

Effects of Inclusive Arts Education on Entertainment and Culture

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Author's Note

In the summer of 2018, I apprehensively took the job of directing and choreographing the children's musicals at the Bender JCC of Greater Washington in Rockville, MD. I was prepared to waste a summer with bratty kids and lazy teenage counselors. Luckily, I was wrong about everything. Upon arriving for training, my co-director and I realized that it was not your ordinary summer camp. In fact, the Bender JCC of Greater Washington is a dedicated inclusive summer camp, serving typically-developing kids from ages 4-13 alongside kids in that same age bracket who have different intellectual disabilities ranging in severity from undetectable to debilitatingly serious.

At first, it was challenging to teach theatre and dance to kids at such diverse levels of ability. However, aided by the resources and support we received from both the camp and its dedicated families, the musicals were deemed a great success. Each child excelled in their onstage roles and clearly benefited offstage as a result of this remarkable experience. Teaching that summer opened my eyes to the power of an education that considers ability as an important aspect of inclusion. By focusing on what every child *can* do versus what they can't, all participants grew in the process and, equally inspiring, made a difference to the production and their communities in the process. While all participants stood out in different ways, there were a few who particularly exemplified the full benefits of an inclusive education in the arts.

One of my students, Samuel, was twelve years old when we met. He has autism, and like many kids with that diagnosis, had a lot of trouble connecting to his peers and being able to read and understand social cues. His inability to express how he was feeling and occasional outbursts along with sensory issues involving physical contact with others might have relegated him to a

background role in a typical production. Samuel also had a deep, rich voice, and a commanding stage presence. Samuel was the perfect choice for the leading role in *Beauty and the Beast*. His special cognitive abilities made memorizing lines a breeze. His featured role also furthered his self-development. Much like the Beast, during the course of the production Samuel learned to express his feelings and to monitor the intensity of his outbursts. He learned how to connect and to engage in more appropriate social interactions with his peers. He also grew as a role model and friend to his younger classmates. Samuel, who entered the summer on the shy side, ended his summer inviting his new friends and cast mates to his birthday party, something his mother said had never happened before.

Another standout experience from my work at the JCC was witnessing the development of a special friendship between two young ladies: Alex and Lily. Alex is a typically developing kid, and one who could be considered a child prodigy in terms of singing and acting. Lily, however, has Downs Syndrome. The girls' friendship developed over the summer and while Alex played Jasmine in the musical *Aladdin*, she continued to support her friend, teaching her the music and going over choreography, which Lily was able to master after practice and encouragement from a friend. Alex seemed to have some trouble at first teaching her friend, which required time and perseverance; singing and dancing come easily to her. After a while, though, her patience grew, and she was soon teaching Lily everything she needed to know. Feeling increasingly confident in what she was doing, Lily did an incredible job onstage. Around nine months later, Lily was featured on the local news for her achievement- becoming a bat mitzvah, something people thought would never be possible due to her disability. Reading on the *bimah*- essentially a stage- and having the confidence to stand in front of the congregation is a skill she practiced and excelled in doing theatre over the summer. This was beneficial not only in

facilitating her progress as a performer but is already making an important difference in her development as a young woman.

Spending my summer with these wonderful children, and experiencing their personal growth was life-changing leaving me with questions about why this approach to arts education remains relatively uncommon. As a result, I became inspired to further explore the issue and benefits to all from an inclusive approach to arts education. This is an issue I perceive as important for achieving social justice and equity, not only in the arts but in all spheres of human activity.

Introduction

In our current cultural climate, there is increasing demand for more diversity and inclusivity, whether it be in the office or onstage. Typically, we understand diversity or inclusion as it relates to race or gender inequity. However, there is another significant segment of our population that continues to be underrepresented: people with disabilities.

People with both physical and cognitive disabilities are one of the most underrepresented groups in the United States, facing 19.1% unemployment rate across all industries, according to the [US Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). Journalist Kristen Lopez finds that this lack of representation, “like racism, [is] the erasure of an entire group of people” (Lopez, [Forbes](#)). In our democracy, there is a clear lack of awareness, understanding and resources that generates this injustice across all facets of our society.

A focus on the need for diversity in the arts and entertainment industries should encompass *all* diversity, including disability. The dictionary definition of diversity is the state of difference, or unlikeness in individual pieces of a group or collection. Disability is a major point of difference, therefore an integral component of diversity. If the intention of the arts is to

record and express the full range of human experience, then the inclusion of people with disabilities in their definition of diversity is an imperative component of our story.

We are beginning to see the positive results of producers who take a more inclusive approach in the arts and entertainment industries. Theatre and performance companies featuring disabled actors have found success on Broadway, such as Deaf West's presentations of [*Spring Awakening*](#) (2015) and [*Big River*](#) (2003) both of which featured deaf and hearing cast members.

There are increased calls for including the disabled in casting from arts and social leaders worldwide. Artistic Director David Kurs said in an interview with the [*Los Angeles Times*](#) "that increased media representation of [disabled] people is directly tied to the position of the [disabled] community in the world." Another influential leader, Bernd Neuendorf, State Secretary of North Rhine Westphalia for Families, Children, Youth, Culture and Sports, also preaches that "people with mental or physical disabilities have the right to develop their artistic potential," in order to open other opportunities. By increasing opportunities in arts education for this population, we are promoting the development of a better future.

The community arts organization, [*Alternate Roots*](#), supports its mission of diversity by noting that art is "the catalyst that brings together a group of people who, by every measure in our history, aren't supposed to be able to be in the same space yet alone find common ground."(Alternate Roots). An inclusive approach to education cultivates a culture of kindness based on the principles of inclusion, diversity, and equity. Developing and supporting methods of integrating and including children with varying abilities and neuro-divergences not only has values for our children, but influences societal attitudes, values, and beliefs essential for human progress and a more just world.

The research here, prompted by a life-changing experience with inclusive arts education (see author's note), advocates for inclusivity in the live arts and entertainment industries based on ability enabled by innovations in arts education and production practice. Through field interviews and secondary sources, this project explores challenges and strategies supporting a more inclusive approach to the arts benefiting those with varying disabilities as well as their surrounding communities. This document should be understood as an introduction, a rudimentary guide for educators, caregivers, and industry representatives, designed to bring attention and increase support for an approach to arts participation that enables those with autism spectrum disorders, vision or hearing impairments, mental health conditions, intellectual disabilities, acquired brain injuries, and physical disabilities.

Representation of Disabled Individuals in Film and Television

“People with disabilities account for 20% of the population but only 2% of people seen in film or on television,” according to Hollywood disability advocates Danny Woodburn and Kristina Kopic, making them the “most underrepresented minority in entertainment.” (*Ruderman White Paper*) A recent op-ed in [The Guardian](#) notes that people with disabilities have “virtually no influence in cinema and the enduring myths that are being created about them are by able-bodied filmmakers,” (Ryan, *The Guardian*) referencing inaccurate portrayals of people with disabilities and the disabled person's experience.

Disabled people, when included in casts, often play minor or background characters, Shannon Kelly for [Disability Horizons](#) reported in 2018. That same report went on to claim that just 2.7% of the top 100 grossing movies include people with disabilities. Even more troubling is the common practice of casting non-disabled actors as people with disabilities, especially

concerning when an entire film, show, or television series revolves around the topic of disability, including *Wonder* (2017), *Me Before You* (2016), and *The Fundamentals of Caring* (2016). Of the few characters created with disabilities, 95% of them are portrayed by non-disabled actors, concluded a study by the [Ruderman Family Foundation](#), a leader in disability advocacy in the performing arts. In response to controversies surrounding non-disabled actors in disabled character roles, advocate and disabled actor Adam Pearson said that “In the 90 year history of the Oscars, 16% have been awarded for movies / performances based upon a portrayal of disability and the disabled experience, with 20+ abled bodied actors winning awards, ”further noting that during the same period, “only 2 disabled actors have been awarded the same accolade” (Pepper, [The Guardian](#))

Today’s artistic directors and choreographers are expected to create authentic universes, and many understand and even embrace the need to diversify casting choices to better represent and support minorities and other groups. Challenging widespread inclusion of the disabled in the arts is a significant lack of knowledge, resources, and general societal support.

For his role in the 2019 film *The Upside*, acclaimed actor Bryan Cranston has been criticized for playing the role of a paraplegic man. Fighting back, Cranston made a statement claiming that as an actor, it is his job to play any role and to become someone else, which could include disability, sexuality, or socioeconomic status (Dry, *Indiewire*). While it can be argued that having a big star in a film can boost box office sales and lead to awards at the Oscars and Golden Globes, these are also important opportunities for an unknown, equally talented, disabled actor. Disability advocacy groups uphold that the opportunities should be made available to equally talented actors who may have experience with that disability alongside those actors who are not disabled, providing all interested parties a fair shot. Disabled actor-writer Mat Fraser said

in an interview with [The Guardian](#) that “Ideally, anybody should be able to play any body, but only when there is a truly level playing field of opportunity” (Pepper, *The Guardian*).

Sally Hawkins’ portrayal of a non-speaking, signing person in the 2017 Oscar-winning film, *The Shape of Water* also generated debate over the opportunities available to disabled actors. While praising the film for acknowledging the sexuality of disabled people, writer Elsa Sjunneson-Henry also expresses the impact the film might have made if the cast had featured a non-speaking actor for the lead female role. “It would have been a much more powerful film had the actress been a disabled woman,” she writes, “especially someone whose sign was fluent and natural, a sign language that she relied upon every day to communicate, and not just for a single role” (Sjunneson-Henry, [Enabling Devices](#)). While the reviews don’t deny that Hawkins played the part well, we are left with the poignancy of Hollywood’s perhaps unintentional but negative long-term effects on the disabled community and general audiences.

Inclusivity is a particularly important issue for those who create and produce popular entertainment. As Ana-Christina Ramón, assistant director of the Bunche Center, said in an interview with [the Huffington Post](#), “visual media teaches us how the world works and our place in it” (Boboltz and Yam, *Huffington Post*). Sociologist Michael Morgan reinforced that statement, adding that “When you don’t see people like yourself, the message is: You’re invisible. The message is: You don’t count. And the message is: ‘There’s something wrong with me” (Bolboltz and Yam, *Huffington Post*). Without people with disabilities having their stories told, and without the proper representation, consumers, which include disabled people, their parents and caregivers, and other members of our culture start to believe, subconsciously, that their stories don’t matter. They start to believe that they can’t pursue creative careers, and therefore don’t pursue or advocate for the proper education or accommodations in creative

forums. In an article for [Teen Vogue](#), writer and advocate Alice Wong writes, “disabled people are everywhere, and yet we’re invisible and erased by people with unexamined privilege in the center. An example of ableism: when it’s the default that disabled characters are played by non-disabled actors.”

Although this social injustice has remained unaddressed for far too long, there are finally signs that movements to make change are beginning to gain traction, from advocacy and social justice blogs all the way to late night television. News personality [Trevor Noah](#) included a segment on his popular program, *The Daily Show*, about the lack of well-known, disabled actors and lack of well-written, disabled characters, claiming that after researching and speaking with disabled actors, he understood why and was turned sympathetic to the plight of the disabled performer.

Although Actor’s Equity claims that in casting the roles of disabled characters, “every avenue should be considered to cast a disabled actor,” this guideline is too rarely put into practice. Studios often claim that they need to cast famous actors to make a movie financially successful, but there aren't many well-known disabled actors, and therefore, they cannot cast them. Advocates counter that this is because disabled actors rarely get the chance to star in a movie- turning this issue into a vicious circle. Arguments people have against hiring disabled actors come in a huge range, from *there wasn't anyone to play the role* to *it would be too difficult to have a disabled person on set or in rehearsals*, according to S.E. Smith of the [Daily Dot](#) (Smith, *Daily Dot*). These false claims, however, are bolstered by the human tendency to be efficient, get the most done with the least amount of effort – in short, the desire for convenience is a significant factor working against those who advocate inclusivity of the disabled in casting.

As a quick search online evidences there is a pool of talented actors with disabilities around the world. However, the casting calls are not inclusive, therefore there is no one in front of these casting directors to see. Additionally, if there were to be more people with disabilities on television or featured in other forms of entertainment media, more performers with disabilities would be encouraged to move to Los Angeles or New York to be present for these auditions. In terms of having people with disabilities on set or in rehearsals, it may seem like a lot to ask for to make accommodations for performers who need them, but in reality, it is the same as making an accommodation for children in the industry, or pregnant women. Adjusting schedules around school and other projects, changing the space for safety or convenience reasons, and costume adjustments are things we already do. Instead of making minor modifications, people choose to exclude those with disabilities for their own expediency.

These exclusionary tactics may seem like the main roadblocks otherwise competent performers face in their pursuit of a career. However, it can be argued that the foundation for a lack of inclusion in entertainment and other industries is a profound lack of education, or knowledge impacting awareness and decision making of disabled people, their families, and professionals. People without disabilities may find the harsh conditions under which the performing arts are studied off-putting and unwelcoming. "I discounted myself from the profession," said Jessy Yates, the first recipient of [The Yale School of Drama](#)'s scholarship for disabled performers said in a statement. "The training necessary for sustained careers in the arts is often not accessible to the disabled community" (Connolly, *Yale News*).

While the issue is deep rooted and systemic in nature, positive change can result from building wider pool of well prepared, empathetic and knowledgeable generation of actors, producers and audiences. Doing so will require tackling two long-standing impediments: the

fixed nature of the conservatory education system, and a lack of resources and knowledge for educators and organizations who do want to contribute to positive change.

Current Status of Arts Education for Disabled Students

The arts, and arts education, reside inside a fixed system, according to British journalist Stuart Maconie, granting success to those predisposed to receive it. He claims that “the fight [for success] is not going to be there for people from more disadvantaged backgrounds” (Maconie, [*New Statesman*](#)) This systemic ableism is what determines who will succeed and who will fail, not only when it comes to simply learning and reaching the fullest potential possible per student, but also who will go on to have career success.

The standard conservatory model and outcomes for dance, music, or any performing arts education, is does not traditionally accommodate for those who require modifications to receive the same education as their typically-developing peers. Often requiring years of intense training, arts aspirants’ paths to success are strenuous, physically and emotionally, and consist of pushing past the limits and making more sacrifices than other sorts of careers may require. Tony-award winning educator Corey Mitchell claims that the “laser focus on skills - the regimented tested and tracking of artists” (Vigas, *Playbill*), is the biggest benefit of this type of education. Conservatory programs often ask of the student total obedience, nearly surrendering themselves and their lives to the art, something that is untenable for most individuals, much less someone who already faces more challenges on a daily basis than a neurotypical person does.

In most performing arts education pedagogy, students with disabilities are not considered for goal-oriented programs, rather, they’re confined to therapeutic or recreational programs (Laes, Westerlund, *International Journal of Music Education*). A typical conservatory curriculum is

designed to fit one style of learning, dwindling the ‘talent’ pool by dismissing alternative learners. There is also the pressure to fit certain aesthetics, whether it be physically, stylistically, or intellectually. In ballet and other forms of dance, the size and shape of your body determine from a young age whether or not a career will take off. In acting and theatre, your ability to memorize lines and to attach the directed emotion to the dialogue is the basis of the craft.

As educators, and curators of the next generation of artists and cultural influencers, we should not only consider preserving traditions in training and production, but instead focus on improving and innovating to better reflect societal progress. Keeping in mind the call for diversity in the media and in entertainment, there is a completely open market for inclusivity of people with disabilities to be better represented and better served.

The lack in representation for people with disabilities is a direct result of a lack of educational opportunities available to them, which is further exasperated by the lack of performing arts educators who have been trained in *how* to teach people outside the mold (or who have been exposed to the values necessary to seek that training.). Despite worthy attempts from the most well-meaning educators and professionals, it is not an easy task to include children with disabilities in an ordinary dance or theatre class. Having intellectual disabilities means needing certain resources in order to engage and succeed on the same level as other children, and it may be an overwhelming task for educators to do the research and provide these resources given other job demands. A study conducted by the University of Connecticut found that no one explicitly shows teachers how to teach to different needs. “Teachers are not only hesitant to implement individualized instruction, but they do not even know how to do so.” (Rosenzweig, [Digital Commons](#))

According to Jennifer Cassady of Xavier University, “Many instructors do not believe they are able to teach these populations effectively while simultaneously teaching a large group of typically developing students.” She also reports that “teachers’ attitudes reflected lack of confidence in their own instructional skills and quality of support personnel available to them,” Adequately addressing this issue requires there to be an environment of equal opportunity and equity in educational resources available. While there are plenty of opportunities for children with disabilities to receive an arts education of some kind, providing a ‘goal-oriented’, professional level education for all children to participate in to their fullest ability is the key to ensuring inclusion and diversity in conservatory and other advanced educational settings.

Inclusivity in Arts Education

According to Lilla Dale McManis of [Concordia University-Portland](#), “Inclusive education is when all students, regardless of any challenges they may have, are placed in age-appropriate general education classes that are in their own neighborhood schools to receive high quality instruction, interventions, and supports that enable them to meet success in the core curriculum.” This methodology depends on the institution assuming that all students with or without disabilities have the same level of competence as participants in the classroom, which minimizes their separation during the school day. The most successful inclusive education practices happen through “accepting, understanding, and attending to student differences and diversity... the physical, cognitive, academic, social, and emotional” (McManis).

Jenny Seham, author of [Dance Partners: A Model of Inclusive Arts Education](#) writes, “we should all be prepared to deliver the education that each student deserves, insisting on

standards of excellence... for each individual.” There is no reason that inclusive education should stay in the realm of core academic subjects- it can be applied to all aspects of education. In inclusive arts education programs, students with and without disabilities are placed in the same classrooms for their creative education, learning with and from each other, and fully engaging in the group process, regardless of their ability (Seham).

Additional Benefits of an Inclusive Arts Education

The benefits of inclusive arts education are evident when dealing directly with students, who learn more, and more effectively thanks to inclusive education. Due to the adaptive, multifaceted approach of inclusive education, the options and perspectives taken to teaching material, steps, and other aspects of arts education are made available to all students, and since all people learn in different ways, all students will be served in their preferred learning style (McManis). Another benefit to all students is that they are able to more personally connect to their art, whether it be the song they are playing or a character they’re performing as, because they will understand it better ([*Kennedy Center VSA*](#)). As artists, work is unique, and individual to the creator, which indicates that the better a concept is taught or explained, the better the outcome will be.

In the short term, more children taught through an inclusive education means many changes in the culture of the performing arts. On the one hand, there is the effect that a high quality, adaptable and flexible performing arts education has on a student with disabilities, who could find that they have reached a level of technical ability to pursue a career in the arts. Alternatively, a disabled student who is acclimated to working with a “can-do” attitude could

feel more prepared to enter the working world and get a job in a field that best suits them (Henderson and Lasely, [Creating Inclusive Classrooms through Arts](#)).

According to [The Guardian](#), “national statistics show that 65% of people avoid disabled people because they don’t know how to act around them, while 67% say they feel uncomfortable when talking to a disabled person” (Goulder, *The Guardian*). Students who are exposed to diversity and people with disabilities grow up to be more tolerant adults, and therefore, are more likely to diversify their companies, cast their shows with a diverse group of people, and create a varied body of work. In the short-term this will create more representation and more employment opportunities in entertainment industry and in the media for people with disabilities.

The long-term effects are more permanent cultural shifts, including the integration of people with disabilities into every-day, community life. If inclusivity in arts education is successful, it could lead to people with disabilities including such roles such as “creative directors, copywriters...” ([AAF DC](#)), causing a shift towards more authentic portrayals, and more frequent representation of people with disabilities on camera and onstage. That “greater exposure and awareness [about the truth of people with disabilities] can change people’s attitudes toward disability” (Jessica Brown, [BBC Future](#)). Similarly to redefining the standards of beauty, enhancing, dignifying, and normalizing people with disabilities’ image and removing our biases can be done through increased opportunity onstage and in film in roles that don’t reaffirm negative stereotypes ([William Bronston](#)).

Being an inclusive organization has some practical advantages as well. With the right marketing, an educational organization could increase both their special-needs and typically-developing students’ populations and gain exposure through local media channels. This could lead to increased revenue and popularity from bringing in a new client base. In addition, a

disability-inclusive organization may make it easier to identify and receive funding from the government, businesses, or individual donors. Alongside the U.S. Department of Education's meager selection of grants to apply for, bigger organizations such as the Hopkins Education Foundation, the Council for Exceptional Children, and the Global Partnership for Education also offer grants for organizations serving people with special needs.

Field Models of Inclusive Performing Arts Education Institutions

It is clear that we as a society need this programming in our arts education to properly move forward- but the question is how to successfully execute the change? What would it really look like? What are the challenges faced by these sorts of programs on a daily basis? There are a few standout institutions that have succeeded at integrating their students, providing the opportunities for all students to learn and succeed. We are featuring here The School of Performing Arts in the Richmond Community and YDance Scotland.

The first school I am highlighting is The School of Performing Arts in the Richmond Community, Virginia, or SPARC, as they call themselves. Recognized as one of the nation's most comprehensive community performing arts programs, the school has developed an inclusive program called [LIVE ART](#). After seeing the struggles of young people with developmental disabilities to succeed in the performing arts, as well as the challenges typically-developing youth had in befriending those with disabilities, they designed a program which enhances all young people's performing skills while deepening their abilities in accepting and connecting with each other (*SPARC Online*). Each class has students of all abilities, with an equal number of students with and without disabilities. LIVE ART also has a team alongside the teaching artist, including "special educators, interpreters, and sighted guides" to ensure that each

child can fully take advantage of the arts skills being taught and that social opportunities can be facilitated smoothly (*SPARC Online*). The nine-month sessions include a variety of performing arts lessons alongside the implementation of their CARE curriculum, which stands for “compassion, acceptance, respect, and empathy” (*SPARC Online*). One parent whose child attended SPARC writes:

“Miracles happen [at SPARC] every single day. We entered the LIVE ART program just hoping my daughter could make one significant connection, and we are so pleased the most significant connection she made was with herself! She has gained self-confidence and an appreciation for her abilities, which she has never had before. Every single class provides my daughter with opportunities to frame herself in ways the rest of the world refuses to allow.”(*SPARC Online*)

An international example of a successful application of inclusive performing arts education can be found in Scotland. YDance, or Scottish Youth Dance, has a performing group, [Horizons](#), designed for teenagers with and without disabilities. A Glasgow based, integrated dance group, they focus on what their dancers can do versus what they cannot. Using “Teach Like a Champion” techniques throughout their workshops, they maintain high expectations for their disabled and typically-developing students by pushing them towards their individual best. In their monthly meetings, students participate in a combination of technical skills practice followed by a creative work period. Their improvised sections alongside synchronized movement phrases build a more unified ensemble and allows for personal success for each student throughout the piece as a whole. I was fortunate enough to speak with Kelly Shearer, Head of Participation, about what Horizons is, how they serve their community, and what challenges and successes they face.

She credits a lot of Horizons' success on the strategies the dance teaching artists use in combination with the dancers themselves. Having both teachers in the room offers the support that some dancers may need in a classroom setting, and also the adaptability within lessons to suit the dancers' situations and their interests. Allowing the group to be flexible and accommodating is a reason that their dancers are successful- some even manage to find opportunities dancing at various venues across Scotland.

Shearer claims that while the goal for students is not necessarily virtuosity, directing attention more towards an increased sense in self-efficacy and positivity, Horizons manages to "showcase the dancers' skills and personalities" (Shearer), shocking audience members with their ability and professionalism. From this reaction, they are inclined to promote themselves in such a way where this can become the norm, and not such a surprise to people.

Overall it can be said that these programs are successful because they are dedicated to serving their students, regardless of ability. They are interested in providing the best education possible and to asking each participant to give 100%.

While these standout programs are doing great work, as recognized by the general public and the parents of the participants themselves, there is a lot behind the scenes that goes into the work. Both Horizons and SPARC claim that part of their success is due to the numerous support they have from individuals, both from employing multiple teaching artists and aides to ensure that each student is able to find success. The spaces they use also must be accessible to all people and purchases of accessibility equipment may be necessary depending on the space. As Shearer stated, budget is a big reason why many inclusive arts education programs are challenging to manage at times. Both companies, though, do not charge their students with special needs to

participate in their programs, which may make paying for these different services more challenging.

Universal Design for Learning

The methods used by SPARC, Horizons, and other notable inclusive arts education organizations are very similar, in terms of how they train and teach the instructors and aides. In a synthesis research paper done by [The Kennedy Center VSA](#), the primary methodology for inclusive performing arts education is clearly defined. By using the Universal Design for Learning, educators can “remove barriers to the access to curriculum and understanding of content” (*VSA Contours of Inclusion*). These are guidelines for “designing multiple and flexible ways to represent curricular content, multiple and flexible ways to engage students with this content, and multiple and flexible ways for students to demonstrate what they understand, know, and are able to do” (*VSA Contours of Inclusion*).

In the brain there are three different ways in which people process information: recognition, strategic, and affective networks. As with all things, each individual’s brain is wired with a preference to how they best receive information in each of those categories. To be truly inclusive, there have to be several different input angles of information to ensure that all students are having their needs met.

Recognition networks are the pathways that collect information and organize it into categories. This is the ‘what’ part of learning. Because system that allows the brain to retain information it is important that every student is given the opportunity to receive information in the way that allows them the most retention. Through inclusive education, there is flexibility in presenting instruction and content to students. For example, it could mean not only providing

sheet music for a student to learn a piece, but also providing audio and a demonstration of someone playing it to fill all needs.

Strategic networks are the pathways that transfer information into practical application. Strategic pathways are supported through flexibility in students' expression of comprehension and application of skills and knowledge. That may mean allowing students to show what they've learned in the way in which they can best express themselves. For example, if the assignment is to interpret a scene from a book, they could do so through a skit, an original dance or song, or any other way in which they can express their understanding.

Affective networks are the pathways that maintain interest and focus. In inclusive education, these are approached through teaching techniques that keep students motivated during instruction. For example, students in an acting class may be best served by allowing them to make the decisions on what monologues they want to learn- that way, they can choose whichever script interests them, therefore motivating them to memorize and study their lines.

Inclusive education works best in this way because all students, including those without disabilities, are able to approach their education in the most effective way.

Application of UDL in an Arts Setting

Depending on the context, inclusive arts education can look very different from one organization to the next. However, one tenant that teaching artists should employ during lessons is by "using many different media to illustrate concepts and to guide the class. This not only allows students multiple ways of understanding the concept, but also multiple ways of appreciating and engaging with the concept" (*VSA Contours of Inclusion*). For example, at Deaf West, LA's prominent deaf-inclusive theatre, the educational approach they took to inclusivity is

by offering both spoken and signed, linguistic and modeled, instructions, in oral English and simultaneously in ASL. Students could also participate in various ways, through movement, speech, or any other communicative method.

Another strategy commonly applied by inclusive arts educators is using language which indicates no bias positively or negatively to observe or comment on student's work. The VSA study found that "this language also supports a constructivist classroom in creating a value-free assessment of classroom activities; thus, students are not bound to a narrow standard" (*VSA Contours of Inclusion*), which is the virtue of inclusive education. By altering our language to be non-judgmental of work being good or bad, the students are able to confidently complete tasks to their best ability and the teacher is able to assess them on their intention and effort. For example, when evaluating a student's work in a creative setting, a teacher could use a personal goal the student has for themselves as a reference point or could be making observations based on the progress made, instead of using the entire class' products or creations to judge against.

By providing every opportunity, and forgoing a judgmental and exclusive atmosphere, students are more likely to thrive and realize their full potential. Having the confidence in themselves and the trust in their teachers to help them succeed is a major component in bringing students with disabilities in the performing arts up and preparing them for professional opportunities.

Conclusion

There is a growing awareness for the equal treatment of people who are different- and the arts have to be at the forefront of this change. Having visibility and diversity in live performances, on television, in films, and in other accessible media forms should be a priority for

creatives and audiences alike, especially when there is so much division between different political and cultural factions. The comparison between the population of people with disabilities in this country next to the percentage of people portrayed in performances and on-screen who are disabled is far out of proportion, with 80% less representation in the media than in real life. It is easy to chalk that number up to ableism, or prejudice, but there is more to it than that one factor.

There is a lack of ability and talent in the field of the performing arts within the population of disabled people, which obviously hinders their ability to represent themselves accurately and fairly. There is a lack of roles available to suit disabled actors, dancers, or performer, and oftentimes roles of disabled characters are filled by non-disabled actors, simply out of convenience, and the lack of a talent pool. This is not disabled people's fault, or an innate fact about performers with disabilities, but a flaw in our educational system, hurting both neurodivergent and typically-developing emerging artists.

Other than teaching skills and nurturing the talent of all children, regardless of perceived ability, there are so many benefits to their lives, and their futures, that they miss out on. By providing education to all children, without any sort of exclusion or segregation, there are better opportunities for adults with disabilities to succeed, whether it be in the arts or in life. Neurotypical children grow to become more accepting, empathetic, and open minded, and gives them the mental capacity to accept someone who is different, and to create spaces for people with disabilities in the performing arts; being allies and friends to those who may just need a little more support to be on the same level as any other person. With all the benefits, and obvious positive outcomes, it may be a shock that this type of educational programming is not more widely available. That exact point- a lack of accessible inclusive education- is where the root of this representation problem lies.

While there are a handful of wonderful, life changing programs around the United States and around the world, alone they are not enough to solve this pressing issue. Teachers and parents are simply unaware of the benefits of an inclusive arts education and are not pressing in their communities for a change. Moreover, the majority of educators do not have the resources to effectively execute an inclusive arts education, especially since traditional performance art oftentimes does not encourage adapting and accepting of students' unique needs and differences. Historically the methods used when teaching dance, acting, music, and other similar disciplines are designed to retain only the most naturally adept students, or those most willing to put themselves through the rigors of a 'one-size-fits all' education. This alienates students who are alternative learners and depletes the pool of differently-abled actors and creators, which therefore limits their visibility.

Providing a quality inclusive arts education is the solution. Giving all students an equal shot at success and doing so in a way that is accessible to every learner will not only benefit the individual but will benefit the community at large. Starting with personal growth in each individual, expanding that into more artistic and creative opportunities available for a more diverse ability level, and then to the overall cultural change that will occur, there is so much to gain and absolutely nothing to lose with this approach. Not only do you get increased representation for people with disabilities in the performing arts and related media, but you also increase opportunities for all people in all industries, see and feel a change in attitudes from the general population, and a kinder, more understanding and inclusive society.

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