



ACCESS AND INCLUSION FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN PERFORMING ARTS HIGHER EDUCATION

ACCESIBILIDAD E INCLUSIÓN PARA ESTUDIANTES CON DISCAPACIDAD EN GRADOS UNIVERSITARIOS DE ARTES ESCÉNICAS

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Abstract: The global performing arts field is facing historic adversity. Given the current social and political unrest, organizations are re-examining producing models with a focus on equity. As the industry moves towards a more inclusive future, systemic racial injustice is, rightfully, at the focus. However, it would be a mistake to ignore an equally important issue that denies a significant number of people from participating in theatre-making: accessibility and inclusion. Disability is fundamentally intersectional: affecting all races, ethnicities, ages, genders, and religions. Considering that 15% of the world's population

experiences some form of disability, the performing arts as a whole can only benefit by prioritizing access in all areas. This work must start in performing arts training programs within higher education. We argue that real transformative change will begin in the classroom; the pipeline for future creators. This paper addresses these issues in both the US and Spain. The methodology utilized includes interviews of professional performing art practitioners with lived body experience of disability and the analysis of case studies from academic settings. Using universal design principles, the goal of the article is to establish best practices for accessibility and inclusion in performing arts education.

Key Words: accessibility, inclusion, theatre pedagogy, universal design for learning.

Resumen: El campo mundial de las artes escénicas se enfrenta a una adversidad histórica. Dado el malestar social y político actual, las organizaciones están reexaminando la producción de modelos con un enfoque en la equidad. A medida que la industria avanza hacia un futuro más inclusivo, la injusticia racial sistémica se convierte en el centro de atención. Sin embargo, sería un error ignorar un tema igualmente importante que niega a un número significativo de personas participar en la creación de una producción teatral: la accesibilidad y la inclusión. La discapacidad es interseccional: afecta a todas las razas, etnias, edades, géneros y religiones. Teniendo en cuenta que el 15% de la población mundial experimenta algún tipo de discapacidad, las artes escénicas en su conjunto solo pueden beneficiarse si se prioriza el acceso en todas las áreas. Este trabajo debe comenzar en los programas de formación universitaria en artes escénicas. Sostenemos que el verdadero cambio transformador comenzará en el aula; la cantera de futuros creadores. Este artículo aborda estos problemas tanto en Estados Unidos como en España. La metodología utilizada incluye entrevistas a profesionales de las artes escénicas y con experiencia en el sector de la discapacidad. Utilizando los principios de diseño universal, el objetivo del artículo es establecer las mejores prácticas para la accesibilidad y la inclusión en la educación de las artes escénicas.

Palabras Clave: accesibilidad, inclusión, pedagogía teatral.

Summary: 1. Access and Inclusion in Performing Arts Higher Education. 2. Literature Review. 2.1. Disability and the State of the Field. 2.2. Decolonizing/Decentralizing the Curriculum. 2.3. Accessible and Inclusive Productions: Universal Design Principles Applied to Theatre. 3. Methods and Materials. 3.1. Approaches for Designing an Inclusive-Centered Theatre Curriculum. 3.2. Survey Respondents. 4. Discussion. 5. Conclusion. 6. References. 7. Notes.

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1. ACCESS AND INCLUSION IN PERFORMING ARTS HIGHER EDUCATION

Considering our current political and social climate of rising discrimination and a lack of inclusion, it is important to evaluate how performing arts programs in higher education (HE) are addressing these challenges. While there are many communities that are underrepresented by the educational and professional performing arts world, this paper will focus specifically on improving access and inclusion for the disability¹ community in HE. Disability is fundamentally intersectional: affecting all races, ethnicities, ages, genders, and religions. Considering that 15% of the world's population experiences some form of disability, the performing arts as a whole can only benefit by prioritizing access in all areas. To understand the challenges, it is necessary to assess what needs to be improved and address the bias that occurs (either consciously or unconsciously) in classes, productions, and in the professional world towards participants with disabilities. This work must start in theatre training programs within HE. We argue that real transformative change will begin in the classroom; the pipeline for future creators. This paper addresses these issues in both the US and Spain. The methodology utilized includes interviews of professional performing art practitioners with lived body experience of disability.² Using universal design principles, this article will establish best practices for accessibility and inclusion in performing arts education.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Disability and the State of the Field

If we consider that the percentage of college-age people with disabilities is only increasing, we will understand that by “failing actively to recruit disabled students, universities will miss out on the diversity and valuable contributions of an important group” (Ralph & Boxall, 2007, p. 371). According to a report by the US Department of Education, of the 15.3 million students enrolled in US high schools in 2019, there were 3,034,188 students between the ages of 12-17 and 334,101 between the ages of 18-21 (roughly 22% of high school age students) that are being

served by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA).³ The National Center for Education (NCES) also reports that 19% of undergraduates and 11.9% of post baccalaureates in 2015–16 reported having a disability in the US.⁴ In Spain, 97,800 persons with disabilities are between 16-24 years old (that is 6.4% of the 5.9% of the Spanish population with disabilities). While the number of students in universities has doubled in the past years (in Spain 31.5% of the population aged 18-24 years old)⁵, enrollment of students with disabilities is not necessarily comparable to this growth. Although the Spanish report fails to include a demographic breakdown of students, Garcia-Cano Torrica's et al. (2021) study shows that only 1.7% of students with disabilities attend university in Spain⁶.

In our observations, there seems to be a clear disparity between the percentage of college students with disabilities and the number of theatre majors with disabilities.⁷ In our 10 years of experience as arts faculty, we can only recall a few students with disabilities in our classrooms and the overwhelming majority of those had documented learning disabilities.⁸ This discrepancy is shown in research conducted in the United Kingdom by *The Stage*, a British newspaper⁹. Their 2018 study of drama schools in the UK found that,

...just 1% of graduates from major drama schools declared a physical impairment – covering mobility, sight or hearing impairments. The most up-to-date government figures, from 2016, state that 11% of people in the general population declared a mobility impairment, 3% declared a vision impairment and 3% had a hearing impairment. (Masso, 2018)

However, the 24th article from the UN Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities (2006) directs “State Parties to recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and life long learning...” Given the population percentages of potential and current students with disabilities, we must question why we are only seeing a small fraction of these students in theatre and performing arts programs?

The previous numbers may be surprising given the efforts seen in university promotional materials emphasizing student diversity. While marketing representation is a welcome indicator of increasing

awareness about students with disabilities, the actual data shows that the recruitment numbers do not match these outward-facing demonstrations¹⁰. Ralph and Boxall's research (2007) indicates two potential reasons: (1) the lack of collaboration between admissions offices and disability services and (2) the materials regarding disability services appear to only be shown to registered students instead of also being used to recruit potential students (p. 382). Moreover, they note that "It would appear that many universities do not place the same emphasis on recruiting disabled students as they do on recruiting students from minority ethnic groups" (p. 383).

Beyond the lack of recruitment, this paper analyzes the obstacles to participation encountered by currently enrolled students with disabilities in two different countries. Importantly, these issues can present barriers to students' full development and participation in education.

According to Shelvin et al. (2004, p. 17) and based on their research of other authors, the obstacles to access and participation in HE for students with disabilities can be classified into the following categories: physical (e.g. teaching spaces, theatres), information (e.g. curriculum, courses materials), entrance to higher education (e.g. program application requirements), assumptions of "normality" (based generally on the medical model of disabilities' assumptions), and levels of awareness.

As an example of some of these barriers, Orr (2020) highlights the experience of Emmy award winner Ali Stroker when getting her training:

She also recalled her experience in college as the only person in a wheelchair in New York University's musical theatre program, which raised doubts about her abilities and her place within the school. Stroker went on to defy the odds, including taking dance classes alongside her classmates. This was inconceivable for her dance professors, she recalled, since they had no idea how to teach a student in a wheelchair.

Thus, access for students is a multi-layered issue that encompasses physical, attitudinal, and curricular aspects. In addition, in Shelvin's et al. (2004) research, participants indicated they encountered access difficulties at every level (p. 25) and that academic and professional success "has tended to be confined to the individuals selected from the marginalized groups with little impact on the isolation of these groups

in society” (p. 28). The researchers highlighted the importance of ensuring inclusion of students as a cultural change that transforms the practices of institutions and personnel “at all levels” in HE institutions (p. 29). Sensoy and D’Angelo (2017) argue that in order to challenge all kinds of prejudices, we have to challenge “the social segregationist built into the culture” (p. 34). Therefore, only by educating and embracing more relationships with diverse people, will we be more likely to “have constructive response(s) when interacting with other members of their group” (p. 34). If we apply these ideas to theatre pedagogy, we argue that department cultures will be more inclusive for students (1) if faculty and staff educate themselves about diversity and inclusion, (2) if relationships are built with a diversity of people, and (3) if representation is increased in all areas of the department and university.

However, as Obermark (2019) points out, there is a continuous isolation (or disability bypass) of disabled students, faculty, and staff in HE. Although a university may signal that disability is welcome and present (e.g. disability-centered campus events, mission statements), these same institutions tend to circumvent facilitating accommodations by “closing down potential routes for access actions or creating maze-like, ineffective routes to avoid looking too hard at what disability or access can offer to the academy” (p. 180). Charles (2019) points out the negative impact resulting from this disability bypass:

The issue for students who are other (BAME, LGBTQ, etc.) is that they come to university to learn about a subject they are interested in.... (and) what happens when they become aware of a lack of visibility of plural voices, or of people like them as having contributed to the subject, or who have a different narrative to the “story” being told?...the message that is being communicated is then that you don’t belong, or that people like you have made no contribution to this subject area. (p. 2)

In order to avoid this invisibility, it is fundamental that the university not only demonstrates diversity (among faculty, staff, and students) but also that faculty incorporate diversity and representation into course materials. In this sense, it is interesting to point out Taylor et al.’s research (2021) which highlights the lack of representation in the curriculum from under-represented communities. Although their study focuses on science and ethnicity, it is relevant here since disability overlaps with

other identities. The authors state “our curriculum should be diverse in its representation to reflect both the diversity of location for scientific outputs and the diverse student cohorts in undergraduate courses” (p.10). Some of their proposed actions include: diversifying reading lists, educating staff¹¹ and students, encouraging staff to reflect on their own unconscious biases¹², and addressing inequalities in the professional field by talking about them in the educational setting (p.12).

Further examining inequitable representation, Skibsted Jensen’s et al. study (2021) demonstrates how people with disabilities are totally absent in many textbooks which contributes to exclusion and invisibility. It is through the reading and discussion of these materials that students build their identities and visualize a future theatre career. Thus, the lack of representation means that students with disabilities will not be able to recognize themselves in those texts, Moreover, as the authors point out, disability invisibility affects the values and attitudes about disability among all students (not just those who have disabilities). This is also pointed out by Spanish authors Vázquez-Barrio’s et al. (2021) research on disability representation in media, where they explained that not only is this representation still limited, especially in terms of quality, but that it continues to show a stereotype representation of disability as an illness or victimizing the person who has a disability (p.6). That is why “It is also vital that staff include the experiences and studies conducted in a wide range of participants so that students fully understand these issues when they enter into careers themselves” (Taylor et al., 2021, p. 11). Furthermore, the lack of representation in performing arts textbooks and course materials is also compounded by limited representation of characters with disability in theatrical plays (e.g. used in class, educational productions, or seen on professional stages). Again if we look at popular media (film, television, and Broadway), Kataja (2020) points out that 95% of the characters with disabilities are actually played by actors with no visible disability. Considering this, in order for performing arts education to truly become more inclusive, we need to understand and address the systemic inequities and the obstacles to inclusion within both the educational and professional performing arts world.

Since representation can build a sense of belonging, Gallego-Noche et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of an inclusive approach to diversity “which is based on social justice, not exclusively on the assessment

of outcomes related to employability or graduation rates” (p.82). They argue the need to understand injustice in three ways: (1) material (exploitation, marginalization, deprivation from a minimal standard of living), (2) non-recognition (demanding equal value for all people), and (3) social non-participation (imposed material and cultural limitations) (p. 82). Thus, an inclusive approach to diversity needs to combine strategies to break down the current structures generating inequality and build new inclusive discourses¹⁵. We propose that injustice can be deconstructed across multiple platforms in theatre programs by asking questions such as: who is in the classroom, who is teaching, what are we teaching, who is in the story, who is on the stage, and who is in the audience? Hopefully, by centering disability as a form of diversity in our answers, we can better champion access and inclusion within HE and the industry.

Moreover, as we increase inclusion in educational programs, we need to reframe language and outdated notions that disability itself as an obstacle. This type of deficit thinking is inherently exclusive and paints both students with disabilities and disability itself as a ‘problem’, ‘abnormal, and ‘tragic’. Disability studies theorists Swain and French (2000), reject this ableist framework and propose replacing it with the ‘affirmation model’ defined as:

A non-tragic view of disability and impairment which encompasses positive social identities, both individual and collective, for disabled people grounded in the benefits of lifestyle and life experience of being impaired and disabled. (p. 569)

This makes us wonder, how do we put this affirmation model into practice? Public institutions have legal requirements to meet for students with disabilities. US educators must provide accommodations when presented with a student’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP) from a Disability Services office. Similarly in Spain, Organic Law legislates educational institutions provide access for students (LISMI, Ley 13/1982, de 7 de abril, de Integración Social de los Minusválidos). However, performing arts departments can and should implement more accommodations than what is legally required. We argue that when access improvements are only made for the few students that manage to find their way into our departments, we are actively excluding potential

students from participating by being only reactive rather than proactive. Often, accessibility improvements have documented intersectional benefits across many demographic groups (e.g. Eardley et al., 2017, p. 206; *Design-for-Accessibility*, s. f., p. 56; Neves, 2018, p. 132; Simpson, 2018). For example, adding captioning helps not only Deaf students but also aids in comprehension for second-language learners. One way to accomplish this type of intersectional access is through Asset-Based Accommodations:

Asset-based approaches seek not to start with a problem or a lack, but set out to identify existing positive assets and capabilities of a community or group. In doing so, asset-based approaches sometimes identify creative and innovative responses to problems that deficit perspectives simply fail to see because of their very assumptions and approach to problems. (Missingham 2017, p. 341)

2.2. Decolonizing/Decentralizing the Curriculum

In order to defy these assumptions and hegemonic perspectives, academia has recently focused on decolonizing the curriculum; however, this important conversation has primarily been tied to race and ethnicity (e.g. colonialism's legacy of euro-centric and/or white western dominance and privilege). Yet, Keele University in the UK has published a *Decolonizing the Curriculum Manifesto* (Afekafe et al., 2018) proposing what it would mean to decolonize the university curriculum¹⁴ and their first statement acknowledges disability specifically. It states that knowledge is not owned by anyone but is rather "collectively produced and human beings of all races, ethnicities, classes, genders, sexual orientation, and disabilities have as much right as elite white men to understand what our roles and contributions have been in shaping intellectual achievements and shifting culture and progress". Further statements prioritize: (1) recognizing power relations, (2) rethinking and reframing the content of the curriculum so it is more inclusive (e.g. multiple voices and perspectives for mutual learning), (3) evaluating how texts are taught and critiqued, (4) identifying structural reproductions of colonial hierarchies within the university and activating potential alternatives, (5) involving all members in the process to collaborate, discuss and

experiment, and (6) acknowledging how students experience university differently, among others. These statements should be taken into consideration when challenging the actual structures. Of particular interest, one statement explains how “Decolonizing the curriculum means creating spaces and resources for a dialogue among all members of the university on how to imagine and envision all cultures and knowledge systems in the curriculum, and with respect to what is being taught and how it frames the world.” (Afekafe et al., n.d.). For this reason, if the curriculum is the means in which we identify knowledge in HE, it becomes increasingly important to interrogate the curriculum. In order to do so, we must present both educators and learners with a broader view which considers multiple perspectives (including their personal, university, and community experiences). Further, we also need to recognize and understand how our world has been shaped by colonialism and the hegemonic culture.

Now our intention is not to make the same mistake of approaching disability with a set of accommodations that can “solve” the “problem”. Using a disability studies perspective, our research, therefore, shifts the focus away from problem-based thinking and instead approaches disability as “a complex yet generative identity” (Obermark, 2019, p. 175). Moreover, disability justice activist Mia Mingus speaks about this shift in approach:

Access for the sake of access is not necessarily liberatory, but access for the sake of connection, justice, community, love and liberation is. We can use access as a tool to transform the broader conditions we live in, to transform the conditions that created that inaccessibility in the first place...It demands that the responsibility for access shifts from being an individual responsibility to a collective responsibility. That access shifts from being silencing to freeing; from being isolating to connecting; from hidden and invisible to visible; from burdensome to valuable; from a resentful obligation to an opportunity; from shameful to powerful; from rigid to creative. It’s the “good” kind of access, the moments when we are pleasantly surprised and feel seen. It is a way of doing access that transforms both our “today” and our “tomorrow.” In this way, Liberatory access both resists against the world we don’t want and actively builds the world we do want. (Mingus, 2017, paragraph 31)

Mingus calls this “liberatory access”. Obermark reinforces that measures should be a collective commitment and responsibility since they will benefit all (2019, p.176). With this call to action in mind, we turn our attention to the state of the performing arts field as it relates to access and inclusion.

2.3. Accessible and Inclusive Productions: Universal Design Principles Applied to Theatre

Given the arts are widely considered an agent for social change, it is difficult to understand why educational and professional theatre is still so exclusive. For example, the National Disability Theatre Company (US) points out that 95% of disabled characters are played by non-disabled actors. Likewise, a UK report from 2018 specified that only 20-25% of performing arts centers offered access services for audiences. While all national theatres, festivals, and some private arts performances in Spain offer accessibility services (according to the Teatro Accessible Web¹⁵), it is limited to only one or two performances per production. Similarly in the US, access services for professional productions vary wildly, as evidenced by the 2017 lawsuit against the producers of *Hamilton* citing “systemic civil rights violations” against theatre attendees who are Blind or visually-impaired (Cox, 2017). While some producers, venues, and performing arts companies are able to offer services, others excuse themselves from providing access under ADA’s “financial burden” claim (SV Flys, 2018). A 2021 report from the British Council and Europe Beyond Access shows unsettling numbers across Europe proving current inclusion shortfalls. According to this report, 87% of venues and festivals do not involve disabled people in selection panels or in commissioning processes, only 28% of venues and festivals regularly present or support work by disabled artists, and 52% of performing arts professionals rated their knowledge of work by disabled artists as either poor or very poor (Baltà et al. 2021).

As mentioned earlier, Shelvin et al. (2004) categorized access barriers into categories: physical, information, entrance, and assumptions. When *Oklahoma!*’s Ali Stroker became the first actor using a wheelchair to win a Tony Award in 2019, she had to wait for the announcement in the backstage wings rather than approach the stage from the auditorium

aisles. Radio City Music Hall had no ramp access. The BBC reporter Alex Taylor noted, “The failure of the award organizers to ensure the award stage offered even basic accessibility, symbolized how little disability is thought of” (2019). This type of access barrier would be cataloged under the physical category. ADA guidelines in the US require that existing spaces must remove architectural barriers unless it is not “readily achievable” or access can be met by other means. It further defines “readily achievable” as something “easily accomplishable and able to be carried out without much difficulty or expense.”¹⁶ While there is need of some flexibility, it is easy to see how the costs for improving access for audience and performers could be considered ‘an undue burden’. However, it is our opinion that by not spending that money to improve access, Broadway and the theatre in general is signaling that people with disabilities don’t belong.

A lack of physical access is not only an issue with existing architecture, but also to be considered when creating new spaces. Moreover, Broadway is not alone in the lack of accessibility as there are plenty of theatre facilities¹⁷ at universities that also still fail to be accessible. Both ADA guidelines in the US and the Spanish Law LIONDAU 51/2003 (Law for equal opportunities, non-discrimination, and universal accessibility for people with disabilities) require that accessibility is considered in the design of all new spaces. Ron Mace’s Universal Design Principles (1990)¹⁸ have been adopted as an international governing standard for improving accessibility in all areas of design (both tangible and digital). However, architect and disability activist Jos Boys (2014) argues that an ADA¹⁹ compliance-centered approach, while offering some access improvements because of Universal Design practices, reinforces the concept that disability is not only a ‘problem’ to be solved, but something only to be considered once the creative process is completed rather than an integrated part of a design process (p.24). Instead, Boys (2014) challenges designers to consider how spaces for the disabled and non-disabled might be designed more holistically:

...rather than reproducing that binary opposition in architecture, through the framing of inclusive design as either for ‘everyone’ and/or to meet the ‘special needs’ of disabled people, we need to instead explore the interface between disability and ability, so as to expose the differential effects material spaces have on different kinds of bodies. (p. 39)

This echoes Mingus and Obermarks' (2019) calls for liberatory access and a collective commitment towards inclusive practices that make positive and beneficial changes for all.

While we focused earlier on physical access failure, access breakdowns as a result of a 'compliance-centered approach' reverberate throughout the remaining access categories as well: information, entrance, and assumptions (Shelvin, et al., 2004). Just as Boys (2014) noted that architects often fail to consider accessibility until the very end of their spatial design process, likewise performance venues often fail to consider accessibility services until the end of the production process (Udo & Fels 2009, 2010; SV Flys, 2020). Moreover, what accommodations are made²⁰ typically only serve the audience, not participants or makers of the performance itself. Similarly, educators typically rely on their university's Disability Services office to inform them of the accommodations for students with disabilities that they are legally bound to provide. However, Gierdowski et al. (2020) suggest faculty would better support all students by utilizing a:

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework when designing learning experiences and services to optimize learning for all people. Many students with disabilities choose not to register for disability services, and students age 18 and older have the right not to disclose even if they are eligible for support. If technology and IT policies are thoughtfully and inclusively incorporated into a course guided by UDL, then ideally learner variability, choice, and agency increase, while the need for individual accommodations is greatly reduced. (2020)

As this research indicates, when accessibility and inclusion is only an "add-on" at the end of the process or something that we must do only when required, there will inevitably be multiple missed opportunities for inclusion.

With these inclusive-centered models in mind, we now consider possible applications to increase access in theatre curriculums²¹ by reviewing qualitative data obtained from arts practitioners about access and theatre training.

3. METHODS AND MATERIALS

3.1. Approaches for Designing an Inclusive-Centered Theatre Curriculum

As previously noted, the goal of this article is to highlight the importance of centering accessibility and inclusion topics and practice into the theatre curriculum. In service of this, we share the following methods and materials:

- In order to gain a better understanding of the state of the field in regards to disability access and inclusion, we conducted qualitative surveys interviewing performing artists, managers, technicians, designers, and directors about prior experiences (both successful and unsuccessful) with accessibility in the performing arts and performing arts training.
 - We screened respondents for those who either self-identified as having a disability (59,3% participants) or had prior experience working with individuals with disabilities (40,7% participants).
 - Our survey included demographic data and questions regarding their theatrical experience and practice in professional and educational settings.
 - The survey questions were divided into four categories: perspectives as an audience member, as a creator (14 participants), as an arts administrator (7 participants), and as an inclusive theatre company manager (6 responses).
 - We have completed a total of 27 surveys. Out of which 18 responses were from professionals/artists in the US and 9 from Spain.
 - We coded the qualitative data responses for analysis into four categories: (1) physical accommodations, (2) attitudinal change, (3) levels of awareness including a knowledge gap, lack of representation, and tokenism, and (4) the ripple effect of inclusion.

3.2 Survey Respondents

Acknowledging that access is a multi-layered issue that encompasses physical, attitudinal, and curricular aspects, performing arts programs need to make holistic changes in all areas to be truly accessible and inclusive. In order to determine possible changes, we sought out the knowledge and lived body experience of performing arts practitioners who either identify as having a disability and/or actively work with people with disabilities. When analyzing the data, we were very fortunate to obtain different perspectives from a variety of stakeholders. Thus, arts administrators, creators and designers, and disability-centered communities gave us their feedback. To report the results, we decided to take Shelvin's et al. categorization and present the results under the following categories: Attitudinal change, accommodations, lack of representation and tokenism, and finally the ripple effect or benefits of access. The goal is to embrace all perspectives with the final outcome of identifying challenges that, as educational institutions, we should address.

Attitudinal change. In our literature review, attitudinal barriers were mentioned on numerous occasions. When analyzing the data collected, this aspect was highlighted in several statements. For example, one respondent mentioned "(s)ome people fear disability. Disability is representative of everyone's vulnerability in some ways and so I think that just prevents people from being able to talk openly" (Person E). This statement shows how these attitudinal barriers may come from fear, lack of knowledge, or insufficient level of awareness. Throughout the surveys, we encountered statements echoing sentiments about attitudinal barriers. Person A spoke about obstacles to receiving any kind of training. Persons 2 and 12 expressed the need for accessible programs for all. Person 7 spoke about paternalism, condescension, and a lack of knowledge about disability and people with disabilities. This knowledge gap was also mentioned by Person E. Person 1 shared the importance of respecting and listening to people with disabilities. Arts administrators seconded the need to listen and respect while also acknowledging that both curriculum and practice processes should fit the needs of everyone. They also emphasized that stakeholders learn about "strengths as well as weaknesses that tend to go with different kinds of disabilities along

with the understanding that each person is an individual and may be different” (Person 3).

Respondents shared examples in academic situations where inclusion was forbidden or considered as a “detriment”. One educator said:

My interest in accessibility and inclusion in the theater was not valued by the rest of my colleagues. My interest was seen as a detriment to my career. When I tried to include a deaf actor in my beginning acting class with an ASL interpreter provided by the university at no cost to our department I was forbidden to do that by my senior colleagues. (Person 14)

Respondents also reported knowledge of students with disabilities being discouraged to enroll in artistic programs. When reflecting on their academic career one participant stated, “I will say in my education there was very little discussion of access and what that meant. Very little consideration for including actors on stage that look different or were different” (Person G). Another participant stated, “I do not remember a single classmate from my BFA cohort who had a disability so there clearly was not a focus on recruiting or they did not feel comfortable “outing” their disability” (Person A). Similarly, Person 8 (theatre director and academic) states that except for specific cases “there is meager incorporation of students with disabilities to these studies²², and we could say that the even more distant and abandoned part would be that of accessibility”.

Many of these observations correspond to the previously presented issues around invisibility. While this may be the result of a knowledge gap, it could be because as Person E stated:

“...disability is often omitted from those commitments.²³ I think it’s largely because there is the perspective that disability is often thought of as a circumstance rather than a culture, a community, or an identity.”

Person C laments how university education bears little resemblance to theatre training done within disability mission-based companies: “I believe that most universities gloss over this and don’t take the initiative. They assume if someone has a problem with the way they work, then they will tell them.” Person 15 argues that “... it is essential to understand

that inclusion can never be an end, but a means. We cannot continue generating “inclusive” spaces or “inclusive” projects, because inclusion must be an intrinsic condition and not an addition.”

Accommodations (physical and other). The challenge of accommodations was mentioned by several participants. Person E succinctly summarizes the conflict at the center of the issue: “you are expected to come in and fit into their plan.” Person 15 similarly comments that it shouldn’t be the person who needs to adapt but the process itself. This echoes the theories reinforced by both the social model of disability and the principles of universal design. Participants shared other commonly occurring issues such as a lack of training on how to work with people with disabilities, communication difficulties, a lack of flexibility, poorly considered schedules, and insufficient financial resources (elements that were highlighted too in Espinosa-Barajas’s et al 2021 article). Most of the participants with disabilities agreed that the access services provided were challenging due to a lack of consistent availability, poor quality, or a complete lack absence of access services for some disabilities. For example, two participants mentioned the lack of knowledge or awareness around invisible disabilities which led to a lack of accommodations and flexibility (Person 6). Other participants mentioned obstacles which included transportation (Person A), architectural barriers (Person 10), inaccessible classrooms (Person 13), communication barriers in general (Person E), and those related to the lack of ASL interpreters (Persons 9 and 18). Only one participant mentioned their personal experience in institutions for the Deaf that was inclusive (Person 17). Another participant specifically indicated there professors lacked training or creativity to include them in the exercises and, instead, left them on the sidelines (Person 10).

Modeling a positive way to provide accommodations, a participant who identified as an educator shared their approach:

Personally, I have my students sign up to talk to me about their needs and then I make a list of changes that need to be made, in my curriculum, to better serve them. If that is having transcripts to podcasts, lectures, etc...then I add that to the year. If that is filming all classes and putting them into the student’s translation program or iPad, I do that. (Person C).

However, in our observations, this is not the general practice of most educators, nor what all institutions would encourage professors to do.

In trying to compare and also find solutions, we asked managers and leaders from disability-centered institutions about potential things could be implemented in training programs to increase access and inclusion. Some responses include: basic ASL skills (Person 1), including universal design in spaces/classrooms and lesson plans (Person 2), devise accommodations and adaptations for every type of actor (neurotypical or neurodiverse) (Person 3), scale programs/curriculums and vary methods of communication (Person 12), among others.

Lack of representation and Tokenism. When asked about disability representation in their training, the majority of answers fell into two categories: either there was no visible representation or they experienced being one of the first to participate. “There are very few post-secondary opportunities for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and most of these are focused on occupational training rather than creative opportunities” (Person A). Another indicated that there was no mention or representation of disability within their training program until a new faculty member joined who championed invisible disabilities (Person G). Since this person also had an invisible disability, this was revelatory to have an instructor understand and advocate for someone like themselves. Two respondents shared that they felt they were only cast for their disability and not for their work. Alternatively, several respondents referred to the experience of being “the first”. For Person E, it was being the first wheelchair user in their MFA theatre program. Similarly, Person 9 was the first Deaf person in their institution. Person F referred to being a series of “first” experiences for others: the first time for an instructor to teach someone with a disability, the first time a fellow cast member acted opposite someone with a disability, and the first time a theatre critic reviewed a performance in which a character written as having a disability was actually played by an actor with the same disability. These examples clearly illustrate the long way we still have ahead to avoid exclusion and increase representation.

The ripple effect. When asked about the potential benefits and outcomes of inclusive pedagogical approaches, respondents indicated that academic programs or productions that took the steps to include persons

with disabilities experienced positive change beyond just the included person. Person F noted:

I can't tell you how many lives I've touched by being cast in a show. Most of the people in the cast and crew have never been on the stage or worked with someone with a disability. It changes their perception and their attitudes and enriches their lives. It alters how they perceive people who are different from them by having that experience. So think of the number of people that being open to inclusion in your training programs will benefit.

While Person F observed their impact on perceptions about people with disabilities, impact is also seen in the creative practices after working with artists with disabilities. This occurred to Person E when cast in graduate school production:

One of the very first shows I did when I got there, was designed the previous year with multiple stairs and no ramps. So they told the designer that she had to put in a ramp and she was upset because of her budget and all the changes. They were definitely hiccups like that. But it also helped, because a lot of the students there all of a sudden started to think about accessibility. The costume designer would think, 'Oh, I better design that character as a wheelchair user in my costume rendering as opposed to standing'.

In this instance, the need for accommodations caused a disruption to the scenic design that was already in place. The student scenic designer was obligated to add accessibility into a creative process that was already well underway, causing budgetary issues and extra work. Despite this initial access 'hiccup', the respondent noted a positive shift in department culture for subsequent productions: "I just felt like everybody was very much on board which made it easier to surmount any access issues that came up." The addition of an MFA acting candidate who uses a wheelchair spurred designers within the cohort to proactively consider how they might better design for this actor in future productions. Both of these instances illustrate the potential for a 'ripple effect' that can occur when accessibility and representation of disability are

introduced into a department or production. Without these initial disruptions in still ponds, changes might never have happened.

As a further example of the ripple effect, Person 15 commented on the ‘multi-directional benefits’ of inclusion pointing out that if inclusion is “an intrinsic condition and not an addition” from the beginning, “everything that each person can contribute will be enhanced, and not the other way around.” When educational programs focus on the multi-directional benefits, they can potentially avoid the pitfalls of tokenism. Another participant described the creative energy that inviting inclusion can bring:

If you can open yourself to being inclusive of those individuals in those communities, it naturally pushes people out of their box and makes people more creative: if they embrace it, and if they go with it, and say yes. I think it’s mostly just tapping into these creative assets. You have these amazing artists that too often are not included in spaces. They’re going to bring something different to the work. (Person E)

In the end, we have to consider what the ultimate goal is. Person 7 highlights the importance of remembering that “culture is democratic, communal and not elitist and it is part of our daily lives in many ways. Therefore, the entire population must be proactive in its cultural contribution to society.” Person 15 supports this by stating, “I always set the example of the differential value that an inclusive scenic or creative project can bring us, compared to that same project without being inclusive. In the end, the quality canons are the same, however, with the first, we are launching a message of social commitment...”

4. DISCUSSION

Gallego-Noche et al. (2021) argued that injustice could be understood in three ways (1) material, (2) non-recognition, and (3) social non-participation (p. 82). While reviewing the survey responses, non-recognition was observed through all the attitudinal barriers that participants shared: the fear of disability, the lack of knowledge, among others. While some responses showed hope, others showed that there is still much to be done to reverse the idea of disability as a problem or as something

different. Performing arts departments need to embrace Mingus' (2017) "liberatory access" and start building inclusive programs that will benefit all. Perhaps by challenging assumptions and raising awareness about disability invisibility, things might change for the better. To counter this lack of representation, we propose engaging with materials and activities in our classes that will show the diversity (e.g. using readings, podcasts, videos from different perspectives, PowerPoint lectures that showcase representative images, design assignment where cast members have a disability, etc.). As Person 15 stated, "inclusion must be an intrinsic condition and not an addition." This should be the mantra for theatre programs moving forward.

By increasing disability representation and utilizing the principles of Universal Design for Learning, we can more holistically incorporate inclusion into our curriculum instead of it being an "afterthought". All this cannot rely only on one person's interest or need. As Person C indicates, shifting the department culture requires, "Unifying other faculty" and laments that "I am the only one who sees a need to do it this way and it's very hard to get my peers on board..." While the actions of an educator such as Person C do make a difference, imagine the impact of a collective response which puts inclusive practices in action. Thus, as professors, not only do we need to understand what universal design entails and how we can re-formulate our classes to follow its principles (e.g. the way we provide class materials, how we require students to participate, etc.) but how to guarantee participation among all the stakeholders. While we can only advocate for architectural changes to physical barriers in our academic spaces, it is within our power as professors to immediately improve communication barriers by gaining knowledge of diverse teaching and learning methods.

Understanding visible and invisible disabilities is essential to ensuring student success in our classrooms and on our stages. Like a pebble dropped in a still pond, a 'ripple effect' occurs when a focused action or event introduced to a system creates changes (intentional and unintentional) within the larger system as a whole. Imagine that a student with a visual impairment, Actor A, is cast in a show. Consider this as the pebble dropped in the stagnant waters of a theatre department. The 'ripple' of inclusion can be experienced in multiple ways. For example, the accommodations that are made to enable the participation of Actor A might include a PDF of the script suitable for use with a screen reader

device. This PDF might also help Actor B, who has an undiagnosed reading disability, and can now use a text-to-speech app on their phone to aid in reading comprehension of the script. Actor C in the cast is planning to major in Theatre Education and is getting valuable experience being in rehearsal with Actor A which they will then apply to their future theatre classroom. Inspired by the casting of Actor A, box office staff decide to get the assisted hearing system back in working order and takes initiative to find a person to audio-describe performances. As a result of attending a performance with access services featuring an actor with a disability, a student attending from a high school field trip decides to put the program on the top of their college wish list.

As another hypothetical example of the 'ripple effect', a scenic design instructor assigns a script for a class project in which there is a disabled character. The instructor indicates that the design must take into consideration that this character will be played by an actor with a disability. As an additional requirement, the students are asked to create a place in their set design on which to project open captions for audiences. In executing the project, the student designers must consider both how that character would interact in the designed environment as well as the necessary accommodations for the actor (noting that these two things might not clearly align). Similarly, they also must meet the practical needs for open captioning while considering how to purposefully integrate it into their designs. Incorporating accessibility within class projects gets students to consider solutions within the safety of a classroom. They will also see a multitude of possible solutions through observing the work of their peers. This intrinsic approach will prepare students to design for a, hopefully, more diverse professional theatre industry after graduation.

Both of these examples reinforce that access needs to be considered from the initial stages of the creative playmaking process. As mentioned earlier, Ali Stroker has spoken of the challenges she faced as being the first wheelchair user in the MFA program at NYU. However, in support of this ripple effect, she notes, "since I graduated, the program has made some significant changes to accommodate disabled people. A number of disabled students have been in touch with me, which is so great." (Purcell, 2020). Considering that theatre has always been a force for social change, the ripple can extend well beyond our theatrical classrooms and stages. As Kataja (2018) notes, "We need performing

arts to be a field where everyone has value, and when we do that, we send a bigger message to society as a whole to alter current injustices.”

In addition, we need to be more inclusive and accessible in our production processes. As a focus of our work for several years now, we offer a few suggestions: (1) select plays that feature diverse characters (including characters with disabilities), (2) advocate for equal opportunities and access for students with disabilities to audition, to design and staff production teams, and to do crew work, (3) create an accessibility team for each production as an integrated part of the process, (4) build relationships with the disability community and solicit their feedback, and (5) train students on the benefits of being inclusive.

5. CONCLUSION

Performing arts departments in higher education around the world can be the driving force towards a more equitable and inclusive future by centering accessibility in the curriculum, teaching and learning outcomes, and within their creative practices.

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7. NOTES

- ¹ For this paper, the authors have chosen to alternate between person first and disability first identifiers since the people we interviewed and talked with use both.
- ² We want to point out that we, the authors of this paper, do not identify as having a disability ourselves and it is because of this that we found it essential to interview members from the disability community.
- ³ <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/oscepipea/618-data/static-tables/index.html#partb-cc>
- ⁴ <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=60>
- ⁵ (Subdirección General de Actividad Universitaria Investigadora de la Secretaría General de Universidades, 2021, p. 25)
- ⁶ With these numbers, we also acknowledge the potential differences between countries in terms of disability classifications and also the difference in tracking students with disabilities due to the educational support structures for this community.
- ⁷ While our observations are by no means hard data, it is worth noting that we were unable to find studies which have tracked the number of performing arts majors with disabilities in the US or Spain.
- ⁸ We were not able to find any statistics specific for theatre programs. Moreover, this summer at an ATHE presentation we asked professors about this and only one person mentioned having someone with a disability in their program. We are often relying on our perception and possibly inaccurate judgements that a student has a disability unless we receive an accommodation notice.

- ⁹ Although our research focuses primarily in Spain and the US we found in this report from the UK interesting data for the purpose of this paper that was not collected in the other two countries.
- ¹⁰ Delia & Graña's article (2021) pointed out the contradiction between university leaders/diversity coordinators' discourse about diversity and the actual implementation of a truly inclusive practice.
- ¹¹ We would add to this full time and adjunct faculty since O'Shea's research (2018, p. 757) highlights the mutability of the labor force.
- ¹² Which as Charles (2019) pointed out, it can also impact the research output, innovation, new theories or insights influencing the future outcomes of knowledge creation (p.5).
- ¹³ In this sense, we would like to highlight Fuentes's et al. (2021) recent research in Spanish HE and attitudinal perceptions from professors. In this study they pointed out the important role of professors' attitude and influence in students to effectively implement an inclusive approach in education. Moreover, the authors expressed that only those professors within the fields of special education showed totally positive attitudes towards inclusive practices.
- ¹⁴ <https://www.keele.ac.uk/equalitydiversity/equalityframeworksandactivities/equalityawardsandreports/equalityawards/raceequalitycharter/keele-decolonisingthecurriculumnetwork/>
- ¹⁵ According to this company (primary one in the sector) in 11 years they have covered 11 seasons, 600 productions and 51 festivals.
- ¹⁶ See 42 U.S.C. Section 12182(b)(2)(iv) & (v) of ADA
- ¹⁷ Not only auditoriums but green and dressing rooms, costume and scenery shops, booths, etc.
- ¹⁸ https://projects.ncsu.edu/ncsu/design/cud/about_ud/udprinciples.htm
- ¹⁹ We believe that this occurs too with the Spanish LIONDAU 51/2003 law. Required by ADA Title III and LIONDAU
- ²⁰ Required by ADA Title III and LIONDAU
- ²¹ Our findings are meant to be generic and not specific for the US or Spain.
- ²² referring to performing arts
- ²³ referring to art institutions with a strong mission based around diversity and inclusion commitments.