themselves) that they are a great source of revenue for the show. Apart from buying tickets to the performance, more preschoolers' parents tend to buy the DVD and other memorabilia than the parents of the elementary students. The disadvantage is that teaching a song and its choreography to students aged four and five is difficult and time-consuming, as rehearsals can only be done in small chunks, and easily become chaotic. Also, the process of getting students in and out of costumes and makeup, and managing their behavior backstage requires more than one adult. Finally, once on stage, most of the students in that age group freeze, or wave to their parents, few of them perform what was rehearsed. Personally, I have learned to accept this as 'cute' and to be a strength of the show.

Group rehearsals. My policy since the first show that I have directed at Bancroft school is that any student interested has to be allowed to participate in the show. I have never excluded any student for any reason, nor have I kicked someone out of a production. To accommodate students with less talent, less experience, or those that didn't get a lead role, I create three chorus

groups: girls, boys, and preschool. For this production, I chose for the boys to be the dogs, the girls to be the cats (both country cats and later the alley cats in the jazzy alley scene), and the preschoolers to be the geese that save the cats from drowning. The problem with this particular script is that it didn't containt a large singing number for dogs or the geese. I therefore had to create two extra numbers (and dialogues to introduce these numbers), one for each groups. For the dogs, I rewrote the lyrics of *I Wanna Be Like You* from *The Jungle Book*. Originally this song is sung by the monkeys who want to be like humans. In our production it was about stray dogs who want to have an owner and be a "good boy." For the geese, I rewrote the song *Zippa Dee Doodah* from *Alice in Wonderland*. Originally this song is about being a free spirit, I rewrote it to be a swimming lesson given by the geese to the cats.

Rehearsals for the dog and cat choruses began in November. Those rehearsals took place at the start of the lunch hour, for 30 minutes. Students came to the music room with their lunchboxes so they could be sent downstairs to eat immediately after the rehearsal. In other years, I let the students eat first but found that I often had to send for stragglers, or students trying to skip rehearsal altogether. I asked the resource teacher to go around five minutes before the start of the lunch hour to remind students, and usher them to the music room, because I still got a few defectors from time to time.

For the first few weeks of rehearsals, I also sent the following message with the morning announcements: "Today at lunch there will be a rehearsal for all the (girls) in the school who want to be in the show. If you would like to join the show but have missed previous rehearsals, it's not too late, just join us at the start of lunch in the music room with your lunchbox." I allowed for students to try rehearsals on a drop-in basis until December.

I dedicated the first half of the first two rehearsals to exploring physical acting games. I encouraged the students to create an individual dog or cat story for their character, and to come up with interesting ways to move like their respective animal. I then let the students hear their group number a few times and to sing along, with the words written on large posters.

The next four rehearsals focused on learning the songs. At 30 minutes per rehearsal, time is limited. I always began rehearsals by playing the sing-along version on the CD at least once. This allowed for the students to remember the lyrics, and to have an idea of what their singing should resemble. I would then use the piano-vocal score to go through specific areas of their songs which needed more work (difficult intervals, tuning, starting pitches, etc.) using the piano. At the end of each rehearsal, we would start adding the movement and choreography that would be required. Up to this point, only a third of the students had the songs fully memorized, which is normal in my experience.

Choreography. During the month of January, the focus shifted from musical direction to choreography. Over the years, I have found that unlike when directing teen or adult actors, it is not efficient to wait until the singing is perfectly polished and the lyrics memorized to move on to choreography. It is the actual movement, attached to particular lyrics, that helps the students remember the words. Some examples of lyric-driven choreography I created in this production:

- For “A square with a horn,” the cats point to the four corners of the room;
- For “Swimming makes for a beautiful day,” geese flap their hands like swimming at their sides;
- For “We wanna sit and stay, fetch and play,” dogs go down on one knee (‘sit’), hold one hand out (‘stay’), then pretend to throw a toy (‘fetch and play’);

- For “Plenty of sunshine heading my way,” geese make a large outward arc, then bring their hands back to their chests.

Another very important lesson I have learned about choreography is to make everyone’s part independent of other actors, and to make their place on the stage irrelevant. I have suffered many traumatic rehearsals trying to re-teach students who their partners or trios were, or how to move down and form a “V” shape on the stage, etc. With a large cast, inevitably, some students end up missing a performance, which can make complex, interconnected choreographies collapse. Therefore, I choreograph individual movements, simple hand gestures and very simple steps. If movement is required across the stage, all the students move the same way. I tell students “shorties in the front and tallies in the back” and reassure them that I don’t care if they’re not always at the same spot. Within a few rehearsals, students have a preferred area they naturally return to anyway.

Miss Maria created choreographies for the lead students. Those were more complex and involved crisscrossing, but they were taught to a smaller group, after school. She also helped to choreograph the dance solo in the dog number, and to come up with some of the moves used in the various group numbers. Mine is a different way of teaching choreography, and we had to meet often in the first weeks so I could explain this simplified method of independent choreographies. Unfortunately Miss Roberts often canceled her rehearsals at the last minute. This was a frustration for the students and myself.

The last two weeks of rehearsals must be reserved for students to get used to the actual stage. Choreography should be completed before then. In our production, this was the case for only some of the numbers. This meant sacrificing some of the time that should have been spent polishing and giving the actors time to enjoy running multiple numbers back to back, so that the

choreography could be fully learned. This frustrated the fast learners and more experienced actors in the cast, as well as myself. I found myself quite stressed about having to accept that there may be some "choreography gaps," moments on stage where the actors don't have any specific or synchronized movement. In the end, this did have to happen for a couple numbers ("Do, Re, Mi" & "The Butler Did It").

Some of the highlights of the choreography were the opening numbers where the alley cats and aristocats would take turns in frozen position while the other group danced around them mockingly, the alley scene where special ultraviolet lights were used to make phosphorescent paints glow (and thusly painted musical instruments), and the little geese number, even though as described above, many of the preschoolers in that number just stood on the stage, out of stage fright. Some of the least effective choreographies were certain sections of the dogs' number where the little boys didn't remember many of their moves.

After-school lead rehearsals. For the first few after-school rehearsals (after the read throughs), we tried our best to separate into three simultaneous rehearsals: music with me, dancing with Miss Maria, and dialogues with Miss Corinne. Even with this planning, some students were going to be left with nothing to do, therefore we created a schedule so that certain smaller roles only came to practice every other week (Abigail & Abby, Roquefort, Napoleon & Lafayette, Thomas O'Malley). This prevented having students with nothing to do misbehaving in the rehearsal rooms. It also takes some of the pressure of learning lines in front of many other students away from the actors.

We always started with a large number (opening or finale) and would share with all the other groups what we had worked on during the last twenty minutes of rehearsals. I like to keep the first month of rehearsals (October in this case) quite relaxed so the students can feel

comfortable with each other, and get to know my less "directorial" side. Creating this bond and attachment becomes crucial in the last weeks when it's all business.

During November and December, both my assistants Miss Corinne and Maria missed a majority of the rehearsals. Between illness, being away at workshops, or just feeling exhausted at the end of the teaching day, they often left me to cope with all the actors alone, or with just one assistant. Although frustrating, I did my best to take this in stride, and to work on numbers that required most of the cast.

I have worked with many assistants in the past, and I know that it can be frustrating for them to sometimes watch me direct without feeling fully utilized. I try to talk to my assistants as much as possible about this and to let them know how much their presence is appreciated, even if sometimes they end up acting as behavior managers more than as directors. I had a long chat about this with Miss Corinne, who felt a little out of her league having no theatre experience, and felt that she wasn't contributing much. I reassured her that having other adults around helps me greatly in feeling like I have support, especially in the months when the lead rehearsals become more stressful.

It is normal for the lead students to go through a "down" period about five weeks from performance. At this time, those who know their parts feel like they are being held back by the others, while the students that don't know their parts feel overwhelmed. I started most of the January rehearsals describing this process where it is normal to feel tired, fed up, and as if there is no light at the end of the tunnel. I reassured the students that as soon as they start using the stage, seeing the scenery and using the props, this feeling gets replaced with great excitement, and that they must push through this difficult phase.

One student gave me a particularly difficult time over those weeks, threatening to quit the show, making all sorts of excuses to not attend after school rehearsals. I often had to go downstairs at the end of the day to bring him up to the music room, all the while calling his mother on the phone to confirm that he should indeed attend rehearsal and walk home at five. Another student used the excuse of having to walk his little brother home to skip rehearsal, and I had to agree to let his little brother sit in through the rehearsal, giving him my classroom iPad as a distraction.

Another difficulty I encountered with this production was the discrepancy between very experienced actors and those who were taking on lead roles for the first time. My experienced students were extremely talented, and fast learners. They were able to be very silly and excited while waiting for their entry, then snap into character and focus almost instantly. This skill, however, set a precedent and the tone for the younger actors who would also fool around, but couldn't regain their focus when needed. It was a never-ending battle to try to calm my grade 6 students down, and remind them to respect the younger actors. This was particularly exacerbated at rehearsals where I found myself to be the only adult in attendance. I would come home from those rehearsals utterly drained, and feeling like my need to be a strong disciplinarian was damaging the attachment some students had to me, thus their willingness to put on their best efforts during rehearsal, creating a self-reinforcing cycle.

Including student with exceptionalities. As inclusive schools, we aim to find ways to include students with exceptionalities, and extracurricular activities must mirror this inclusive attitude. I made sure it was clear to every student that if they wished to participate in the play, they would be welcome to. This meant tolerating certain things in rehearsals: lack of concentration, noise making, echolalia, creating an adapted choreography when needed, working

with a childcare worker assigned to a student with autism. In previous years, one childcare worker had to stay on stage with her assigned student, and we came up with a fitting costume for her to be more or less inconspicuous among the cast. The mother of one student this year told me that she saw her son (who suffers from Asperger's disorder) pinching other students on stage and trying to start a fight during a song. In the end, these situations must be taken with a grain of salt, and I try to focus on the benefit of participating for these students versus the damage they might do to my choreographies or directing.

In this particular production, I had students with a variety of exceptionalities in the cast: mild and moderate learning disabilities, developmental delays, attention deficit hyperactive disorder, autism, Asperger's disorder and oppositional defiant disorder. Some of the difficulties I encountered were students having a difficult time learning the songs or doing both singing and dancing simultaneously, interruptions during rehearsals, the need to discipline some students more often than other.

Preschool rehearsals. One of the challenges when rehearsing with our school's preschoolers was that their lunch hour started fifteen minutes earlier, so they had to eat before rehearsing. I made arrangements with the daycare and lunch monitors to have help supervising the little ones, and asked several of my grade 6 girls to come along to help teach the song, and manage the behavior at the first rehearsal (at the start of January). I asked that all the students in preschool attend the first two rehearsals, while a letter was sent to parents for them to give confirmation that they wanted their child to participate in the show, and send their 10$ contribution to the production. After those two weeks, we had a list of the preschoolers that came to rehearsals, while the others were sent to play. A vast majority of them were in the show.

Because so many preschoolers joined the production, and because it is demanding for such young performers to come to school and stay up late on two evenings, I divided the preschoolers in two groups. The students from one pre-kindergarten and one kindergarten classes were to perform on the Tuesday morning and evening shows, while the students from the other pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classes would perform on the Thursday morning and evening show. This also allowed for a smaller, more manageable group on stage at once.

After the first two rehearsals in the music room, we started using the space in the gymnasium. I would have the Tuesday kids sit in one circle, and the Thursday kids in another. They would take turns on stage practicing. Those students have a very short attention span, so I would often have to break up any learning tasks with small, physical games like Simon Says, pretending to be geese, etc. They struggled with the concept of spreading out on stage, as is typical for this age group. If too many went Stage Left and I tried to get some of them to move right, the entire group would move Stage Right, and vice versa. I was grateful to have adults and my grade 6 helpers along to laugh about these challenges.

Rehearsing in the gymnasium. Starting January 14th, we started holding all our rehearsals in the gymnasium, where the stage would ultimately be assembled. I used painter's tape on the floor to delineate the edges of a virtual stage, and where students would be able to stand in the "wings," waiting for their entrance. This gave the students some time to get an idea of how far they could travel in choreographies, and also to get used to lining up silently before chorus numbers.

The disadvantage to rehearsing in the gymnasium, is that it is very echo and makes every distraction more noticeable. We also had to set up and take down a mini sound system to play the accompaniment CD. Also, this caused a rescheduling of the indoor soccer practices. I

discussed this with the coach ahead of time, and he agreed not to have practices on the days we rehearsed. During the fall, there were several occasions when boys or girls in the chorus skipped rehearsals in favour of playing soccer. During after-school lead rehearsals, the students had much more room to scatter, which lead to a lot of stress for me. In the end, I started taking out the gym mattresses, and assigned each student to one, scattered about the gym. The instruction was to be either on stage or on their mattress, reading or watching the rehearsal. Still, there was a lot of traveling, visiting, chatting, and disciplining from me.

First week on stage. On February 4th, following the parents' blitz, the students started having rehearsals on the stage, in the gymnasium. This marked the start of the excitement phase, in which students, rather than having to be chased down to come to rehearsal, started asking for more opportunities to rehearse.

At the start of that week, most of the scenes were where they needed to be, according to my planning. The leads for the most parts had their parts completely memorized, and were starting to work on details of timing and using the space. A few lead scenes were behind in blocking: the kitchen scenes, the drowning scene, and the scene using a trap door on stage. The dogs had covered all of their choreographies, but somehow struggled when putting singing and dancing together (this would continue into the actual performances). The girls, having two dance numbers, needed a little extra work to finish polishing the choreography.

During that week, I started holding class time rehearsals, during some of my spare periods. A notice with the last two weeks' schedule had gone to teachers in December, letting them know well in advance when I would be pulling students from class. By this point, the lunch time thirty-minute rehearsals were not enough, as I needed to run rehearsals for more extended periods. I had extra rehearsals on Mondays and Wednesdays until recess. On

Tuesdays and Thursdays, when I have a spare period right after lunch, I started rehearsals at 12:30 and went until 1:30. I worked with various groups at those times, as per the schedule sent to the teachers. It was interesting to note that although the girls were highly motivated and would express their disappointment when it was time to stop, the boys generally lost their focus after forty minutes of rehearsing, and really resented having to repeat any section of a song more than two or three times. The younger boys were particularly affected by this.

During that week, I insisted on starting to use all props and costumes that would need timed manipulation (water, motorcycle, fur coats, kitchen items, potion bottle, and milk bowl with serving tray.) Aside from learning how to manipulate these items perfectly, students also had to learn where to store them backstage, often having to hand an item to someone else, or receiving it from someone else. All these technical details required time, and while we smoothed out those wrinkles, the other actors had time to become restless. We had to spend a particularly long time creating convincing movement for our tricked trunk and trap door escape. Although fun to watch for the rest of the cast, the actors involved complained of having to redo over and over the same actions, and of the awkward contortions needed to get out of the back of the trunk through the trap door.

I wrote a note to the parents of lead students asking for extra after-school rehearsals for the next two Thursdays, feeling that the leads still required quite a bit of polish work. I also wanted those extra two rehearsals as buffers in case something went wrong (a student ill, a catastrophic rehearsal, etc.)

Last week of rehearsals. Again, during that week, I needed to run rehearsals during my spare hours, with the addition of an all-morning Friday full run of the show. I had a list of

various elements to cover, and every minute counted. By this point I felt very exhausted, while the students were very excited.

On the Tuesday and Thursday extended lunch rehearsals, the boys and girl choruses were together for the first time in the production. It was their chance to see each other's numbers, to encourage each other, but also to start to get a feel for how the different numbers fit together. They were surprisingly well-behaved, perhaps from being impressed with one another.

On the Wednesday, we had our first rehearsal with the entire cast, including the geese (preschoolers). The geese got to hear the dialogue and song that preceded their entrance, and showcased their number to the rest of the cast. We also worked on the very last number of the show, which is a reprise of "*Everybody Wants to Be a Cat*," previously sung by the girls' group. The other geese and dogs had been given a small amount of training on that number, but I have learned that by the time the entire cast re-enters the stage, the sheer number of them is spectacle enough, and not to stress with attempting to teach an elaborate choreography. With the leads on the floor in front of the stage, the girls upstage, and little geese downstage, there was no room for the dogs, who had to stand on the floor on either sides of the stage.

At the Wednesday after-school rehearsal, the students thoroughly struggled to keep their focus. It was a very frustrating afternoon where we would repeat items previously mastered, and the amount of talking and fooling around backstage paralyzed progress continuously. Students were playing in the storage room in between scenes (thus missing their entrances), climbing the ladders along the gym wall, or going out of the gym altogether. Because the back wall of the stage was so tall, I had no way of knowing what was happening behind the stage. Miss Corinne had the job of supervising the backstage area while getting used to managing the entrances, and she found the experience very frustrating. So much so that the next day, she told me she would

not be staying again that afternoon. I made a long speech to the actors at the end of practice about the need to view participation as "work" and not "a party", and that being backstage was work too: concentrating on their next scene, staying in character, working on being silent and listening to what is happening on stage, etc.

That Thursday, Miss Maria was supposed to stay to help with the backstage business, but she was nowhere to be found (she eventually arrived for the last ten minutes of the rehearsal). Fifteen minutes into the rehearsal, behavior was continuing to worsen, until I reached a breaking point. I had brought cheese and crackers for the students to eat (guessing that part of the reason for the bad behavior the previous day may have been empty stomachs), and within one minute of me trying to fix a problem backstage, the crackers and cheese sticks were flying around the room. I shouted at the offending students, only to see my grade 6 girls rolling their eyes at me and sharing a giggle. At that point I looked around and said "Ok, I'm done, that's it." There was a very long silence in the gym (at last), and I milked that silence, while trying to figure out how to proceed. I told the students that I wasn't able to both direct and babysit at the same time, and since their safety was my first concern, I would babysit. I sat down and told them I was either going to spend an afternoon furious, or I would accept to not polish certain details in the show, and that I refused to let myself be furious. We therefore spent the next hour or so in a much calmer state where no one was allowed backstage, and I would only fix problem areas in the show when everyone was silent and attentive. When the fooling around would restart, I would simply stop directing and wait until they calmed themselves down. I came home feeling low, somewhat demotivated, but nonetheless happy that I chose not to let the afternoon disintegrate further than it had.

On the Friday morning, I had a booked substitute teacher to take over my teaching while we had a full run with the entire cast in the gym. We made sure that Miss Corinne and Miss Maria were at their post backstage through internal substitutions also. We had several interruptions to fix small problems, or when students forgot critical movements or lines. We still had 45 minutes left at the end to work on the final number and the bows.

Production Work

This section will describe the behind-the-scenes work done over the course of those same months, leading up to the performance week.

Reserving sound and lighting equipment. We used wireless headset microphones for the lead roles, which we rented out from Steve's Music. I have found over the years that it is best to make these reservations early on, to make sure they are available. Knowing we would be using a ten-track sound console, I decided to rent twelve headset microphones. The school has its own console and speaker system, but if they could have had to be rented as well. I also rented a professional DJ CD player, because they cue-up much faster, and in this production there were a few areas where quick cues were needed.

The lighting for our production was provided by a parent. This was the first time we embarked on having lighting. The equipment was rented from Solotech, and was quite inexpensive ($300). As with sound, however, I would advise making these arrangements early on. The system we installed was made up of two tripod towers, each holding a rack of eight spots, connected to a simple dimming control console. We also rented a follow-spot, which we installed at the back of the room on a tall table.

The parent volunteers room. As outlined earlier, we have dedicated an unused classroom to our parent volunteers. With profits from previous productions, I have furnished the

room with a coffee maker, a sewing machine, a radio, and all the art supplies the parents ask for. Our main volunteer, Mrs. Roberts, typically comes one day per week, to continue the work, but also to supervise other parents who may not have as much initiative or experience as her.

I made sure to drop in every Monday to see how things were going, and to answer Mrs. Roberts' questions. Over the years, we have developed a fun camaraderie, and we work well together. I make a point of expressing my gratitude for her work (and all the other volunteers present) every visit.

Costumes. For this production, the main task was going to be the animal costumes. Mrs. Roberts created prototypes of leg and arm warmers, sewn with elastic bands so they could fit children of any size. For the ears, we already owned 100 headbands with ears, purchased for our production of *101 Dalmatians*, and the volunteers decided to simply change the fur on them for variety, and size (small and pointy for cats, large and droopy for dogs). We already had tails from the monkeys and elephants in *The Jungle Book*, and the parents chose to re-cover the majority of them.

A letter was sent home to parents explaining what "costume basics" they would need to provide. This was the clothing to be worn under the costume accessories sewn by our volunteers. For dogs (boys), we asked for black, brown, or grey pants and long sleeved shirts. For cats (girls), we asked for black, brown, grey, or animal-print tops and bottoms, with a white top underneath, which would glow under the ultraviolet lighting used in the back alley scene. For the geese (preschoolers), we asked for white tops and bottoms. We told the parents that shoes were irrelevant (only the front row of audience can see the students' feet), but plain coloured shoes would be better than sneakers, if they owned some. These items were to be sent

to the school, labeled, in a plastic bag also labeled, by February 1st. The resource teacher agreed to collect these bags in three different boxes as they arrived.

What we needed was fur, and a lot of it. I found a parent willing to go around asking fabric stores for a special deal for our inner-city school. She managed to get fur in many colours at a discounted rate, sold by the pound. I stayed after school the day of their delivery to lay them all out by colour in the parents' room so that the ladies would be surprised when they walked in the next Monday. They were indeed very impressed and energized.

Parent volunteers. One of the struggles this year was a much smaller number of parents who actually came to help Mrs. Roberts in the parents' room. In previous years, she had developed a great friendship with another mother through volunteering on our shows, but this mother had returned with her family to her native Chile. This year, although parents would claim they intended to come volunteer, Mrs. Dias was often alone, and this was difficult for her. I attempted to get some new parents to come and volunteer, but with the time demands of my other duties, I could only dedicate a few scattered attempts every few weeks.

One other parent was very helpful creatively. She had great ideas for the geese costumes: a sailor's hat and white felt tie for the boys, and a bonnet and apron for the girls. With orange felt, she made elastic-banded legs and simple beaks that looked great. She committed to making most of the props, but because of repeated illnesses, she was able to come volunteer far less than she had anticipated. This resulted in having to scramble in the last weeks to either create those items myself (water), reuse previously built items (potion bottle, cookware), or ask another parent to take over the task (motorcycle). Some of the legs and beaks were completed the day before the first performance, with the help of another parent.

Getting materials. I gave my regular volunteers permission to make any purchases (within reason) they needed, with the instruction that the receipts needed to be submitted to me for quick reimbursement. None of the volunteers abused this system, and it freed them from having to check with me and return to the stores for items they needed. Some of those purchases were makeup, sewing supplies, coffee supplies, paints, masks, elastics, etc. I also kept a sheet of paper posted in the parents' room for "supplies wish-list," which I would go shopping for every few weeks. This included more expensive items like carpentry supplies, glue, paints, fluorescent paints, etc. For cardboard, I have a relationship with a wholesale box manufacturer. Every Spring, I call this company and ask for a shipment of large sheets of cardboard, which they donate to the school, with free delivery. We used the cardboard for a variety of props and decorations.

Set design. A parent, who has previously done some graphic design work for our school, approached me in September and offered to create our set drawings. I was happy and relieved to let him tackle the task of searching through the original movie for various images that could be replicated for our sets. I gave him a deadline of early January to provide initial sketches for approval. On January 10th, we met to look over his drawings. The country and back alley scenes were excellent, and I told him that they didn't need any changes. The apartment scene, however, was drawn with the horizon line at an angle, which he felt would give our stage an illusion of depth. He had also included a piano in the drawing, but I already had a parent dedicated to making a large piano out of cardboard. I politely asked him if he would draw another, simpler design, which he agreed to. I received the final sketches and approved the new apartment scene January 15th.

Permission forms and contributions to the show. In January, we started collecting permission forms, along with the parents' required $10 contribution to the show. We asked a student teacher to be in charge of marking down the names of those who had brought back their form and contribution on a school students list. As we were just starting rehearsals for the preschoolers, we also sent the lyrics of the geese song to these families. In the third week of January, we sent a reminder notice to those coming to rehearsals that had not paid yet. Some families wrote in, asking for a waiver of the contribution, citing financial difficulties, and we accepted. Some families end up never paying, in spite of reminders, and we tolerate that as well. Because of this, our cast list remains vague until a month before the show, which is inconvenient to our costume volunteers, not knowing how many costumes precisely will be needed until late into production. In the end, we had 111 students in the cast, with 97 students who actually paid their contribution.

Building the sets. We used a set of platforms, built years ago, to create the stage. We also had a set of flats (walls) which we used in last year's production of *The Pirates of Penzance*. They were covered in cardboard, on which a large printed banner was installed. This year, however, I asked that we replace the cardboard with thin plywood so that these flats could be reuseable, only needing to be repainted year after year. As described earlier, I also asked for a second set of lighter flats to create the second and third scenes.

Our main carpenter volunteer came up with a design with a lip overhanging the back flats so the second flats could be simply slid into place, locked safely in place by the lip and their own weight. I asked for these walls to be completed the week before our volunteer blitz, so that I could trace the scenery outlines onto them.

With the principal's permission, we claimed a large area of the school's main floor, an area usually unused except for indoor recesses. Two volunteers spent one and a half days building the new flats and recovering the old ones. My main carpenter volunteer has experience working on movie sets, so I trust his abilities completely. However, he is a perfectionist and works very slowly. He continued to come many morning in the third week of January to push forward little jobs. Meanwhile, I was getting pressure from the principal to liberate the area.

On January 28th, I applied a coat of primer to the three sides of flats. I brought down a projector and laptop, and projected the images of each scene onto their respective flats, which I propped up side to side. I traced each scene using wax crayons (pencils run out and need sharpening too often). After tracing all the lines from our designer, I used his coloured design to assign a colour-number to each area. I kept a master guide of what numbers represented what colours, regardless of the scene. For example, number six stood for brown, regardless of whether it was a brown object in the apartment, country or alley. There were 30 colours in total. This process took five hours, with some help. The single-sided flats had warped (we knew this would be fixed once they were screwed together) but this meant that straight lines in the original design were being traced slightly crooked here and there.

The parents' blitz. On February second, we held our annual parents' blitz from ten until four. This is advertised as an opportunity for parents who want to volunteer (especially those who can not during school hours) to come and contribute to the production. This year, the main task was to paint colours onto the designs on the flats. I had already bought all the necessary paints, and set up the lunchroom with the help of grade 6 students with a paint center, and all the flats laid out on tables in the very large space.

As volunteers arrived, I assign them a particular colour number, and instruct them to go around the lunchroom looking for their number on the various flats. If a colour required mixing (beige, dark grey, light grey, etc.) I mixed one large batch that I expected would suffice to cover the all areas in all the scenes. Some colours were assigned to more than person, for example dark grey was done by two entire families.

At eleven, we counted the volunteers and I ordered pizza and drinks for all those present, to be reimbursed by the show budget.

At twelve-thirty, we began to flip the finished flats of the country scene to begin work on the alley scene. At the same time, the finished walls of the apartment started to be brought into the gym, where the stage boxes had been brought earlier, ready for the actual assembly. The set designer had also arrived, and started to assign some fine-detail work to our adult volunteers. Throughout the day, Mrs. Roberts worked upstairs on costumes with her visiting sister, and a few hand-picked volunteers. In all, we had thirty-five volunteers during the course of the day.

The play committee. The play committee is an advisory body made up of teachers from the school. It was created two years ago, to help manage the situation of certain teachers opposed to our extracurricular activity interfering with class time. By giving the option for teachers to help in the administrative decisions, it forced those who complained most to either join the committee and help find solutions to various problems, or complain in silence. The committee met at the start of the year, when I presented my needs in terms of class-time rehearsals. By looking at the schedule, we produced the least disruptive schedule possible.

The play committee also manages the night performance supervision. Contractually, each teacher is obligated to work three evenings over the course of the school year, the dates of which are at the discretion of the principal. Our principal assigns one of those evenings to

performances of the play, which means half the teachers help to supervise the change rooms on the Tuesday night performance, the other half on the Thursday. Creating that schedule is always a source of conflict, and I was happy to delegate these "dramas" to the committee.

The play committee also creates the programme for the play, and I was happy to work with the same teacher as in previous years. She only met with me a few times, and created a beautiful programme.

Finally, the play committee oversees the running of our dinner theatre. They preordered lasagna from a caterer (Elios), purchased table decorations, made arrangement with a parent that has a catering business to borrow table cloths, cutlery, and dinnerware, and purchased wine, salad and garlic bread. The committee also seeked parent volunteers to donate a variety of desserts so that a "dessert bar" bar could be presented at the end of the meal, with coffee and tea donated by Tim Horton's. The set up of the dining room (with decorations and tasteful mood lighting) was done by the members of the play committee on the Thursday afternoon.

Set changes. My design for the removable flats called for relatively thin (and thinly covered) flats, so they could be lightweight enough for the actors to perform the scene changes themselves. Unfortunately, our main carpenter insisted on making them with a thick frame, to make sure the flats wouldn't warp, and would perfectly align on the stage. This resulted in six very heavy flats, four feet wide by ten feet tall. It became clear early on in their construction that it wouldn't be safe for children to be moving these about, so I needed to find stage hands willing to perform the five scene changes called for by the script.

I decided to try to recruit high school students from the top floor of our building. I met with the head teacher there in late January, who gave me a time to come and speak to the students, which I did. I left a sign-up sheet in their hallway, complete with all the time

commitment this job would require. I needed to have stage hands who could come to all four performances, plus one training session on the morning of the first performance. In the end three students signed up. On Friday February 15th, I went upstairs and found one of those who had volunteered, and asked him to remind the others of our training session early February 19th.

Additionally, I asked two male childcare workers if they would help with this task, since they were planning on attending all performances. Our principal also recruited her daughter's help, as she would be on reading week from Concordia University on those days.

Performance Week

This section covers the week of February 18th until the 23rd.

Monday February 18th. I began the day by going early to Steve's Music to pick up the microphones and CD player. This is a time-consuming process, as every component gets checked before being released, so I arrived thirty minutes early to be first in line.

That Monday was a non-teaching day, which meant I didn't need to book a substitute for the morning, in order to have time to install the sound system. On the other hand, it meant that the students weren't at the school to practice with the microphones in the afternoon, and would have to learn "on the go" during the next day's morning performance.

When I arrived at the school, one of the childcare workers helped me to unload the material, and install it in the gymnasium. It's a lengthy process, partly because there are no outlets in the back of the gymnasium, so a tangled mess of extension cords and power bars had to be created to feed all the individual components (12 receivers, sound console, CD player, light, light board console, lighting, handset microphone receivers, and speakers).

After having proceeded to a sound check and setting levels on the board, we created the curtain system which blocks the view of the backstage from the audience. This was far more

time consuming than I had expected, requiring some clever arranging, especially for the area where the piano, chair and trunk props needed to come on and off the stage for the apartment scene.

I also needed to finish painting the Paris scenery in the window of the apartment. I had asked a friend of mine, a former parent and well-known Montreal artist to drop by and do a quick sketch for us. This artist helped design our sets of *Alice in Wonderland*. Unfortunately, although we held out on the window painting as long as we could, he wasn't able to make it, so I drew a scene myself and painted it that afternoon.

Tuesday February 19th. I began the morning with a final tour of the backstage area, making sure all the props and costumes involved in changes were in place. We also installed flashlights along the back of the flats, in anticipation of the darkness that would reside there during the evening performances.

I had asked my high school set movers to meet me at nine, but only one student came. By nine-fifteen, it was clear that the others wouldn't come, and we needed to run our training of the set changes. I had come up with a very specific way to stack the flats so that three pairs of helpers could each have two flats to move. We practiced a full set change once, including reversing the country scene into the alley scene. This allowed us to discover little problems with my system, and in the best way to handle the flats.

While this training took place, students arrived at the school and were sent to their change rooms after attendance was taken. That also meant that some teachers sent their non-performing students to another class for supervision, so they could be free to go supervise the change rooms. The staff lounge was the change room for boys, the music room was the change room for girls, the library and upstairs bathrooms were the change rooms for the leads, and the preschool

teachers kept their students in their rooms to change. The supervising teachers were chosen based on which night they would supervise the change rooms: they worked on the same morning, knowing that on the Thursday they would switch supervision of the non-performers with the teacher to whom they had sent their non-performers.

As the students were ready into their costumes, they came down to wait in what we call the "senior lobby" which is a very large empty room North of the school entrance. It is furnished with benches and is close enough to the gym that groups can be called in within thirty seconds, but far removed enough that any noise in this room can't be heard in the gymnasium. The doors of the gymnasium needed to stay open, becasue they make distracting sounds as they open and close. The lead students also waited in the senior lobby for me to bring the tub containing all the headset microphones.

The cat chorus had a costume change between their country scene and the alley scene, for which they became "funky" cats, with mismatched coloured fur and prints. They had the additional task of bringing down their funky cat costume in a labeled bag down to the senior lobby where they could change arms, legs, ears, and tails, and take off their top shirt to reveal the white shirt already worn underneath. We also had to make sure before every performance that the cardboard musical instruments for the alley scene were in place in the senior lobby.

At ten-thirty, we were ready for the first performance of the run. We were performing for all the non-performing students of Bancroft school. I spoke briefly to the audience to explain that, although we would try our best to run the show uninterrupted, since we hadn't practiced since the Friday before, and because it was the first time we used the microphones, it was likely that we would have to stop a few times.

The performance took place and went well. Miss Maria was at her post backstage supervising the entrances and exits of the leads, and making sure everyone stayed silent. Miss Corinne was at the other end of the backstage, and gave cues to the stage hands for the scene changes, as well as giving instructions to a runner (we used a different runner for every performance) to go to the senior lobby to get the choruses so they could line up behind the stage in time for their entrances.

We experienced some problems with the microphones. Each microphone broadcasts on a different frequency, preprogrammed by Steve's Music. However, because we were using twelve different microphones, some of the frequencies were very close to each other, causing interferences. Some of the students moved the pop filters of their microphones, in spite of my warnings about this, resulting in some loud pops on plosive consonants. Finally, as I discovered later, some microphones had a feature called "squelch" turned on, which automatically turns off microphones when they are out of reach. This, however, resulted in noise created in microphones that sat on nearby frequencies. I managed these problems by minimizing the use of the offending microphones, going as far as turning off the channel dedicated to the actor playing Edgar entirely.

The set changes turned out to be even slower than expected, and I was glad to have prepared a lengthy track of music just in case. I decided to cancel two quick set changes towards the end of the play where the action is supposed to briefly move from the apartment back to the alley, and return to the apartment. We simply kept the apartment scenery up, but that resulted in a problem with the trap door at the end of the show, because the trunk that was to be placed in front of it during the scene change wasn't brought there. It was a funny mistake resulting in a ruined "surprise" when the kidnapped cats reappeared through the trap door.

After the show, several staff members stayed in the gym with digital cameras for our first photo shoot. We sent the girls upstairs to change, expecting to take their photos on the Thursday morning, to minimize the time needed to take all the photos. We took the photos of the preschoolers first, followed by the leads and the dogs. I reminded all the photographers not to discard their photos as I would ask them ultimately to upload their photos onto my laptop. The collection of all the photos taken, including action shots from the performances, would be sold to parents in the weeks following the production.

In order to reduce his costs, our parent who organized the lighting decided to set up the lights on the Tuesday afternoon. I had booked a substitute to watch my students so that I could be on hand to help with the lighting set up. He arrived at one and we finished around three.

Unlike the morning performance, where the audience sat on the gymnasium floor, we needed to set up chairs. This was a labour-intensive task as chairs needed to be brought in from various areas of the school (storage in the basement, library, computer lab, resource room, etc.). We always ask the grade 6 class to do this, but with the set up of the lighting, we had to hold out until the last minute, and to work around the lighting set up, as final adjustments were being made.

Finally, I needed to place reserved signs on chairs in the front rows for various guests and volunteers that had donated many hours to the show. I rushed home for a quick meal, to walk the dog and to get dressed for the show.

Two volunteers helped with the lighting that night: one to operate the lighting board, the other the follow-spot. Because I knew these men wouldn't be familiar with the script and be able to anticipate what lighting would be needed, I had created a master script in which every desired lighting cue received a cue number and instruction. I then created a list for each operator. An

example from the follow spot cues would be "Cue 7 – On Edgar from Stage Left, in Red; Cue 8 – Off." An example from the lighting console cues would be "Cue 12 – Dim apartment 50%, over 10 seconds." Even with this organized system, we needed to run a cue-to-cue rehearsal to make sure every cue was understood. We locked ourselves into the gym at five-fifty and took twenty minutes to do that.

The students were told to get to the school by six o'clock, and report to their change rooms immediately. The makeup was added to the preparation routine for the first time that night, except for the geese, who didn't need makeup since they already wore an orange beak. As soon as they were done changing into their costumes, students reported to the art room where several volunteers were stationed. The dogs had their noses blackened and whiskers drawn on. The cats had a variety of more complex, full-face makeup applied. Various leads had custom make up, designed by our head volunteer.

The performance that night went very well. We had 240 parents in attendance, almost a full house. All of the children performed flawlessly, and the audience was very enthusiastic about the show. We ran into a few technical difficulties with the microphones once again. I had to juggle several tasks at once: turning microphone channels on and off, adjusting channel levels, starting and stopping the accompaniment CD (and switching CDs for the additional numbers and scene change music), turn the pages of my script, call the stand-by and cue numbers to the two lighting operators on either side of me, and conduct the cast during the tempo-sensitive sections of the musical numbers. Needless to say, with microphone problems to solve on the fly, I had some difficulties but I somehow managed to pull it off.

Wednesday February 20th. I have spare periods at the start of Wednesdays in my regular schedule, so I took this opportunity to quickly return to Steve's Music to exchange two microphones that were particularly problematic.

The rest of the day was fairly normal, and was an opportunity to relax before the final day. I met with the teachers on the play committee to make sure the preparations for the dinner theatre were going well. One teacher went to get the catering materials from a parent's house.

Thursday February 21st. The morning set-up process went very smoothly, now that our young actors had already experienced the dressing process. This was also facilitated by the fact that we didn't use makeup for the morning performance. We also decided not to bother removing the chairs for the morning performance, contrary to other years when we needed to, since we could fit more visitors by having them sit on the floor.

Three schools had responded favourably to our principal's invitation to the performance: Nesbitt, St-Monica's and Coronation. They each sent approximately sixty elementary school students. Unfortunately, a winter storm blew in that morning, which delayed the arrival of one school quite a bit, forcing the students to sit around in their costumes.

The morning performance went extremely well. In my experience, the third performance is usually the least polished: the students are exhausted, and performing for peers from other schools is less exciting than performing for their parents. Typically students hold back, and lots of choreography and blocking errors are made. This year, however, the students were excellent, and our sound problems were much less significant. We did not use lighting for this performance (except for the ultraviolet lights in the back alley scene) since anyway with the daylight coming in from the large windows in the gymnasium, the effects of the lights would have been minimal, and the two operators were at work.

We held our second photoshoot at the end of the performance, for the second group of preschoolers and the cats, while the leads and dogs went upstairs to change, having had their photos taken on the Tuesday.

At the start of lunch, the play committee started to tackle a variety of tasks for that night's dinner theatre, such as organizing what to do with their students while they prepared the dining room and the food. I tried to stay out of the way, but still within reach should my help be needed.

As of the previous Friday, 55 tickets to the dinner theatre had been sold, at a cost of $25 each. I nonetheless advised the teachers on the committee to plan for 80 meals, knowing that last minute orders would come in, as well as parents claiming to have sent an order in, but without tickets, based on previous experience. When I came down to the dining room, I discovered that the teachers didn't follow this advice, and only set up 58 seats. I tried to explain that even if we only had 55 guests as the ticket sales showed, some groups of three or four patrons wouldn't want to be separated, and that we needed to furnish many more seats. This led to some frustration on their part, and they stubbornly left the room, claiming that it would be fine.

The principal was privy to this conversation and she was of the same opinion as me: better to have too many seats than not enough. The two of us therefore proceeded to get some larger tables to replace smaller ones, and expanded the dining room to accommodate 78 seats. We also prepped glasses, utensils, and water for these extra places.

In the end, as I expected, several people arrived asking to buy tickets at the door, and in fact, we had one parent not able to sit with his family, and who decided to help with the service instead of sitting down to eat with strangers. We served 75 meals that night.

The final performance was most excellent. The students remembered all their lines, and gave their best performances. I was very happy with my own work as well, having more or less tamed the beast that was the sound system. Students stayed late with their parents, and had their pictures taken on the stage. I made sure all the leads gave their microphones back to the stage hands before leaving the gymnasium, something I learned the hard way when one year, one student absentmindedly brought his microphone home.

After the show. I spent an hour with two friends packing all the sound equipment back so that I could return it to Steve's Music the next morning. The lighting was removed by our parent volunteers the next afternoon. The stage was taken down the following Monday by a group of parents. It is impressive how quickly a stage can be disassembled in comparison to all the hours required to put it together. All the props and costumes were returned to the parents' room, and Mrs. Roberts spent a few hours in the weeks ahead putting everything back to her liking.

General Reflections

The process of writing this report has caused me to appreciate how very time and energy-consuming this project was. In the myopic goings-on of day to day and week to week planning, I don't think I appreciated how daunting this task could seem to an outsider. Indeed, a residual sense of pride with myself, the cast and the crew of volunteers has taken me over. The questions my reflections will cover are motivated by the penultimate purpose of this project: to attempt to get more schools (should the proposal be approved) to offer musical theatre productions to their students as extracurricular activities.

The literature review clearly demonstrated that there is a wide range of benefits that can be expected from offering extracurricular activities such as musical productions. The questions

that remain can be summed up with the following: Is the drama worth the drama? In other words, in my opinion, do I think that all the work, headaches and stress were worth the benefits for the participants? Another question for the proposal would be: what kind of team should a school be sure to have minimally, to assure the success of such a production? Benefits that extend beyond the students will be explored, as well as thoughts that relate to the literature reviewed earlier.

Is the drama worth the drama? I have intentionally waited to answer this question until at least a month had passed after the performances. Certainly, in the midst of performance week, under the burden of exhaustion (I was still teaching my regular classes at this time), and based on several volunteers' opinions at the time, I would have answered negatively to the question. Producing a musical in a school context is draining, and the countless "dramas" (teachers upset, costumes breaking, microphone problems, finding volunteers to take tickets at the door, managing very excited children, etc.) make the experience almost unpleasant at the end.

Having had time to recuperate and to look back, I have a different answer. Certainly, putting on a show is a difficult task, but that pain is temporary, the little conflicts are all forgotten (more or less), and what remains is the pride of what the entire team accomplished. What remains for the children are life-long memories, and, as the literature review allowed us to assume, a wealth of benefits. School connectedness and self-esteem effects, although not formally investigated in this project, were evident immediately after the show for many students. Many of the benefits the children will have received from participating would not have been received through the regular education classroom.

Minimal requirements for a production. I stongly believe in teamwork and that a production of this scale should not be attempted without a commited team. This means at least

three members of the teaching staff and at least five parent volunteers willing to give minimally an hour per week for several months. The need for administrative support is crucial also, as is a secured amount of seed money (at least three thousand dollars, which can be recuperated through sales).

There are also some factors that are not essential but can make the production much easier. Having an auditorium with a real stage that can be booked for rehearsals and performances will help in many ways: students will be quite used to the stage by performance week, set design can take place on-site and at a slower, more relaxed pace, and having access to wings and a green room (back stage) can be very helpful. Having teachers that have experience in performing arts would be an asset. Having resourceful parents, who are imaginative and have initiative, will reduce the amount of micromanaging necessary to move sets, costumes, and props along. Students with a natural talent or experience on stage are a soothing balm on the difficult task of teaching kids how to behave in rehearsal, how to follow directions, and how to use the stage.

Benefits beyond the students. In my opinion, the benefits of a school musical production extend beyond the students to the school itself, the teachers involved, and the volunteers.

By offering musical productions, Bancroft school as an establishment has benefited for years, in creating interest from prospective parents, and retaining students. Indeed, Bancroft is one of the few schools in the English Montreal School Board that has experienced a rising enrolment, contrary to the city-wide trend of Anglophone parents either moving to the suburbs, or chosing to send their students to French schools. Through media coverage of the productions,

the school benefits from exposure. As teachers learn of the school's impressive projects (such as this one), quality teachers have been lured to join our team.

Also, I believe that extracurricular activities beget extracurricular activities. Having taught in Ontario and in Quebec, I have noticed a difference in this province, where teachers in general tend not to offer any extracurricular activities. Some teachers have actually verbalized over the years how my productions "make them look bad." This probably explains the aforementioned movement to try to shut down our productions by the more senior members of the staff. However, as new teachers arrive to the school, they too want to stand out, and many have started extracurricular activities, to the point that sometimes we have to negotiate which activity can happen over which lunch hour, a fortunate problem to have.

Our volunteers benefit from the production in a variety of ways. Through being in the school often, they are well-known, privy to information and special privileges that other parents do not have. Their presence in the school allows for a sense of camaraderie to develop with these parents. Some of our volunteers have cited their work on our productions as references in furthering their employment. Also, there exists a subjective "hierarchy" within the parent community, and the parents that volunteer on the show are known, and benefit from a certain clout among their peers. Volunteers at the school who eventually run for positions on the governing board are therefore also more likely to be elected.

The directors of the play also benefit from a production. My first year at Bancroft school, I directed a production of Beauty and the Beast. At the end of the year, the principal fought to keep me at the school, rather than the typical procedures whereby new teachers have me return to the "recall list," and be sent to another school the next school year. She created a post impossible for anyone else to apply for, based on my abilities to teach French, physical

education, and music. This scheme worked, and I was kept at the school since no other teacher applied for my post. The next year, in January, mysteriously, I received a notice from the school board announcing that I was now permanently attached to Bancroft, even though official board rules specify that a teacher cannot be given a permanent position until he or she has taught in the same post two years plus one day. My principal had cashed in some favours to make sure I wouldn't be sent to another school, even as other teachers, with more seniority than me, were shuffled in and out of our school.

Over the years, I have benefited from the clemency of principals of the school whenever I committed a small mistake. This earned me the nickname of "principal's pet." Every year, I leave on vacation at the same time as the students, while the other teachers have to return for three professional days in their classrooms. This compensation is given to me by the principal in recognition of all the hours dedicated to the production (and other extracurricular activities that I organize). Teachers who have helped me significantly during the productions have also benefited from clemency and compensation days. Every year, I have always been given the exact class I have wanted the following year. I share these rather personal anecdotes to show how there are potential benefits for teachers embarking on large productions: administrators are likely to show their gratitude for the work done by teachers organizing EAs, especially those that have wide-ranging benefits.

Part Three–Project Proposal: A Multi-schools Musical Theatre Production

This section contains the penultimate purpose of this project: to encourage the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) to support a project for three schools to each produce a production of the same musical, staggered over several months of the same school year, in order to share resources and reduce the difficulty of the task.

Introduction

Purpose. To offer the opportunity to participate in a musical theatre production to more elementary school students at the EMSB. Through partnership between three schools that will share resources and planning, and with the support of the EMSB, those schools will produce an extracurricular musical theatre play, based on the success and experience aquired at Bancroft school over the last decade.

Problem. Producing a musical is a daunting task that few teachers are willing to tackle. However, research has shown that participation in extracurricular activities (EAs) of this sort has a wide range of benefits for the participants. Efforts need to be made to enable willing teachers (through support, networking, and resources) to organize such productions.

Proposed solution. By partnering in the production of the same musical in one academic year, schools would be able to share resources, reduce costs, reduce organizational and creative workloads, and use an existing road map for successfully producing an elementary school production. With the support of the EMSB (substitutions, rentals, and transport of shared resources), this task will be made even more manageable.

Motivation. Over the last decades, research has demonstrated that participation in EAs leads to a variety of benefits for participants. Academic benefits include improved academic achievement, as demonstrated by improved test scores, grade point averages, and a lower risk of

dropping out. Psychosocial and developmental benefits include improved school connectedness, self-concept, life skills, decreased problem behaviors, and reduced risks of substance abuse and criminality. Those effects seem to apply to students with exceptionalities who participate as well. Performing arts EAs share the same benefits as other types of EAs, overall. Although some risks have been associated with participation (overscheduling theory and substance abuse, primarily), they are associated with extreme participation (more than three different activities per week) or athletic EAs, in adolescents. Current research on risks remains inconclusive to this day. A thorough review of the literature is available upon request.

In Quebec elementary public schools, there is often a lack of EAs, when compared to other provinces. The reasons for this can partly be traced back to political strife between teachers' unions and the Ministry of Education, and to the fact that there is no contractual obligation for teachers to organize EAs in this province. Faced with the choice of extending one's day, going through the stress of organizing and supervising EAs, most teachers choose not to do so.

For those teachers who do choose to give some of their time to EAs, the thought of producing a full-scale musical (costumes, sets, props, sound system, and a large cast of students) is daunting, and with most teachers not having the experience to do so, rare are the teachers who embark on such a journey.

At Bancroft School, full-scale musicals have been produced every year for the last ten years. Under the direction of François Lukawecki, teams of parent and teacher volunteers have been created year after year, and have delivered outstanding productions to audiences of parents and community members. This year's production of *The Aristocats, Kids* featured a cast of 111

students (exactly half the school population), animal costumes, three interchanging sets, professional-grade sound system, lighting, on a make-shift stage built in the gymnasium.

Year after year, student participants and their parents have testified to the long-lasting benefits of participating in these shows: improved self-esteem, overcoming stage fright, improved school connectedness, improved behavior, more enthusiasm towards the school, tackling other challenges, etc. I firmly believe that the memories and benefits gained from participation in these productions will be life-long, for those who participated. This author also believes that similar results could be created for students at other schools, and therefore, a system to make this participation possible needs to be created, which is how this proposal came to be.

This year, detailed field notes were kept during the production of *The Aristocats Kids*, at Bancroft school. This narrative can be used as a "road map," a step-by-step guide to effectively producing a musical in an elementary school. This project has been written with the assumption that three schools would participate, including Bancroft school.

Project Summary. Starting in June of the preceding school year, the three directors would meet to discuss resources available at the school and choose a script. Each school would be responsible for receiving authorization for the project, securing seed funds (to be replenished through sales and fundraising during the following school year) and purchasing their own "showkit" and performance rights.

Over the course of the year, these three directors would be released to meet at each other's school on six occasions, on rotation, to discuss progress and to help one another with their productions. Each director would be also released two additional times, to attend the other productions' performances.

Since only one set of costumes, set, and props would be created, the burden on each school would be greatly reduced. By working with the same script, creative ideas would be shared, and directorial duties (blocking, staging, and choreography) would also be split up, resulting in much less preparation work for each director.

The EMSB would additionally be required to provide access to electronic equipment for the required sound systems, as required by the schools, and transportation for moving the sets, costumes, props and stage, as each school gets into production, one per month starting in March.

Project Details

Project director: François Lukawecki

Associated project directors: Two elementary teachers, from two schools (to be recruited upon approval of this project).

Relevant experience: François Lukawecki has directed 15 musicals in his career, ten at Bancroft School. Through those years of experience, he has gained expertise in all aspects of production, and can confidently be relied on to make these productions artistically successful, and to ensure their profitability.

Project location: Three elementary schools within the EMSB, including Bancroft School.

Project duration: One academic year, from June 2013 to June 2014.

Project start date: June 1st, 2013

Project total budget: Total $18,600 (contribution by EMSB: $8,400)

Project total revenues: $32,400

Timeline

May 2013. Recruiting the two participating schools and directors, with help from the EMSB (communications and detailed explanation to teachers and principals).

June 2013. Meeting #1. Agenda:

- Choosing the script;
- Team creation: what's needed to make it work;
- Main fundraising activity brainstorm;
- Acquiring the necessary administrative support and seed funds;
- Performance schedule;
- Division of tasks: set design, blocking, choreography, costume and props design, and volunteer lists;
- Schedule meetings two to six;
- Distribution and perusal of road map from *The Aristocats Kids.*

September. Meeting #2. Agenda:

- Assembly of blocked script;
- Rehearsal schedules finalized;
- Fundraising organization;
- School play committees;
- Organizing volunteers in each school;
- Age groups encouraged to participate;
- Getting administrative support;
- Audition procedures;
- Documents for parents, permissions, and contributions.

Auditions and callbacks.
Information meetings for teachers and for parent volunteers.

October. Rehearsals begin.
Meeting #3. Agenda:

- Choreography for two numbers;
- Rehearsal plans and ideas;
- Attend a rehearsal at one of the schools;
- Costume and prop designs;
- Using various staff resources (assistants);
- Sound system needs and EMSB contribution;
- Reserving the EMSB moving van;
- Organizing the school play committee;
- Overview of volunteer organization.

November. Costume and prop construction begins.
Meeting #4. Agenda:

- Choreography for two more numbers;
- Planning for dinner theatre;
- Attend a rehearsal at one of the schools;
- Sound system training and channel distribution;
- Discuss lighting options;
- Blocking and staging issues coming up in rehearsals.

December. Set drawings completed.
Actors off-scripts.
January. Meeting #5. Agenda:

- Final numbers and bows;
- Additional blocking, as needed;
- Organizing the photo shoot;
- Review of sound and lighting cues in the script;
- Preparing the evening supervision schedule and communicating with the staff;
- Change rooms organization and supervision;
- Chorus costumes needed and sizing;
- Lead costumes;
- Backstage management.

February. Meeting #6. Agenda:

- Sound system and lighting;
- Dinner Theatre;
- Bows choreography;
- Final cues;
- Managing the props during performances;
- Final weeks rehearsals and stage management;
- Requesting substitution from administration during final weeks (as needed);
- Attend a rehearsal at one of the schools;
- Management of the stage and set moving from school to school;
- Ticket sales.

All props completed, and sent to school 1 (Bancroft).
Final cast numbers in.
Ticket design completed (for each school).
Costumes completed and sent to Bancroft school.
March. Bancroft school performs.
The other directors visit, and help with the direction.
Materials are delivered to second school.
April. Second school performs.
The other directors visit, and help with the direction.
Materials are delivered to third school.
May. Third school performs.
The other directors visit, and help with the direction.
Materials are returned to Bancroft school for storage.
June. Directors' meeting for final debrief and accounting, as well as decision to continue, stop, or welcome other interested schools into the project.

Implementation Issues and Challenges

Four main areas of difficulty can be expected: assembling two teams per school (one direction and one for production), rehearsals during class time, supervision during performances, and fundraising.

Assembling a team for direction and production. Although one person needs to take on the leadership role of director, it is strongly recommended to have at least two other assistants. Typically, one person could be in charge of the music and the other the choreography. There are, however, other ways to organize the directing team, especially if more than three teachers want to help out. Each director, for example, could be responsible for a certain number of scenes. Rehearsals then could be scheduled on a rotating basis, making for a much lighter workload, and more preparation time between rehearsals.

At Bancroft school, the production team has always been made up of parent volunteers. However, there have been years when a majority of tasks were taken on by the director. It is possible to delegate certain painting and prop construction tasks to older art classes. It is strongly recommended to seek commitment from volunteers. One way to accomplish this is using a "volunteers binder" wherein each new task is described, with sizing and constructions details and a deadline. The volunteer interested in tackling this task signs his or her name on that sheet, which makes completion much more reliable.

Rehearsals during class time. As the production gets close to performance, it will become necessary to run rehearsals during class time. It is important to have support of the administration early on for this to take place. It is also important to start bringing up these dates to the staff early on, so there are no surprises for the teachers. Sending reminders two weeks and one week before also will help get all the staff on board. This topic needs to also be brought to the attention of the staff council to seek approval for these disruptions to be authorized.

Supervision during performances. This is a very complicated task to organize. Directors can expect to be busy in the performance hall during the entire performance, which means other responsible adults need to be in charge of change rooms (particularly to ensure that all clothes and costumes stay organized as they come on and off), and to supervise the students backstage. At Bancroft school, the principal assigned one of our three "required night-time presence" to the show, allowing for nondirecting teachers to take on these responsibilities. A clear schedule and outline of each task is a great help.

Fundraising. Each school will be responsible for raising some of the funds necessary for these three productions. The majority of those funds will be in the form of profits generated by ticket sales ($10 per ticket), DVDs of the performances ($10 each), DVDs of photos taken of the children in their costumes, on the stage ($10 each), t-shirt sales ($13 profit on a $20 t-shirt), and dinner theatre tickets ($18 profit on a $25 ticket). Each school will be expected to hold at least one other fundraising effort, such as Bancroft's Fall Walk-o-thon, to meet the demands of the expected expenses ($3,400 per school).

Budget

Expenses paid by the participating schools.

Show kits (scripts, royalties, and permission to videotape) ($600 each)	$1,800
Additional sound system ($500 per school)	$1,500
Blank DVDs	$300
Volunteer incentives ($200 per school)	$600
Costumes	$2,000
Sets	$1,500
Props	$1,000

Dinner Theatre Supplies ($500 per school)	$1,500
SUBTOTAL–SCHOOLS	$10,200
(Each school must fundraise $3,400)	

Expenses paid by the EMSB.

Substitution (6 days × 3 teachers at $300 per day)	$5,400
EMSB Moving Van	$0
EMSB Sound equipment	$0
Other expenses (to be determined during production)	$3,000
Subtotal: EMSB	$8,400
TOTAL COST	$18,600

Projected revenues. It is difficult to project how much revenue each school can expect. Different factors that would greatly influence this calculation are: the size of the school, the size of the cast, the socioeconomic status of the parent community, the success of fundraising activities, the sales of derived products, the seating capacity of the auditorium where the performances will take place, as well as whether publicity efforts take place, to solicit ticket sales beyond the school community.

Since Bancroft school is a small inner-city school (just over 200 students), it is fair to assume that the other participating EMSB schools would be able to match the revenues attained during the sample production of *The Aristocats Kids* used for this project. The projected revenues below are therefore a conservative estimate.

Main fundraising activity ($3,000 per school)	$9,000
Ticket sales (400 tickets × $10 per ticket = $4,000 per school)	$12,000
Dinner Theatre net profits ($1,000 per school, based on 60 patrons)	$ 3,000

DVD sales (70 per school at $10 each = $700 per school)	$2,100
Photo DVD sales (as above)	$2,100
T-shirt sales (50 per school at $13 each = $650 per school)	$1,950
Participant contribution ($10 per student × 75 = $750)	$2,250
TOTAL REVENUES	$32,400
NET PROFITS	$13,800

As can be seen above, it is projected that the productions will yield greater revenues than expenses. It is proposed that, should this project become annual or bi-annual, these revenues be used as seed funds for the following production. It is not inconceivable to think that eventually, the costs incurred by the EMSB could be reduced (schools could pay for the required substitution). Alternatively, the profits generated could be directed towards increasing the budgets available for costumes and sets, making the productions more impressive.

EMSB expenses per participant. At Bancroft school, over 100 students participate in each production. A conservative estimate for the other schools would be 60 participants per school, for a total of 320 students (including Bancroft). It is possible to calculate a cost per student for the EMSB: $8,400 divided by 320 participants equals $26 per child. This is an extremely reasonable cost, considering the numerous aforementioned benefits for the students.

Risks

As described earlier, few risks have been associated with participation in EAs. Of the risks that exist, they affect older students, high intensity of participation, and participation in sports EAs.

Risks for the students that could exist with this type of project are: disappointment in not getting a desired role, performance anxiety, or exposure to poor adult modeling, if the directors

themselves demonstrate negative behaviors, due to stress or poor management. It is expected that through discussion and the support network created by having monthly director meetings, these risks will be minimized, or extinguished.

Risks for the EMSB and the schools could be financial, if a school does not meet the fundraising or sales requirement. It is expected that, in the event of a financial loss, the EMSB would absorb the loss and review future productions planning accordingly.

Another risk could result from the participating teachers finding the experience overwhelming or not feeling supported in the process. Aside from the exhaustion this would cause, this would risk future participation of these teachers, potentially leading to less EAs offered in EMSB schools. This risk will be managed through close supervision by Francois Lukawecki, who has sufficient experience to rectify the aforementioned situations early enough at their onset, to minimize their effects and consequences.

Conclusion

Students' school life can and should be enriched by extracurricular participation. Many students cannot afford to enroll in activities outside of school, for a variety of reasons (financial, parents' schedule, etc.). Wherever possible, the EMSB should strive to encourage teachers willing to supervise EAs.

Participating in a musical theatre production would expose the participants to a wide breadth of benefits: academic, developmental, self-esteem, school connectedness, reduced risk of behavior problems and later delinquency, discovering and developing talents, etc.

This project minimizes the main obstacles that hinder teachers from tackling a musical theatre production: the overwhelming complexity of organization, lack of directing experience, and financial needs to bring a production to terms. Through financial support, the creation of a

support network, and capitalizing on one teacher's experience, teachers that normally would not have felt confident enough to produce a musical can be encouraged to do so.

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