Disability Freedom for Students in Technical Theatre

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A critical literature review with models of moving forward for increased accessibility of theatre for students with disabilities

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Students with disabilities often feel the weight of their future resting on their ability to conform to society's debilitating standards (Kelmer, 2023). Because of an ableist society's restrictions, students with disabilities are not able to fully contribute to being a part of a show, prompting them to feel left behind, and unincluded in the theatre space (Worthington, 2025). These experiences are reflected in all social institutions, including technical theater. Federal funding that would otherwise support the arts faces repeat cuts, restricting theatre education. Not only was there not much funding to begin with, but theatre expenses are high due to the sheer number of departments involved: carpentry, painting, hair and makeup, costumes, sound, lighting, etc. This alone makes theatre an inaccessible industry because there is little funding to help make changes to the theater to be more accessible (Zdeblick, 2024). Moreover, when it

comes to students with disabilities, the physical effort that goes into putting up a show creates a restrictive environment.

To define some terms, technical theater is anything that goes on “backstage” before, during, or after a show. “Backstage” is anything that happens to progress the show that isn’t acted on stage. It can range from designing in the space, and/or working from home, to being in production meetings, to serving as a stage manager in rehearsal. “Technical” can be any department such as sound, lighting, costumes, and production; or positions such as a scenic designer, a firsthand stitcher, a live audio mixer, a production manager, or even carpenters striking the show once it is over.

The term accessibility refers to designing or adapting something to be used by anyone and everyone, regardless of ability (Oregon Department of Education). Accessibility means that there is no ‘right way’ to do things, and that students should be allowed to do tasks how their body sees fit. It ensures equity and safety, which is important because strenuous physical effort can hurt those with disabilities. Most times people with disabilities feel undervalued, coddled to, or are treated differently. “Instead, disability should be regarded as an individual trait, like hair color. Many people with disabilities try to fit into societal current expectations of norms, or pass as able bodied, even when it isn‘t in their best interest in terms of health and safety. The action of passing fail[s] to change the existing system of social privilege and economic distribution” (Nelson, 2013, p. 5).

Technical theatre can be increasingly inaccessible for those with physical disabilities in many aspects given the need for fine motor skills for painting, makeup, and hair; heavy lifting for carpentry, sound, and lighting, as well as using ladders, drills, saws; and having enough space to access catwalks. Theatre doesn’t account for those who move differently in the world, and if it

continues to run without any changes or accommodation. Instructors may feel lost with how to help students with disabilities, and these same students may feel stuck with advocating for themselves. These obstacles make it difficult to come to a conclusion for access, ultimately deterring students with disabilities away from technical theatre or putting pressure on those who engage regardless of access and safety.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Students with disabilities aren't able to fully resist disabling structures and policies when they aren't given the contexts and theoretical understandings of how ableism shapes normativity taught in US theater classrooms (Zdeblick, 2024). Resisting disabling structures and environments can look like making pathways for change, allowing accommodations, and changing policies and procedures (Zdeblick, 2024). Without these tools, students with disabilities are met with blockades when it comes to technical theatre due to accessibility gaps. Because technical theatre is a highly physical job, a lot of disabled students in theatre can be left behind. Much of this is because theaters usually run a tight schedule, and it is hard for them to find time to make accommodations. Production can often feel like a race to tech week, making sure that everything is perfectly placed in a quick amount of time. This paper questions the necessity of such urgency, especially in education.

On top of all of this, we must acknowledge that theatre's history is very elitist, Eurocentric, and centered around white people. This is still seen today, especially in the Chicagoland area, with most theaters being on the north side of Chicago, where most white residents live. Expensive ticket prices makes theatre highly inaccessible for all audience members. Because of theatre centers Eurocentric whiteness, anything that doesn't fit standards of being fast-paced, perfect, or "correct" is seen as bad theatre (Zdeblick, 2024).

If we want to progress as a society, disabled people must reject the pressure and need to pass as able-bodied and instead have the agency to decide how they want to show up in a room. This should be reflected in the structure, process, and schedule of technical theatre. When people are disregarding their disabilities and pushing forward, they are putting their health at risk so that they can seem easier to work with, get more job opportunities, or act on their want to be involved in something that is inaccessible to them (Worthington 2025).

This pressure doesn't come from nowhere. Those in positions of power such as teachers, leaders, peers, and parents perpetuate it, and disabled students carry that with them throughout their lives. A cultural change needs to happen in order for these people in power to stop pressuring young students. If the cycle continues, then there will be no emphasis on making the appropriate policies and practices for change.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to understand the experiences of students with disabilities in technical theatre and help identify strategies and guidelines that can drive change in technical theatre education to ensure self-agency for success in their environments. Through this paper, I identify ways to relieve the external pressure of passing as *able-bodied*—allowing students with disabilities to be in total control of their access and education while fully expressing their identity. Success in environments can be self-defined from student to student, ranging from completing a task to running a show to autonomous self-advocacy or a mixture of all and/or more. Due to the lack of research in this area, I aim to better understand students' needs, and from there, identify strategies for institutional change that can set them up for success when it comes to self-advocation, creating art, and maintaining a healthy relationship between the student and their work. Since technical theatre can be very physically exhausting, this paper

serves to find solutions to avoid physical exertion as much as possible while still finding pathways to access.

When we start the change for accessibility for kids at a young age, it creates awareness and allows others to experience it. It also empowers them to make changes in their environments as well, overall creating the foundation for lasting change. This is important because students with disabilities not only have to brave the disabling world, but they also have to deal with those who do not understand and can harm their environment due to overlooking, underestimating, and bullying. Having other peers experience disability in the classroom allows for implicit and explicit bias over disabled people to be positive.

The overall goal for this paper is to support students with disabilities, providing the tools necessary to facilitate their full access to technical theatre. This paper provides suggestions for instructors looking to promote pathways to understanding, empathizing with, and incorporating inclusive change in their curriculum to ensure increased access and an equitable learning environment.

POSITIONALITY

My positionality is informed by my identity as a white disabled woman, living in Chicago. I was born in the south suburbs of Chicago and went to school in the northside suburbs. My school districts were predominately white, well-rounded in arts, STEM, and more, as well as being academically competitive. I was raised by parents who advocated for me and pushed me to advocate for myself as early as possible. The only other people at my school who were disabled like me were my sisters, so school was a very isolating experience at times, and I never saw any representation of disability throughout my childhood besides my own family. I bring this perspective into my work as I seek to change systems that oppress students with disabilities in

the educational environment of technical theatre (Germinaro). This personal approach informs the structure of my research, purpose, methods, and analytic outcomes.

MY JOURNEY

There was a time where I felt like I wasn't different from others. That was when I was younger, and I was still somewhat level height with the kids my age. It took me some time to realize that something about me was different. I had my first ever spine surgery at three years old, but seeing my sisters go through this too, I thought it was normal.

I had the privilege of never feeling different at home. I have two sisters, a twin and an older sister. We all have the same disability, and all went through the same surgeries, starting with our backs, then our knees, then our feet, then our backs again. Surgery was something that came every year (if not more often) for us, to the point where my amount of surgeries matched my age for a couple years. Once I turned 15, I felt a wave of relief wash over me, as I was finally older than the amount of surgeries that I had undergone, and I felt like I could release a part of me that was chained to my disability. Special modifications were an everyday thing for me as I was wearing back braces, getting new orthotics every time my feet grew, using special cushions at school, taking time away from class so I could nap after coming back from surgery, and even having mini things in the house that my parents installed for my sisters and me that we still have to this day.

I always felt like I didn't really fit into a category of ability or disability. Growing up there was a lot I had to sit out on. I could run laps, yet I wasn't allowed to rollerblade. I could play sports like soccer and lacrosse, but my hip would dislocate during a test in school. I could stretch my arm all the way back, yet bouncy castles were too dangerous. I knew that I had many different disabilities all combined— dwarfism, kyphoscoliosis, joint laxity, knocked knees, and

messed up feet, the long, straight scars all around my body—but I always longed for something that made my disability easier to explain to others.

In 2015, my family and I did a case study at The University of Madison Wisconsin and found out that I have spondylo-epi-metaphyseal-dysplasia with joint laxity type 1 (SEMD-JL). I was glad I finally fit into a category even though only thirty people in the world with this disability existed, including my two sisters and I. In the meeting where we got results, we were told that kids who do not receive medical attention die at the age of twelve by their spine crushing their spinal cord. Being that exact age when I found out this information was terrifying to me. I felt like I escaped death without even having to do anything—I just lived. I felt survivor's guilt for a situation I didn't even know that I was in until it was over.

Although the horrors and traumas that I went through definitely still stain my mind, at the time I felt like I had it easy compared to others with disabilities. I was told that as I age I would only have more mobility issues, and my anxiety told me that I would never be able to be on my own and that the mobility freedom that I had was only temporary. This anxiety came from doctors telling me that I couldn't play sports, that I needed a rolling backpack, and that I am going to experience debilitating arthritis when I get older. They told me I stopped needing to move as much as I was, but I could never sit still, and always felt like I needed to be doing something. All of those things were terrifying to me as someone who used to love sports, felt embarrassed with a rolling backpack (still do), and didn't want to be bedridden by thirty as a kid who used to play outside until the sun set.

I always felt pressure to dim down my issues as much as possible since my family was going through so much while I was growing up. Along with all of our combined spinal surgeries, my older sister had childhood cancer, my twin had endless ENT issues, and I had my hip issues. I

didn't want to burden my parents more than I already was on a day-to-day basis, so I didn't like telling them when I was in pain. If I did, that meant we had to go to the doctor, ultimately resulting in another surgery. Obviously, there were times where I couldn't hide it because a lot of my spine surgeries were a yearly routine to lengthen the metal rod in my spine to fix my scoliosis, so I felt more comfortable sharing my pain when I was younger, versus middle school and high school.

I always tried my best to heal as fast as possible, if that is even a thing that can be done. Every time I woke up from anesthesia, the first thing I wanted to do was get off my IV, stand up, and walk out the door to go home. Able-bodied people don't understand the struggle of having to stay in the hospital bed another day because you aren't healed enough when all you want to do is get back to school and friends. I felt that every time I woke up in that hospital room: I was tired of being frustrated at something that was in my body but I couldn't control.

From first grade, I pressured myself to feel like I needed to go above and beyond everyone around me. I was never the smartest in the room, but I always had good grades and was a teacher's pet. If I couldn't succeed physically, I could succeed in academics, reading, and creativity. Growing up, my mom would always tell me that I was the creative one, that I see the world in rainbows. I loved when she told me that because it made me feel like I was more than who I was physically and that I had potential to be whoever I wanted to be. I was always drawn to art activities because they were a way for me to fully indulge in an activity that didn't require physical work. Looking back at the time I spent in the hospital, my favorite pastime was doing something creative. I felt like I could express myself, and—to me—it was an even playing ground to the people around me; I didn't need a headstart like I did in gym class or on the playground with friends. I yearned for that even ground.

This pressure that I put on myself only grew as I did, augmented by the pressure of others. In my house at home, I was sometimes told that I was lazy because I loved to lounge around the house when I wasn't over-involved in theatre or doing one of my various hobbies. Even though it was unintended, the comments made me feel like I needed to keep doing more, and that made me feel ashamed of the rest that I was allowing myself to have. Because this was drilled in my brain, I have become a self-proclaimed workaholic. I am always reaching for more, even when I am at my limit. I am still learning to say *no*. Although this pressure still impedes my ability to fully relax when I have nothing to do, it also helped me develop an above-and-beyond work ethic that I continue naturally to this day.

Despite my disability being a huge part of my life, when it came to my personal identity, I never felt like I had to lead with the fact that I was disabled. A big part of this was that people could often assume, but because my ability shifts a lot, I was and am able to present as able-bodied. I only have one disability that is visible, which is my dwarfism. Even then, I felt like I never felt in that category of disability because my dwarfism doesn't look like any of my friends who also have dwarfism. I am completely proportionate, and sort of tall for a dwarf at a staggering 4'4". Additionally, I do not have any of the characteristics of dwarfism that are normally seen in people who have achondroplasia. Achondroplasia is the most common type of dwarfism, with an elongated torso and short limbs. I have much more serious disabilities that are invisible as well as the faded scars on my body.

Some people are able to understand that my disability isn't just my dwarfism, that there are other factors that give me chronic pain everyday. Most of the people that I tell about my disability understand that, but some don't and they can get very frustrated with my disability. Some teachers and professors thought that I was overusing my disability as an excuse to get out

of class when I didn't want to be there, when in reality, I was ahead in the class, and I was suffering from degenerative disks in my lumbar spine (along with countless other issues throughout my educational experience). Correcting people is easy, because my scars and my height are very visible to others. Since I have so much knowledge on my conditions, once I start talking about them, I never get second guessed again.

While I was growing up, my creativity eventually wandered to entertainment media. Watching anything theatrical was a thrilling experience that I longed to be involved in. I waited until high school to get involved as people at my middle school bullied anyone involved in theatre, and I already got bullied regularly because of my disability. The sheer size of my high school distracted from the fact that I was in theatre, and I found more people like me. Once I got to high school, I had tucked the idea away until one of my friends asked me to do painting crew with her because she felt too nervous to do it alone. My excitement reignited, and there were many days where crew was the only reason that I went to school.

Every year, I fell deeper in love with theatre. For the first time, I was able to be in a space where I wasn't impacted by my disability. Yes, theatre is physically taxing, but the pain never felt like hospital pain… It was different. For the first time, I felt like I was exercising my body in a positive way that wasn't physical therapy. This time, I had control over it, and I felt like I could finally move my body how I wanted to regardless of what my doctors told me about my mobility. People were nice, and no one ever looked twice at me. Thanks to a student with dwarfism who graduated four years before I got to the high school, my high school already had step ladders, mini saw horses, and a technical director who understood my struggle as a disabled young artist. He saw me and knew immediately what I needed. He always checked in with me and had open conversations about my needs, went the extra mile, and listened when I felt like I had no one to

talk to during my angsty teen years. I loved painting at heights, getting messy, hanging off ladders to reach a far away spot, having deep conversations up on the cherry picker, and feeling big and capable for once. Backstage is where I felt I never had to struggle. But something always called my name to the stage.

It wasn't easy auditioning, but I got an ensemble role in a show, only to realize I was the only one who wasn't in the dance number. My director never wanted to talk about my disability like my technical director did, it seemed as though she assumed that I couldn't participate. I felt as though my work in her drama class was valued, but once I got to after school theatre productions, I was overlooked. It wasn't a safe space to bring up my disability, so I ended up giving up acting. I didn't feel sad for long, and I never had to look any further, because I knew I was never underestimated for my abilities painting backstage.

A month before Covid-19, I was struck with degenerating disks in my lumbar spine, and was ultimately unable to get surgery due to Covid's surgery restrictions. I was told that hospitals were only doing life or death surgeries, and to me, everyday felt like I was getting closer to death. I was in an unimaginable amount of pain, to the point where I developed insomnia. I felt lost—my pain had overtaken my mind, and I became severely depressed and anxious. I started getting bad grades when I was a student with a 4.0+ GPA with dreams of going to architectural school in another state. I had lost my passion, and it seemed like I had screwed up all of my hard work for going to a good college. I started underestimating myself, but with some guidance, my technical director urged me to research schools for technical theatre. I didn't believe that it was something that I could do, given the amount of pressure I had put on myself to live up to standards that weren't attainable for me and my body.

Currently, I am about to graduate in May 2026 from The University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) with a BA in Theatre Design, Production, and Technology, with a focus in set design, scenic painting, and stage management, as well as a minor in education. UIC presented a challenge, being that I had never lived away from home and had to figure out how to physically support myself. I originally thought that I wouldn't need any accommodations, but I was immediately proven wrong. The school's design studio challenged my expectations with tables as tall as I am. I had to climb metal stools with no back support or cushion and scale tables if I ever wanted to store my work in the studio. The shelves were six feet off the ground and the lockers could not fit my model boxes in them. It also didn't help that my program was in a basement with 3 foot wide hallways in classrooms that were no bigger than renovated closets. Even so, I learned to love how small and mighty UIC's theatre program is. To this day, I still don't mind it because it's what I've been used to for the past four years. It reminds me of climbing my countertops at home, just to grab a plate or a cup for water.

Since scenic painting wasn't something that UIC offered, I turned to scenic design as it piqued my interest. Through these classes, I explored scenic design under professor Collette Pollard. She has been the biggest ally for my accessibility, always taking strides with me to advocate for my success. When I took scenic design classes, I was presented with more ability issues. How can I carve out big chunks of foam on a table too small, with a table height that reaches my head, while balancing on a metal stool? I asked for a step stool, and received a heavy plywood box that I struggled to pick up because the handle was at my hip. Through discussion, I was able to get a lighter and smaller step platform, and from then on, I was able to excel in my education, and my work speed doubled.

By trying many different departments backstage, stage management caught my eye. I fell in love with being in such a collaborative position, and for the first time, was in a position of power where my physical appearance and ability had no impact on the work being done. Although I still ran into directors who didn't understand me and the way I moved and operated, I was able to overcome their rudeness and judgement to explain why I do things differently.

I started working in storefront theatre in January of 2025. Being over-involved in almost every production at UIC, my education prepared me for the Chicago storefront theatre community. Since then, I have stage managed for multiple theatre companies and painted for many shows, and finally landed my first set design gig outside of UIC. My professor has also given me an opportunity to help her set design *Eureka Day* at Chicago Broadway Playhouse as a studio assistant. Being involved allowed me to start taking on responsibilities and learning what theatre looks like before graduation. It also allows me to have difficult conversations about my needs and what that looks like professionally in different types of theatre companies. Storefront theaters are very inaccessible, from trekking down to basement shop spaces to loading in endless flats for a show on the second floor.

In my work, I am committed to finding community with disabled people and releasing the troubles that come with the environment being disabling. I believe that all people with disabilities should be able to freely express themselves and do the self-care routines that they need to conserve their body and energy without fear of instability and interrogation. I want to bridge a gap between society and disabled people because society needs to change in order for disabled people to be truly liberated. The arts should create places where help and time are freely bestowed on people with disabilities to do their jobs safely in a progressive, professional environment.

I have made so many strong connections with so many great artists, and I never thought that my career would be so fulfilling this early on. As an artist, I will always reject normalcy since society made an "average" that barely anyone fits into. All art is important, transformative, and political, and I want to tell stories that highlight those who are often in the shadows, as I am often in those same shadows. In my career, I want to make art that challenges the systems that oppress, connects those who feel separated or othered, and emphasizes a need to do better for yourself and the community around you.

METHODOLOGIES

This research study is a critical literature review of scholarship on students with disabilities in educational technical theatre. Critical literature reviews are papers written to show that the author has gathered, assessed, and evaluated different articles on a specific topic that they have extensive knowledge on through research. These reviews not only share descriptions of materials, but analyze, synthesize, and create a new model to move forward with (Booth & Grant, 2009).

METHODS

To begin my literature review, I started by making an appointment with a librarian at the UIC library to get access to as many different databases as possible. The search terms that I used were differing variations of "disability" and/or "ability," "education" and/or "instruction," and "theatre tech" and/or "theatre technology." I wanted to be as broad as possible when it came to my searches, because I knew that resources could be limited.

First, I searched through Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) with my search terms and came across 332,503 results. None of these were applicable to my research after searching through many different pages, because they related to disability in a different

educational area or specifically focused on performance. I then moved on to EBSCOhost, selecting picks from every database. I got 94 results, and throughout those results, I was able to find:

- Reynolds, M. (2022). Accessibility in Technical Theatre: How can we make technical theatre more accessible for people of all abilities? *Theatre Design & Technology (TD&T), 58(1), 12–19.*
- Nelson, M. K. (2013, January 9). Inclusion of the disabled theatre artist. *Howlround Theatre Commons.,* and Vermillion, A. (2022). Imagining Access: What Does Digiturgy Have to Offer? *Theatre History Studies, 41, 49–53.*

These two articles catalyzed my focus exclusively on technical theatre rather than theatre as a whole. After switching my research to be exclusively technical theatre, it was increasingly difficult to find sources appropriate for this topic and research. I then came up with inclusion material (see Figure 1) that these articles need to have in order for them to be vital and applicable.

Figure 1: Inclusion vs. Exclusion Material

Inclusion	Rationale
Material that discusses disability in an education setting	This is informative to the history and current culture that exists in different environments, classrooms, and educational settings
Material that discusses first hand accounts or specific accommodations and recommendations for disabled students' experiences	Students need to be involved in the process if they are the people that need help. There should be no accommodations made if students aren't directly involved. Others' experiences can inform or be transferrable to others.
Material that focuses on technical theatre	Most articles reflected only the performance side of theatre, so they were unable to be used. Technical theatre material is the most essential inclusion material.
Material discusses strategies, procedures, and policies that should be put in place	These policies are important because they are a first step forward for change. I wanted to find as many as possible to show how many different options there are and the many different forms access can look like.

To find the article I previously used, I Googled Nelson's article and ended up finding a newer article that fit the inclusion criteria of discussing technical theatre, accessibility, and firsthand experiences of being disabled in the theatre space:

- Nelson, M. K. (2019, May 19). The importance of including the disabled designers. *Howlround Theatre Commons.*

Then, I searched through Project Muse using the terms "theatre accessibility" with 10,179 results, and "theatre and disability" with 13,340, but I couldn't find anything helpful while looking through ten pages of results because none of the material fit into the inclusion criteria (featured above in Figure 1). After reading abstract after abstract to see if I could potentially use

an article, they were ultimately unhelpful because they were either specific to performance or disabilities in other fields that weren't applicable to theatre.

I did a basic Google search for more information, hoping to find firsthand accounts of being disabled in technical theatre. Through this search, I discovered:

- Oregon Department of Education (2023). Understanding and addressing ableism in schools. *State Library of Oregon Digital Collections*.
- Educational Theatre Association. (2024, February 15). Theatre accessibility: How to improve your program. *Educational Theatre Association.*
- Bright, D. (2020, July 31). Virtual Theater benefits students with disabilities. *Wireless Inclusive RERC| Georgia Institute of Technology | Atlanta, GA*.
- McKoll, K. (2025, March 6). Inclusive curriculum & showcasing artists with disabilities. *GIVE Guide.*

These articles helped with the foundation of addressing disability in the classroom environment. I then decided to dig back into EBSCOhost and found many more articles, such as:

- Zdeblick, M. N. (2024). From Directing to Accompanying: Centering Disability Justice in Theater Pedagogy. *University of Washington ProQuest Dissertations & Theses, 2024. 31328968*.
- Worthington, N. M., & Sextou, P. (2025). Theatre, disability and wellbeing: Addressing best practice and creative outcomes across disabled and non-disabled communities through an interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Arts & Health: An International Journal for Research, Policy and Practice, 17(3), 294-307.*

Additionally, I scoured the sources of the papers that I had already gathered, hoping to find more information regarding theater technology and disabled students. Throughout this process, I came across:

- Wilner, A. (2024, November 25). Disabled theatre artists deserve better pathways into the industry. *HowlRound Theatre Commons*.

After exhausting all of my search engines, I met with my professor who urged me to explore Google Scholar. From there, I was able to find:

- Hole, R. D., & Schnellert, L. (2024). Disability Theatre as Critical Participatory Action Research: Lessons for Inclusive Research. *Social Sciences, 13(2).*
- Kelmer, K. (2023). ADApting Higher Education: Revamping Curricula for the Inclusion of Theatre Students with Disabilities. *Virginia Commonwealth University.*

After time away from researching, I looked into EBSCOhost one last time, discovering my last two sources:

- Morris, P. (2025). Bamboozle Theatre: Creating opportunities for disabled children. *Word Matters, 75(1).*
- Sonali Shah, Mick Wallis, Fiona Conor & Phillip Kiszely (2015) Bringing disability history alive in schools: promoting a new understanding of disability through performance methods, *Research Papers in Education, 30:3, 267-286.*

In total, over my three weeks of researching, I have gathered fifteen sources: articles about the individual experience of being disabled in theatre, studies that were done with students with disabilities, pedagogy strategies relating to those with disabilities, and even guidelines for how the classroom should be and feel for students with disabilities with policies and procedures.

DATA ANALYSIS

To analyze the research articles selected for this review, I completed a thematic analysis (Ahmed, 2025). A thematic analysis is a report that analyzes qualitative data to identify patterns and discern meaning from sources (Ahmed, 2025). In completing the thematic analysis, I engage in a multistep process where I: 1) read all the articles and collected notes, 2) utilized a table provided by my professor to help identify common points and synthesize between papers, and 3) organized these common points to

In researching academic theatre spaces for students with disabilities, most discussion revolves around inclusion and access. However, when it comes to ability, there is no one correct way to do things that were discussed. Instead, these articles offered different pathways to reach the same result of facilitating access. Given the purpose of this paper is to give students resources for their education, themes regarding access and safety are critically important. They each feature different steps that should be taken to ensure a fair classroom and environment to students with disabilities.

A lot of the resources that I used were firsthand accounts of educational experiences in theatre, what students with disabilities could and couldn't do, delving into the different accommodations made versus the blockades they couldn't change and had to work around. Because of this, all of these articles discussed access, but from a different perspective given that disability is different in every person. In further narrowing down the points of commonality, I broke down the idea of access and safety into these six categories:

- ADA regulations for wheelchairs: Specific recommendations of sizing and space to allow for wheelchairs to move around.

- Other accommodations in the physical space: Gadgets and other materials to help aid those with differing motor abilities, as well as clear labeling, bigger fonts, and more.
- Wellbeing of the students mentally and physically: Mental health is directly impacted by physical health, so taking precautions to ensure safety of students goes beyond physical.
- Communicating with people to get needs and access met: Open conversations for those (student or instructor) to freely express their concerns regarding their access and education.
- Media representation: how those with disabilities are portrayed in media and shown as helpless, or having to 'overcome' a disability instead of showing how society is disabling the person.
- Faculty representation: Students with disabilities need to see others like them in positions of power to help understand them and their access, as well as show students that people with disabilities are capable, and can be accountable.

After sitting with these six ideas and reflecting over the best way to represent them, I refined and defined what they mean in terms of these articles into four categories. These four themes were: Open conversations, representation, wellbeing of mind and body, and physical accessibility.

Conversations regarding access were labeled as "open conversations" to express that these conversations are never just a one-time occurrence and change as people change. I chose the term open conversation to express how simple, casual, and comfortable these conversations should feel. As is made clear in some of the articles with firsthand accounts, some students with disabilities describe their needs as being different from others'. Open conversations are "a small and accessible change available to all educators that re-centers the student within the pedagogical

model by creating a student-mentor relationship that is developed on trust, autonomy, and agency" (Kelmer, 2023, p. 68). They are vital for beginning the process of accessibility.

Media and faculty representation were grouped together under "representation." These sources emphasized how disabled people are portrayed in the media, discussed in the classroom, or featured in a play being worked on, as well as whether the instructor is someone themselves with a disability. Media shows how those with disabilities have been framed through time, and faculty representation shows how theatre contexts can change to accommodate those who need it, modeling how disabled people are capable of being in positions of power.

"Wellbeing of Mind and Body" is hugely important when it comes to student's access to ensure that they aren't being harmed in their educational environment. Disability can be a heavy mental and emotional load throughout adolescence into adulthood, so it is important that students' wellbeing stays in check and overexertion is monitored closely, or eliminated entirely.

In a number of these resources, ADA regulations and other physical accommodations were grouped together as "Physical Accessibility." Accessibility should not be limited to only wheelchair-using people, as "wheelchair spaces" are also in place for those who may need a little more space to move freely. They can be helpful to those who use crutches, have a boot or special orthotics, or just move around differently in a space and need more room.

FINDINGS

The first theme is an open conversation. Advocacy starts with a conversation about what is needed, and six of the fifteen sources are represented in this theme (i.e. Educational Theater Association, 2024; Hole, 2024; McKoll, 2025; Nelson, 2013; Nelson, 2019). This open conversation should be available to all students, whether it be private, with the whole class, or both. Open conversations never close and allow for students to bring up issues as they occur to

get the access they need. This also involved shifting language away from “othering” students with disabilities, which can be done by setting expectations for the classroom.

The second theme was determined by a need for representation in the space to allow others to experience disability secondhand. The more it is experienced, the more awareness can be brought to make meaningful changes. Of the fifteen sources, six discussed representation (i.e. Educational Theater Association, 2024; Kelmer, 2023; McKoll, 2025; Sonali, 2025; Zdeblick, 2024). Representation is not only having a disabled student in the classroom but also allowing those students to be in positions of power, as well as represented among the staff is key. Another way this can be done is by engaging in pre-professional programs for students with disabilities and/or having a mentor they can collaborate with. Representation also revolves around media portrayal and how misrepresentations can perpetuate stereotypes. Giving historical context allows for these media portrayals that seem out of character to have context as to why they were made this way. This allows for awareness and change to be more welcome in the future.

The third theme is highly important but not talked about as much. The physical wellbeing of students should be a top priority, especially since technical theatre can be physically demanding. Only four of the fifteen sources discuss this idea (i.e. Nelson, 2013; Nelson, 2019; Worthington, 2025; Zdeblick, 2024). This isn’t just physical wellbeing and pain management but also mental and emotional wellbeing. A lot of anxiety comes with being disabled in a position that causes pain due to urgent deadlines and fixed practices. Allowing the space for students to take the time that they need decreases the pressure and stress that comes with fast-paced theatre production.

The fourth theme is physical accessibility. Six sources out of fifteen discuss the need for ADA accessibility in the theater space (i.e. Bright, 2020; McKoll, 2025; Nelson, 2019; Reynolds,

2022; Vermillion, 2022; Wilner, 2024). This theme of accessibility isn't just confined to wheelchairs, as some disabled students need more room to move around that aren't in wheelchairs; for example, if they have a brace or use a crutch. This is why the term is described as physical accessibility instead of bound to only wheelchairs.

Theme 1: Open Conversation

The first theme is having open conversations with students. These are essential to the safety and success of students with disabilities. They allow students to get the help and accommodations that they need in order to perform daily tasks that may be different to their able-bodied peers. The Educational Theater Association (2024) explains two different ways that these conversations can happen. One option is having the conversation one on one with the student as an instructor, empowering the student to share whatever they feel comfortable sharing and needing. The second option is having an open discussion with the entire class as well as the student(s). If the second option is chosen, all students must be on board to have said conversation and not feel pressured to share out of nowhere. These conversations help students with disabilities feel more comfortable advocating for themselves and encourages them to continue to speak out about the accommodations that they need, ultimately allowing them to have better access and working conditions.

Nelson (2013, 2019) agrees with this point, stating that opening these conversations leads the way for a better understanding of what proper language to be used, which questions to ask that aren't super imposing or improper, and how changing the norm of what disability means can benefit everyone. This is important, not only for the student to openly share, but for the instructor to feel more comfortable. Knowing what the student can and cannot do allows for creative obstacle solving. Often, instructors may feel as if discussing a person's disability is disrespectful,

so they may see the subject as taboo rather than integral to the student's learning process. This is a huge roadblock in the student's journey and can easily damage their education.

Relating to instructors, Zdeblick (2024) reframes instructors' accommodations for students with disabilities as accompanying versus allying. Allying is outdated as it is elitist language that perpetuates hierarchical dynamics, while accompanying allows for student and instructor to be on the same plane, therefore collaborating as equals. This is highly important to help the student feel comfortable sharing their needs and takes away the pressure of discussing a difficult subject with someone in a higher power. Students with disabilities often feel intimidated by the hierarchical power of certain instructors, thus making them feel the need to hide their disability and suffer in silence, ultimately stunting their educational process (Nelson 2013).

Hole agrees that collaborating with people with disabilities on the same plane (accompanying) is necessary for improvement in the research field, stating that all research about people with disabilities should directly involve them, and they should be aware of the entire process—emphasizing the phrase, "nothing about us, without us." There can be no true justice done for those with disabilities if the research and conversations revolving around aid are not including them.

In the world of curriculum, Nelson (2019) believes that it should reflect students' identities and embrace them rather than having the curriculum be the same for everyone except for the disabled students. This is important, because allowing the curriculum to be flexible instead of strict and binary grants students of all abilities the freedom to "self-guide" their education. McKoll (2025) concludes that allowing the curriculum to be a mirror or representation for students fosters free self-expression (another form of open conversation) of identity that doesn't have to be hidden. By openly discussing process, findings, and creativity, disabled

students will have a platform to share and be seen by not only their instructors, but their peers who are now better acquainted with the experience of a disabled person.

Theme 2: Representation

The second theme focuses on the need for representation in technical theatre. There are many different ways that representation can be present in learning environments. Representation is highly important and necessary because it breaks down the barriers between able-bodied people and disabled people. It teaches others that disabled people have more to them, and they are never just their disability.

One way to boost representation is to change the materials and allow for new plays and works that tackle disability. The most important dramaturgical aspect that should be discussed with material with disability representation is the historical context behind it. In Zdeblick's (2024) research study, theatre of the oppressed was taught to students to help them learn critical literacy and deal with the struggles of injustice in their communities—directly deconstructing ableism with her students. Theatre of the oppressed teaches students the history of disabled rights, as well as societal and institutional struggles that they endured (and still do) that some able-bodied students may not realize still affect people (Sonali, 2025).

McKoll (2025) agrees with teaching students the contexts in which the materials take place, adding that all instructors should look over their materials for perpetuated stereotypes, systems, and institutions that oppress those with disabilities to give context as to why those disabled people may be experiencing what they are experiencing. Not only does this educate those about the historical context of disability triumphs, but it also allows students to have empathy for those with disparities, ultimately breaking down the stigma against the capabilities of disabled people. Kelmer (2023) also includes context, stating that media representation is

usually not truly representative of the disabled experience. A lot of media is usually portraying the disabled character as helpless and erratic due to their situation, when—in reality—it is the environment that is disabling that person, ultimately making them act in certain ways (Zdeblick, 2024).

The way to break stigmas is to spotlight those students with the responsibilities that they deserve and work hard for. It can help other students that may have unnoticed prejudice realize that disabilities are not something that takes away from the capability of a person, therefore helping students unlearn their ableism. Faculty and instructors should also be a representation for students as well, showing that leadership for people with disabilities can go beyond the classroom (Educational Theater Association, 2024). Starting with representation in the classroom leads the way for more opportunities in the professional world and creates a ripple effect, ultimately changing the standard and societal norms of people with disabilities (Educational Theater Association, 2024).

Theme 3: Wellbeing of Body and Mind

The third theme is the wellbeing of body and mind, meaning that the overall health of the student is vital to their performance and ability. The main reason for accommodations like open conversations, regulations, and change in pedagogy is for the overall health and wellbeing of students with disabilities. A lot of students often feel pressured to pass as able-bodied, and yet whenever they represent themselves as passing, they are inherently hindering their health and ability to perform (Nelson, 2013). This pressure of passing can be either internal or external. Internally, many disabled people don’t want to be seen as someone to coddle or labeled as a person that is “hard to work with” due to their accommodations. This is done in the hopes

that—despite their disability—people who pass are seen as easy to work with, flexible, and overcoming their disability (Worthington 2025).

Externally, this pressure can come from teachers, directors, or anyone that has a higher power or influence over the student. This creates unsafe power dynamics where students feel shunned away, that they cannot represent the part of themselves that is disabled or seen as *other*. There is an odd phenomenon in theatre where suffering is commendable, as "the show must go on" (Zdeblick, 2024). This ideal, which is often perpetuated in theatre spaces, is dangerous to those with disabilities as it pressures them to push past their capabilities and physical limitations, therefore putting them at extreme levels of exhaustion with no room to rest. The theatre industry regularly has late night rehearsals, long tech days, and physically demanding tasks that all must be done within a two-to-eight-month process. In school environments, these are usually shortened to one to three months, ultimately putting extreme pressure on disabled students to perform at an able-bodied level, or else they may be considered as incapable and unvalued (Zdeblick, 2024). This only enforces the narrative of people with disabilities being "helpless" or something to pity. In reality, they are disabled by their environments, not their physical capability.

Possible solutions for physical burnout include slowing down the pace, allowing for more breaks, and facilitating student partnerships with assistants (if they are in a leadership position) or team members to help them (Nelson 2019). This also gives way for students to be in areas of leadership positions where they lead crews of people, allowing them to be an integral part of the process.

Theme 4: Physical Accessibility

The fourth theme is physical accessibility. Physical accessibility is vital to those with disabilities to allow them more space to move in their environment. Physical accessibility is often rarely found in theaters due to a lot of them being old buildings that were made before ADA regulations. “A 2022 peer-reviewed study assessed fifty well-funded undergraduate collegiate programs using a University Disability Inclusion Score and found that 60 percent received a close to failing grade when measuring accessibility, accommodations, and reputation for inclusion. In comparison, only 6 percent received an A” (Wilner, 2024, p. 3). Due to structural foundations inhibiting changes, some disabled students feel forced to push past their limits and exhaust themselves.

The main issue for theaters being inaccessible is not having the proper funds or time to make changes to the theater. Looking forward, when it comes to designing theater spaces, the seven principles of design should always be heavily implemented (Reynolds, 2022). Those principles being equitable use, flexible use, simple and intuitive concepts, perceptible information, tolerance for effort, low physical effort, and appropriate size and space. Appropriate size and space relate to ADA regulations that allow wheel-chair users to safely and independently move around the space. This can often be hard in small theaters, but creating backstage rules that explicitly state that all spaces must be clear pathways is one step towards equitable accessibility. Other accessible features can be described as large print documents and measuring tapes, a posted decibel meter for when to wear hearing protection, tech tables being in the audience during the entire build process, and many more solutions (Reynolds, 2022).

Bright (2020) and Vermillion (2022) offer a different solution to physical access, which is moving things online. Bright believes that being at home takes a lot of physical burden off of the

students by having to move around an inaccessible theater. This may be challenging with hands-on technical theatre but is productive for things such as production meetings, read throughs, and paper tech. Vermillion (2022) offers digiturgy as an alternative for in-person theatre, which is defined as "art, technique, theory, and practice of composition for digital storytelling" (p. 49). This allows students to still be creative, but from the comfort of their home. There may be some challenges with this since technical theatre is very hands-on, but a digiturgy project alone could be highly successful.

When each of these themes are implemented into the program, a safer, and more equitable environment for disabled theatre artists is upheld. Having a space to share where people are receptive to change and feedback allows for change to start—but that isn't enough. There needs to be collaboration between student and instructor to ensure that the student's wellbeing is in good health, along with accommodations that are outlined and put into practice. This allows for students to succeed and be able to be in positions of leadership and employment, deconstructing the narratives and stereotypes around disabled people. Often students with disabilities are overlooked, even when people in power believe that they are being helped. Transparency, equity, collaboration, accountability, and representation are all things that need to be present to ensure the success of disabled students in technical theatre.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to note that nothing should be done for students with disabilities without them being aware first. Students with disabilities are the beholders of knowledge of their bodies, their disabilities, and what they can and cannot do (Reynolds, 2022), so we must honor that by creating ongoing dialogue that ultimately leads to access.

When a disabled student joins a classroom or a theatre project, access checks and open conversations should be scheduled and happen as soon as possible. This is because instructors cannot see something that may be inhibiting the student's ability to participate. These open conversations can be one-on-one, with the whole class, or both, if disabled student is comfortable with talking about access needs with the entire class. These conversations are not only limited to students with disabilities but can be open to anyone who knows that they work differently or need extra support. These conversations include anything that the student might need regarding access, time away due to illness, physical recovery, or doctor and hospital visits. The discussion should also include how they like to operate on their own.

This open conversation can also involve shifting language away from "othering" students with disabilities. For example, do not use the term "overcoming a disability" because there is no way to get rid of it—we live *with* it (McKoll, 2025). This can be achieved by setting expectations for students and their language, including what words they are not allowed to use when it comes up. With this emphasis on language, students aren't being taught harsh words to be used against their disabled peers, but rather addressing it when it comes up, along with the context behind the word. A student speaking out of turn can and should take accountability for their actions, regardless of if they were intentionally harmful or not.

A poster board in the classroom or theater describing the expectations for actions and language of everyone in the classroom can be helpful, as would discussing them in the first meeting or class. With a clear understanding of the explicitly-stated expectations, there is no room for excusal of one's actions that intentionally harm another student (Oregon Department of Education, 2023).

When it comes to curriculum and pedagogy, lessons that may be inaccessible to students with disabilities should never be completely cut. They should be accommodated for those with disabilities. The needs that the student expressed during the open conversation should be implemented into all lessons. If an instructor is unsure of how to make something accessible, check in with the student to come up with ideas together. When it comes to redesigning a lesson for students with disabilities, they should always be aware of the changes, because even with the change, it may not be fully accessible (Zdeblick, 2024). These changes can be discussed during the access check, or before the activity is being done, never during the lesson so that students have time to plan with the instructor, and feel comfortable in their decisions.

Representation is important for students with disabilities to feel a sense of belonging. This can be done by looking at the materials of plays and musicals and either shifting or making room for media that portrays people with disabilities (Kelmer, 2023). Some have harmful stereotypes and may not be realistic to the disabled experience, so it is important to give context behind why those stereotypes are perpetuated (McKoll, 2025). For example, *The Glass Menagerie* shows a disabled character, Laura, who feels helpless due to her disability in her leg. With more understanding, we can see that her portrayed shyness and deceptions are a result of society rejecting her due to her disability. Some may make assumptions that Laura's motives are due to her disability, when in reality they are tied to her character instead of her disability. Regardless of disability status, all plays and media shared in class should involve historical, social, and economic context, especially because of theatre's racist and elitist history.

Breaking down these stereotypes allows all students to see how the environment is disabling them and the hardships that result. Bringing awareness to the disabled experience not only benefits the disabled students, but also allows others to empathize, connect, and collaborate

with people who are differently abled. Awareness empowers this understanding to continue in the future—essentially changing the narrative of inclusivity (McKoll, 2025). Disabled characters in literature help facilitate positive relationships between nondisabled and disabled peers (Sonali, 2015). Sonali (2015) also believes that, "an enabling education is important for an equal society as today's school children are the teachers, policy-makers and employers of tomorrow. Recognizing the value of personal qualities, talents, and diversities of all contributes to a healthier, happier and economically successful society," (p. 5).

Representation should not only appear in materials in the classroom but also the staff as well. If we want students with disabilities to feel capable of being in the arts, being a leader, and succeeding despite their struggles, we must have people with disabilities in power. This sends a message that students with disabilities are welcomed and wanted in spaces. This staff member in power should also reflect agency back to the students. One way can be to give a disabled student a designer position, allowing them to be in a leadership position. Disabled people's authority is commonly diminished by "assumed authority" granted through power inequities, which is why it is important that they are represented in positions of power (Worthington, 2025). Since designers still have to do some physical work, they can either lead a crew or have an assigned peer assistant or co-designer helping them. Having disabled technicians and designers backstage also helps change the narrative for onstage performers as well. Having disabled people backstage helps accentuate disabled actors onstage, because they are more understanding of access needs and other factors that play part in performing as a disabled person (Nelson, 2013).

Another way to help representation in students with disabilities could be to start an allyship between an instructor and the disabled student. This is especially important if the student is looking to do theatre professionally. Once the initial open conversation is had, the instructor is

in an allyship with the student. However, this connection can deepen accessibility when an instructor helps students with their access needs directly by making changes, collaborating, and can also include offering pre-professional work—accompanying. Instead of being an ally to the student in a static relationship, the instructor can accompany the student on their endeavors. Some ways this can be accomplished by allowing students with disabilities to sit in on a tech process, helping them with college applications, or checking over a resume (Zdeblick, 2024). The difference is that an ally is someone who helps someone with hierarchical dynamics versus accompanying, which means taking strides for change and accessibility together.

Students' wellbeing is critical for their success in every aspect of life. If they are being physically hurt by engaging in technical theatre, that can impact their sleep schedule, homework, friendships, and so on. Physical pain is something that is all-consuming, and it is hard to focus and engage with something when it is heightened. Taking away physical demands can be done by assessing what is possible and what is harmful to the student during the open conversation. For example, a student may be fine to carry full paint cans around but cannot carry a 10ft ladder and may need help with grabbing and placing that in different positions for their painting.

To be truly accommodating, theatre departments must also enact change in their culture around urgency and speed of production. If it feels like issues cannot be dealt with because there is no time to change and address them, the space must be slowed down (Zdeblick, 2024). Accessibility needs must be addressed before starting a show with a student with a disability—if not, it is impossible to have a fair and safe process. In the theatre world, there is a common saying of, "the show must go on." This saying perpetuates the idea that there is no time to stop and change the way that things are done, that we must keep pushing. There is also a level of praise that comes with suffering for continued success in theatre. This ideology is harmful

because it teaches young theatre artists that they should endure work no matter what, that work comes first over health. Good health is vital for good performance, and if health is suffering, not only is there no good work being done, but it is dangerous to push through an illness or injury.

By keeping technical theatre as harmless as possible, students can excel in their environments. In technical theatre, it is impossible to avoid physical labor, but there are alternatives to those who cannot engage in physical activities—like being put in a lead designer position, as stated earlier (Nelson, 2013). There are also many specific efforts that can be made to help students with disabilities in the theatre space, ranging from big design changes to simple labeling.

When it comes to those who have difficulties with sight, paperwork and programs can utilize big fonts or braille. Black and white colors or high contrast colors can benefit those with color blindness. There should also be a clear labeling of the end of the stage, especially if there is a pit orchestra. For props and set dressing, furniture and props can be labeled with colors and text for certain storage areas so there isn't energy wasted on figuring out where the prop or furniture piece goes. Large print measuring tapes and tool bins clearly labeled with text and pictures can also alleviate visual strain.

For students with hearing disabilities, there should be a decibel meter somewhere for loud noises such as sound cues, saws, drills, and pressure tanks for industrial staple guns. This helps communicate to those with hearing difficulties when to wear hearing protection; anything above 85 decibels requires it. Furthermore, any materials that utilize video should require audio descriptions and captions (Nelson, 2013).

Students with dwarfism or other vertical challenges should have step stools around the space that they can easily access. There should also be adjustable saw horses for students

building and constructing sets so that they can work and saw at their desired height. Tools frequently used should be stored at their height. Either all of them should be stored lower, or the student should have their own section/locker of tools that they are able to grab from. If the latter, others who are average height should not have access to these, as they may unintentionally grab from this, depriving the student of tools at their access.

For wheelchair accessibility or those with mobility issues, pathways should always be clear with five feet of room. Again, ADA accessibility is not just confined to those in wheelchairs but to people with all disabilities. This space is allotted for more than only wheelchair users to move around freely. Some students with disabilities may use crutches or have bulky braces that are prone to getting caught on objects, so having the space clear prevents struggle from happening.

When it comes to lighting, there are many changes that can be made. In certain theaters, light hang can be lowered to deck level instead of the catwalks. This is easier for electric baton lines but is unavoidable when hanging directly on the catwalk. Hanging at deck level can sometimes be challenging if there are large set pieces and flats in the way, so scheduling for this to be done as early as possible is vital so that set pieces can be incorporated. Focusing is also a challenging task, necessitating people at tall heights on giant ladders. A way to combat this challenge is to hang lift chairs on batons, allowing for those with mobility issues to sit in these chairs, safely strapped to the baton and involved in focusing lights. This is also helpful because two people could focus at once—one can be focusing on a ladder while another focuses in the lift chair.

When it comes to the build and tech process, tech tables should always be available. This removes the need for students to run from onstage all the way up to the booth, back down, and

onstage again, just to repeat this process for programming—especially because most booths require stairs to be climbed. It is important to have a counter rake in the audience for those with wheelchairs so that they do not feel like they are being pulled forward out of their chair due to the rake in the audience seating. Those with other disabilities should have cushioned seats to help alleviate pain that comes from sitting in tech for twelve hours.

The seven principles of design should be present in every space that wants to constitute itself as an accessible space (Reynolds, 2022). The first being equitable use, meaning it focuses on diverse abilities—not the majority—leading into the second principle of flexible use. Flexible use means it takes individual preference and ability into account. The third principle is making sure that things are simple, intuitive, and easy to understand regardless of knowledge and skill. The third leads into the fourth, that communication is effective. The fifth is tolerance for error, meaning that everything that could be hazardous has a clear label and has fail-safe features. The sixth principle is having everything require low physical effort so that people don't overexert themselves. The seventh and last principle is appropriate size and space, allowing for those of short stature, those in wheelchairs, and everyone else to reach and utilize equipment. All of these principles should be taken into account when designing, organizing, and preparing a theater space so that it can be used equitably. These principles are important to implement to foster student independence, alleviating the burden of asking others for help as much as possible.

A lot of disabled students may feel burdensome due to their disability and try to hide it. "I spend so long trying to make a new director feel comfortable about working with me that actually I haven't raised issues that are making me feel uncomfortable," (Worthington, 2025, p. 301). There are differing reasons for why some students choose to diminish their disabilities, some being from personal pressure that they put on themselves and others from external pressure

from directors, colleagues, and family. Hiding or diminishing a disability is dangerous due to the other medical issues that can occur from overworking or overlooking a component of one's disability.

If we want to change the narrative for people with disabilities, disabled people need to stop making allowances for non-disabled people's imperfections, ignorance, and slow learning curve on how another person operates (Worthington, 2025). Self-advocacy can be unnerving for disabled people because they want to be seen as easy to work with so they can get more opportunities. However, actively advocating is essential to the growth and development of disability justice. This is not meant to tell disabled people to be mean to those who don't understand but rather to speak up when something is incorrect or unjust. Holding people accountable with language, actions, and attitude is an important step in the process.

When it comes to how the instructor should behave, they should be flexible, adaptable, a creative problem-solver, as well as someone who checks in with their students often. The material that the instructor has should include components of social justice, disability justice, new work, and old work, all while explaining the contexts in which these works may be empowering, disabling, frustrating, liberating, and so on. Learning media without context depletes the soul of education, perpetuating shallow learning of materials that doesn't fully acknowledge the art that was created. It is important to diversify the material as much as possible to stray away from theatre's roots: Theatre is based on white Eurocentric able-bodied ideas, instead of what serves the class (Kelmer. 2023).

Furthermore, instructors must "embrace disability as a part of the aesthetic, experience, and making. Include voices and experiences rather than as something special… Curriculum is a mirror reflecting students' identities, a doorway into new experiences, and an amplifier for value

and importance" (McKoll, 2025). Students bring their own experiences and knowledge to every assignment, so if there is a curriculum that is inaccessible to them, the curriculum is invalid until the student can either have an accommodation or the curriculum is changed for all. That decision between accommodation or curriculum change should be discussed with the student, so everyone is aware of why changes are being made. This allows students to be in the driver's seat, leading their education and accessibility instead of feeling like choices are being made for them. As an instructor, you must ask yourself, "How am I building accessibility and valuing disabled people's contribution in my practice? What are disabled people having to do to accommodate my inexperience of disability, and how can I ease the weight of that?" (Worthington, 2025, p. 304).

CONCLUSION

If we want to combat the ableist and elitist past that theatre has, we need to actively be creating pathways for change for students with disabilities. Theatre is a home for those who are different, so they should not be gatekeeping their students, collaborators, or future artists. Establishing strategies of policy change and planning can bridge the gap between students and students with disabilities to break down the barriers that divide students with disabilities from others. Instructors have a responsibility to create safe environments for their students, and it doesn't stop in theatre just because the pace and rhetoric may be different from an English or science class.

Students with disabilities need to feel wanted, important, and needed in spaces or else they will have no safe place to call home. As educators, there is always more room for change and equity to be established in the classroom, whether that be with the entire class, student to student, or individually reflecting on ourselves and our actions. Educators must understand that

everything that goes on in the classroom with regards to accessibility with students must be done in collaboration with the student, as there is “nothing about us, without us” (Glenn, 2024).

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