



Social Issues

WHEN EDTA CONDUCTED the second national survey project exploring high school theatre in 1991, it added a series of questions designed to assess how theatre programs addressed “sensitive social issues.” The study team explained that the questions were included “because the problems of the larger society unavoidably (and, it seems, increasingly) affect our schools, and because theatre has historically been a powerful agent of social change.”

Specifically, the study asked teachers to indicate if they actively addressed abortion, divorce/single parent families, drug/alcohol abuse, drunk driving, multicultural issues/education, sexual identity, sexually transmitted diseases, teenage sexuality/pregnancy, teen suicide, and/or gang/street/family violence through coursework and/or play production, either directly or indirectly. The 2012 study asked the same questions, though two additional social issues were added to the list to be assessed: bullying and end-of-life issues. **Table 1** indicates the percentage of teachers participating in each study who indicated that they addressed various social issues in their theatre work.

Several patterns are present in the data. In both 1991 and 2012, participating teachers addressed the various social issues more through coursework than through production programs. As the present study cannot assess *why* this trend is so evident, future research might fruitfully investigate its potential cause(s). Perhaps the “safe” creative environments of the drama classroom are difficult to replicate in public

spaces? Perhaps many communities throughout the country are (or at least are perceived to be) more conservative than the schools within them? Or might the phenomenon simply suggest a lack of quality scripted material for the educational stage that explores such issues?

While comparisons over time must be made with caution, one can’t ignore the marked differences in the two studies between the percentages of schools addressing any one social issue, or social issues as a whole. Teachers participating in the 2012 study were, by and large, considerably less likely than their predecessors in the 1991 study to report addressing any social issues, which again begs the question: *why*? Future studies that seek to replicate these findings might benefit from the inclusion of qualitative methods, such as interviews with teachers and administrators in which they can more freely discuss the role their theatre programs might play in addressing social issues within the larger culture.

The most frequently addressed topics addressed in-class by teachers in the 2012 study were bullying and multiculturalism, which may not be surprising given the national attention paid to these issues by educational leaders, legislators, and the media in the past few years. Similarly, both drug/alcohol abuse and violence are often addressed through longstanding in-school programs such as D. A. R. E (Drug Abuse Resistance Education). Although bullying was the most frequently addressed theme in 2012, it was not included in the query list in 1991. The most

frequently addressed themes in 1991 (drug/alcohol abuse and multiculturalism) remained among the top three most frequently addressed topics two decades later.

Similarly, the *least* frequently addressed social issues in both 1991 and 2012 are related to sexuality and health: abortion and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). These topics were incorporated into theatre coursework and productions relatively infrequently, even though some teachers in both studies did take on related and politically contentious social issues such as sexual identity, teen suicide, and teenage sexuality/pregnancy in their classrooms. Why certain aspects of teenage sexuality (including pregnancy) were addressed more frequently than positive health measures such as prevention of STIs is unclear and worth considering in future research. Furthermore, though the relative percentage of teachers who address end-of-life issues, abortion, or sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is low, it is clear that some theatre educators do tackle these topics in their classrooms. Of course, it is not possible to determine *how* teachers addressed these issues from the present data, or what perspective they offered on them.

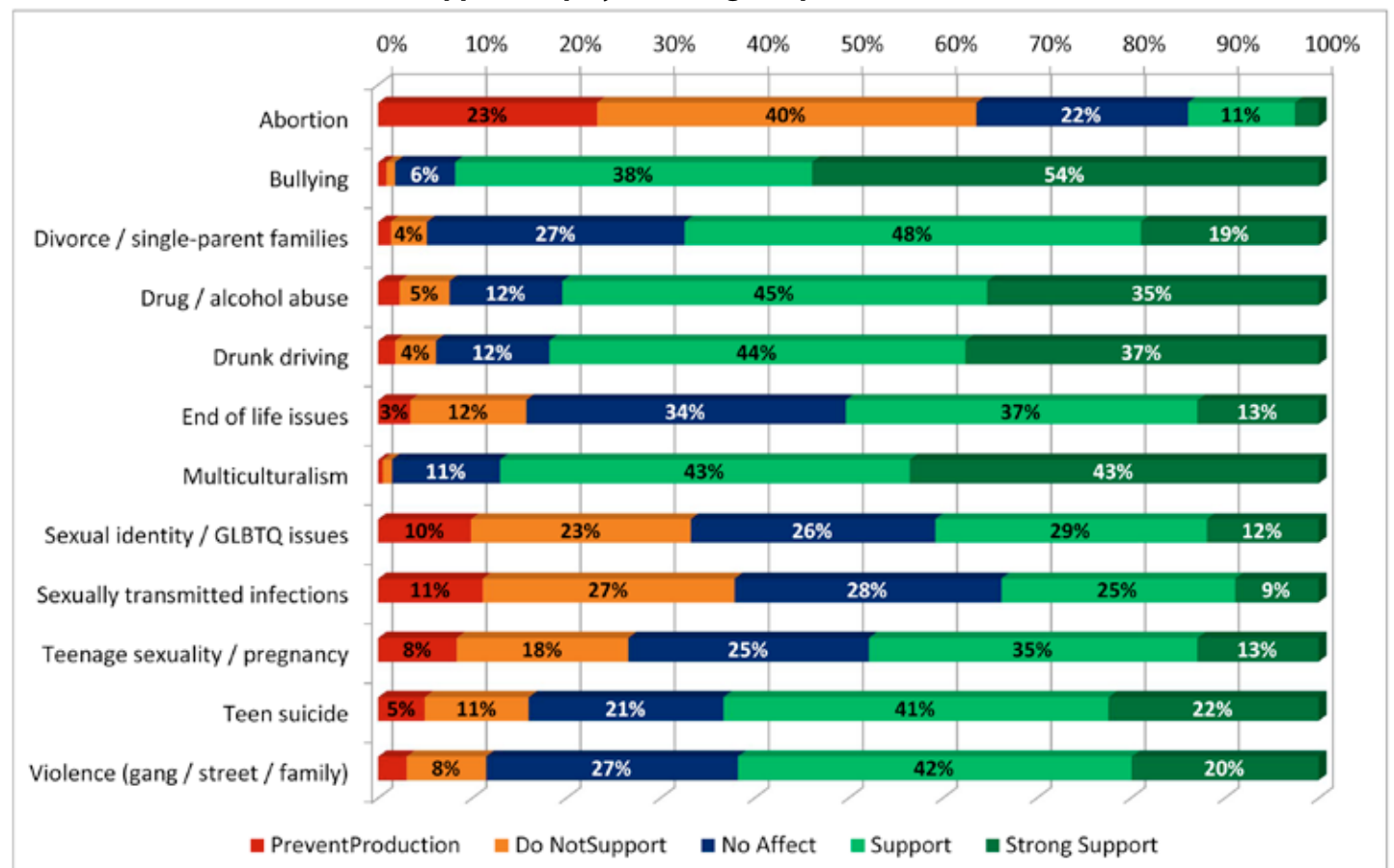
Administrator views

The 2012 study raised additional questions related to social issues, including asking school administrators to indicate how they believed they would react if their school’s theatre program wanted to produce a play that addressed any

Table 1: Percentage of teachers addressing social issues through theatre courses and/or productions

	1991		2012	
	Coursework	Productions	Coursework	Productions
Abortion	28%	20%	10%	6%
Bullying	--	--	42%	38%
Divorce/single parent families	45%	40%	23%	22%
Drug/alcohol abuse	50%	48%	33%	28%
Drunk driving	42%	38%	19%	12%
End of life issues	--	--	17%	17%
Multiculturalism	49%	40%	39%	34%
Sexual identity/GLBTQ issues	43%	43%	25%	21%
Sexually transmitted infections	29%	19%	7%	5%
Teenage sexualit /pregnancy	42%	38%	21%	17%
Teen suicide	43%	36%	24%	19%
Violence (gang/street/family)	45%	37%	30%	30%

Chart A: Administrators' level of support for plays focusing on specific social issues



of the social issues discussed (**Chart A**). They recorded their responses using the five-point scale below, with its accompanying terms and definitions.

- Prevent production: I would take action to prevent production of the play.
- Do not support: I would be wary of the production of the play and/or would encourage the program to reconsider choosing this play.
- No affect?: This theme would not influence my opinion of the play or my level of support.
- Support: I would support production of the play, but would not offer additional resources.
- Strong support: I would strongly support producing the play, and would offer resources beyond those normally offered for plays produced by my school.

The social issue administrators indicated the most concern about was abortion. This was the only subject that a majority of participating principals clearly opposed, indicating that they would either “not support” or “prevent production of” a play dealing with this topic at their school.

Abortion was also among the issues least-often explored in productions, along with STIs, with 38 percent of administrators indicating they would attempt to prevent such a production. It is unclear if this correlation suggests general agreement between teachers and administrators that these plays should not be produced, or if teachers who want to produce such material refrain from attempting it because they expect a challenge from their administration—or for other reasons. The view that controversial social topics should not be addressed through high school play production is not universal, however. Fourteen percent of administrators would either support or strongly support productions of plays dealing with abortion, and the percentage of administrators who would support or strongly support production of a play addressing STIs was 34 percent—almost as high as the percentage that would oppose it.

Plays addressing bullying and/or multiculturalism received the support or strong support of most administrators (92 percent and 87 percent, respectively), as did drunk driving (81 percent) and drug/alcohol abuse (80 percent). A majority of administrators indicate they would support or strongly support productions addressing divorce (67 percent) or violence (62 percent), while just under half would support or strongly support plays addressing end-of-life issues (50 percent), suggesting that some teachers might be able to explore these issues with greater frequency than they presently do without facing challenges from administrators. Although a majority of administrators would not oppose productions addressing teen sexuality, pregnancy, or sexual identity, they would not garner the support of most principals either, as 48 percent and 40 percent of respondents indicated they would support or strongly support plays focusing on those issues.

It's worth bearing in mind that the answers individuals give when asked hypothetically how they might react to any given situation do not necessarily show how they would actually respond; it is difficult to fully assess one's potential reactions, particularly when completing a survey which may not evoke the emotions of a real-life experience being asked to support (or not support) a play exploring these issues.

Specific plays challenged

Teachers were also asked if any play script they intended to produce or use in the classroom had been the subject of a community challenge or negative administrative review in the previous two years. Nineteen percent of respondents indicated that a play choice had been challenged. The three most-frequently challenged plays were:

The Laramie Project, by Moisés Kaufman and members of the Tectonic Theatre Project

Urinetown, by Mark Hollman and Greg Kotis

Rent, by Jonathan Larson

While any claims as to why these particular plays may have been chal-

lenged more often than others would be speculative, it is interesting to note that exploration of questions and themes related to sexual identity are central to both *Rent* and *The Laramie Project*, while *Urinetown's* title may be sufficient grounds for challenge in many communities.

Teachers who indicated that a script they had intended to use had been challenged were also asked to report how the conflict was resolved. The most common result, reported by 38 percent of teachers responding, was that the play was not produced or used at all. In 17 percent of the cases, the play was produced, but changes were made to the script (raising questions of compliance with copyright law), and in 11 percent, the play was produced/used as written, but with other changes (e. g. to the director's vision, staging, etc.). Only one-third of the teachers reported that the script they had intended to use was produced as originally intended.

Who makes the call?

Whether or not they had personally experienced a challenge to a play, teachers were asked which individuals had a voice in the decision-making process if a question of script appropriateness arose. Almost all respondents said that the teacher/director and school principal had a voice in the process (95 percent and 93 percent, respectively). Other individuals or groups that many teachers indicated had a role in the process included the school board (27 percent), the superintendent (40 percent), students (31 percent), parents (29 percent), and other faculty members (15 percent).

Teachers were also asked which party made the final decision as to whether the play would be used. Fifty-four percent of respondents indicated the principal made the final decision, while 25 percent indicated that the teacher/director did so. Thirteen percent indicated that the decision was made by the superintendent, 7 percent reported that it was the school board, and the remaining respondents indicated that some other entity (or a combination of parties) made the final choice.