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Christian Anderson

*University of Central Florida*



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INCLUSIFYING THE REHEARSAL ROOM: CREATING ACCESSIBLE AND  
ACCOMMODATING THEATRICAL SPACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

by

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B.F.A. East Carolina University, 2018

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of Theatre  
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## ABSTRACT

In youth theatre spaces, it is up to the facilitators to discover and create new ways to include more students, especially those who previously didn't have a seat at the table. Making rehearsal spaces inclusive and accessible to all starts by establishing inclusion as an innate practice integrated into every step of the process. This thesis focuses on creating inclusive and accessible rehearsal spaces outside of the traditional classroom for young people ages 8-22, specifically in community theatre and collegiate spaces. The director's role is explored in two projects: *Home of the Brave*, a Theatre for Young Audiences production performed by college students, and *Alice in Wonderland*, a youth community theatre production. In examining each project, I apply disability, educational, and inclusion theories to my work. Through the process of examining theory and my own practice in theatrical spaces, I advocate for embedding inclusive practices from the start of a rehearsal process and articulate effective strategies for creating inclusive and accessible rehearsal rooms.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Culturally, the word inclusion is everywhere. Especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, our society has become more and more interested in zooming in on our current systems and their failings. Inclusion is paired with diversity and equity, among other terms, in conversations about political, social, and educational structures. In continuing conversations about how to implement inclusion effectively into various sectors and industries, we must first define the term. According to the American Psychological Association, inclusion is “an environment that offers affirmation, celebration, and appreciation of different approaches, styles, perspectives, and experiences, thus allowing all individuals to bring in their whole selves (and all their identities) and to demonstrate their strengths and capacity” (APA, 2021b). Inclusion creates a specific place where individuals feel free to express themselves and all parts of their identities. Inclusion is active; it does not just happen. It involves those in power making a conscious effort to make their spaces more inclusive.

Theatre as an art form is innately exclusive. Theatre often relies on an audition process where some people get cast and others do not. Most productions have a set number of roles and cannot accommodate the number of actors auditioning. There’s always going to be someone left out. Who we see on stage represents specific demographics and tends to favor white, cisgender, able-bodied individuals. These ideas are also seen in educational theatre spaces where educators are trying to prepare students for the “real world” by replicating the same narrow casting choices found in professional theatre.

In recent years, we have seen artists and facilitators strive to work against the system by creating new art that goes against many of these traditional ideas. From creating shows from new

perspectives (*How to Dance in Ohio* and *Six*) to casting individuals not normally seen on stage (*Hamilton*), artists are actively creating art that showcases a more inclusive reality. We are far from where we want to be in terms of making theatre completely inclusive and accessible, but are making steps in the right direction by challenging tradition and wanting better for our art form.

As an educator and youth theatre director, I see the value of rehearsal rooms and classroom spaces as places where inclusion helps young people thrive and creates a lasting impact on their lives. As defined by author and leadership expert Stefanie Johnson, the active verb “inclusify” means actively applying inclusion practices that “celebrate unique and dissenting perspectives while creating a collaborative and open-minded environment” (2020). What inclusion looks like and sounds like in these spaces can vary widely from practitioner to practitioner, but what they should all have in common is a desire to create a collaborative, affirming, and open-minded environment.

Inclusion is often seen as an abstract idea that organizations and businesses strive for but have no idea how to reach. What does it mean to be inclusive, and can full inclusion ever be achieved? In attempting to answer this question, I think of diversity as “the what” and inclusion as “the how.” To establish a diverse environment where people from different experiences and points of view can co-exist, inclusion must be at the forefront in both theory and practice. Both exist independently but must also work in tandem to be effective. As an educator who values diversity, inclusion must be a fundamental aspect of my practice as it is a continuous experiment.

Inclusion in educational environments manifests itself in many ways. Educators can practice inclusion by staying current with the most effective practices, analyzing student needs, applying strategies, reflecting on the strategies’ effectiveness, and continuing to revise their



pedagogy. Inclusion is often seen through an educational lens with most research on the subject coming from the field of education. As a Theatre for Young Audiences practitioner, I approach inclusion as both an educator and an artist. Directing youth parallels teaching in that I'm often educating my young actors on how to be in a show. My rehearsal room serves as an educational space where young actors learn about performing in addition to numerous life skills, such as teamwork and collaboration.

As a neurodivergent artist, I see the world and interact with it differently than my neurotypical peers, including how I direct and teach. As a young student, I was very introverted and would rarely speak up in class unless called on directly. Over time, I found myself getting more comfortable in certain classes but not in others. In reflecting on what these specific teachers did to encourage me to speak up, I think about how I can incorporate these strategies as a facilitator and director. I aim to create a rehearsal environment where students feel free to speak up, share ideas, and have tough conversations. Through exploring my own identity and experiences, I can discover new ways to help all students feel more included in the rehearsal process.

In this thesis, I ask: "what is the responsibility of theatre educators and practitioners in creating inclusive spaces, and how do we accomplish this?" I explore what it means to be inclusive by analyzing a variety of practices and theories. I research what education scholars say about creating inclusive spaces and how that can apply to educational theatre spaces. I break down inclusion and use examples from my research and practice to examine how inclusion plays a role in educational theatre. Using a collegiate production of *Home of the Brave* and a youth theatre production of *Alice in Wonderland* as examples of my creative practice, I examine each rehearsal process to discover the ways I, as the director, implemented inclusion successfully and

the potential for further inclusion. Through the exploration of research, my practice, and my identity, this thesis will serve as a guide for further discovery into the implementation of inclusion in youth theatre spaces.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE RESEARCH

The process of researching inclusion revealed varying definitions of terms depending on the source. Throughout this thesis, these terms will appear when discussing various research and examples. These are not the definitive definitions of these terms, but rather an attempt to create a mutual understanding of the ideas mentioned later in the paper. While on this journey, I found that my understanding of some of these terms evolved as I dove further into this project; these shifts are articulated in my narrative in later chapters.

### Definitions

- Access- “The elimination of discrimination and other barriers that contribute to inequitable opportunities to join and be a part of a workgroup, organization, community, or service” (APA, 2021c). An environment is accessible when barriers are removed and individuals of all backgrounds can actively participate.
- Colorism- “Discrimination based on skin color, usually favoring lighter skin color over darker skin color within a racial or ethnic group” (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2021, para. 3).
- Deadname- To deadname is to use a transgender or non-binary individual’s previous, given name instead of their preferred name (“Words Matter: Respectful and Accurate Vocabulary for Discussing Gender Identity with Your Teen”).
- DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion)- A commonly accepted acronym for diversity and inclusion. Among the several acronyms of this kind, DEI is most often applied to

educational spaces (“Diversity and Inclusion Acronyms: A 2024 Glossary - PowerToFly”).

- Diversity- Diversity is the “focus on social identities that correspond to societal differences in power and privilege and thus to the marginalization of some groups based on specific attributes...there is a recognition that people have multiple identities and that social identities are intersectional and have different salience and impact in different contexts” (APA 2021c). This thesis explores diversity through a variety of lenses including gender identity and disability.
- Equity- Equity is an “ongoing process of assessing needs, correcting historical inequalities, and creating conditions for optimal outcomes by members of all social identity groups” (APA 2021c). Equity involves providing resources according to the needs of diverse populations to help achieve fair outcomes.
- Inclusion- Inclusion is a practice that promotes an environment where a group of individuals can come together to learn, create, and express themselves freely. Inclusion is a place created carefully to offer “admiration, celebration, and appreciation of different approaches, styles, perspectives, and experiences” (APA 2021c). Though the term inclusion can apply to any setting or group, this thesis focuses primarily on inclusion with young people in educational theatre spaces.
- Gender identity- Gender identity refers to a person’s psychological sense of their gender. These gender identities may or may not correspond to a person’s sex assigned

at birth (APA, 2015a). Gender identity is distinct from sexual orientation. Examples of gender identities include cisgender, transgender, and nonbinary:

- Cisgender- Cisgender refers to “a person whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned at birth” (APA, 2015a, p. 833). For example, someone assigned male at birth who identifies as a boy would be considered cisgender.
  - Nonbinary- Nonbinary refers to people who do not subscribe to the gender binary. They might exist between or beyond the man–woman binary. Some use the term exclusively, while others may use it interchangeably with other terms” (PFLAG, 2022).
  - Transgender- This is an umbrella term used to describe “the full range of people whose gender identity and/or gender role do not conform to what is typically associated with their sex assigned at birth” (APA, 2015a, p. 863). Many transgender people engage in a process of affirming their transgender identity through social, legal, and/or medical transition, though it is not necessarily required.
- Identity-first vs. Person-first language
    - Identity-first language- Language that centers the identity and allows the individual to claim their disability/condition. This type of language empowers the individual to choose their identifier rather than letting others name it (e.g., autistic person, disabled person) (APA, 2020b, 2022a).
    - Person-first language- Language that centers the person and emphasizes the person over the condition/disability (e.g., person with autism, person

with a disability) (APA, 2020b, 2022a). This type of language is used often when discussing disability in academic writing. In this thesis, I use person-first and identity-first language interchangeably depending on the context.

- Misgender- To misgender someone is to use the incorrect pronouns when referring to an individual (e.g., using she/her instead of they/them to describe a non-binary person) (“Words Matter: Respectful and Accurate Vocabulary for Discussing Gender Identity with Your Teen”).
- Neurodivergent- “A ‘neurodivergent’ person refers to a person on the autism spectrum or, more generally, to someone whose brain processes information in a way that is not typical of most individuals. These people may have learning disabilities, attention deficit and anxiety disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and Tourette syndrome. Through a neurodiversity lens, such conditions reflect different ways of being that are all normal human experiences” (“What Do ‘Neurodiverse’ and ‘Neurodivergent’ Mean? | DO-IT”). I use the term neurodivergent throughout this thesis to describe students, as well as myself, with a variety of conditions such as autism and ADHD.
- Neurotypical- The opposite of neurodivergent; someone who falls outside the spectrum of neurodivergence (“What Do ‘Neurodiverse’ and ‘Neurodivergent’ Mean? | DO-IT”).

### Diving into the Research

In examining existing research, I explored how research about inclusion relates to educational theatre pedagogy. Many of these sources come from the field of education where

inclusion, in conjunction with equity and diversity, has been a huge topic of conversation in recent years. The COVID-19 Pandemic, the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and the #MeToo movement, among other events, sparked conversations about equality that brought previously marginalized voices to the forefront. In these conversations, the importance of inclusion in the early years continued to be a key talking point. It became clear that more than ever, we need educational spaces that champion inclusion and diversity to help create a generation of empathetic young people that can spark real change.

My research revealed few written sources dedicated to inclusion in specifically youth theatre spaces. This makes me think about the work currently being done that is not being formally documented. My research pulls from existing literature within the fields of education, theatre, and disability studies. By applying these findings to my knowledge and experiences as a youth theatre practitioner, I aim to fill the existing research gap about inclusive practices in youth theatre spaces. What follows are key concepts from my research findings that guide the exploration of this thesis.

### Inclusion as Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Diversity, equity, and inclusion must work together but also have their own individual importance. While researching how inclusion is implemented in educational spaces, I found many sources talking about how inclusion interacts with diversity and equity.

One book that has been instrumental in my research is Zaretta Hammond's *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*. Hammond defines Culturally Responsive Pedagogy as:

“An educator’s ability to recognize student’s cultural displays of learning and meaning making and respond positively and constructively with teaching moves that use cultural knowledge as a scaffold to connect what the students know to new concepts and content in order to promote effective information processing. All the while, the educator understands the importance of being in relationship and having a social-emotional connection to the student in order to create a safe space for learning” (Hammond 15).

Overall, her book is about reframing the educator’s mindset rather than a strict guide for being a culturally responsive teacher. She gives the reader ideas to think about, questions to ask ourselves, and advice on how to react to different scenarios. In her book, Hammond dives into concepts from neuroscience while arguing that understanding how young people think makes you a more effective teacher.

As Hammond dives into her Ready for Rigor framework throughout the book, she gives the reader several real-world examples of how this framework can be implemented in a classroom. Her format of starting with an anecdote from her teaching experience, following it up with the neuroscience behind it, and then ending with the practical applications allows the reader to see both why and how this framework is useful. Although Hammond’s work focuses more on the traditional classroom teacher, much of her teaching can be applied in educational theatre settings. The way she explains the principles of the brain is especially helpful because she addresses them in a digestible way without ignoring the complexities of neuroscience. The brain principle that seems the most applicable to theatre settings is the first one: “the brain seeks to minimize social threat and maximize opportunities to connect with others in community” (Hammond 67). Theatre for many young people is a social activity first and foremost, a place to engage with their peers outside of the traditional classroom setting. Theatre then becomes a



means of social connection that can be used as a tool for building social skills in educational settings. It is our job as educators to create a community that is diverse and inclusive to allow these social skills to be learned effectively.

In exploring culturally responsive pedagogy, I came across the many ways in which inclusion and diversity intersect. In Hammond's book, she argues for the importance of culture and details how practitioners can implement the different types of culture in educational spaces. In reading sources from the field of disability studies, the ideas of representation and disability culture show several throughlines among minority groups. Through examining my practice as a director and facilitator, I explore how play in the rehearsal process can be inclusive, educational, and practical. In researching diversity in its many forms, I explore thought inclusion, or diversity of thought, to further include students who may process information differently. In Chapter 3, I use Hammond's book, as well as several other sources, and my practice to further explore how inclusion and diversity mutually benefit one another.

### Inclusive Language

There are many small actions practitioners can take to move toward more inclusive educational spaces. As explained in Peter Johnston's book *Choice Words: How Our Language Affects Children's Learning*, language becomes the practitioner's most powerful tool. What we say and how we say it can have lasting impacts on young people. As Johnston observes, "language has 'content', but it also bears information about the speaker and how he or she views the listener and their assumed relationship" (6). Our job as theatre educators is not only to teach them the fundamental skills that are tied to theatre but also to build emotionally and relationally healthy learning communities.

Throughout the book, Johnston gives examples of specific words and phrases that can be used in educational settings and the various ways in which they are effective and ineffective. This information is backed by numerous studies that demonstrate how what we say and don't say has consequences for what and how children learn. Johnston reminds educators and practitioners to be mindful of our word choices and to be explicit in our language. Saying exactly what you mean may sound simple and obvious but is crucial for effective communication.

In examining the importance of inclusive language in an educational space, I explore an article from the American Psychological Association entitled "Why Inclusive Language Matters." This organization has a plethora of important resources for anyone looking to engage in inclusifying a space. They have Inclusive Language Guides that detail keywords and phrases, manuals that serve as guidelines for other organizations to engage in similar work, and a myriad of resources available for further reading. APA serves as a source for much of this research, including many of the definitions mentioned previously in this chapter. This article dives into three main points of inclusive language: focus on people and not labels, show cultural humility, and think impact over intent. In Chapter 4, I search for ways to inclusify my language as a practitioner while exploring these three points, Johnston's book about language, and my practice.

### Inclusion through a Disability Lens

Inclusion is not just including people from one minority group. Inclusion is about finding ways to actively include all individuals regardless of race, gender, class, disability, or any other identity marker. Throughout my research, many of my findings came from the field of disability studies where these conversations have already been happening. In later chapters, I use findings from this research to further explore ways to inclusify rehearsal environments.

One of my biggest grievances while doing this research is that many sources explain how to be inclusive from a theoretical standpoint but do little to explain how to be practically inclusive. What can we actively do as practitioners to make our spaces more inclusive for all? The book *Disability and Theatre: A Practical Manual for Inclusion in the Arts* aims to answer this question.

The author is disability activist and artist Stephanie Barton-Farcas, the Artistic Director of Nicu's Spoon Theatre Company. This book offers specific how-tos for creating inclusive theatre and includes information about how to "fix your space," what to look out for when attempting this kind of work, and a list of resources for further reading. Barton-Farcas' company calls itself the "first fully inclusive theatre in New York City." This title immediately caught my eye. I was curious to see how she defined "fully inclusive" and how it might differ from other definitions of inclusive, including my own. She goes on to define it as being inclusive of "age, gender, color, religion, disability, and nationality." She describes the art her company creates as defying "social norms and includes disabled people, whether in themes, ideas, performance or the creation of the artwork, rather than works focusing on disability as the central theme" (Barton-Farcas XV). Nicu's Spoon Theatre Company aims to highlight the experiences and lives of disabled people through art rather than focusing on disability as a theme of their work.

The book lives up to its name in terms of serving as a practical guide for inclusion but certainly doesn't include all the answers to inclusivity. After all, inclusion is a trial-and-error-based process. No one resource holds all the secrets to inclusion, yet there are tools, approaches, and mindsets that can contribute to creating an inclusive environment. Barton-Farcas focuses much of the book on her personal experiences directing and producing shows through her company and the many ways in which her practice has evolved. She offers advice, warnings, and

a plethora of anecdotes about how inclusion can be achieved in theatre. One of the aspects of Barton-Farcas' argument that sticks out is when she calls herself a realist, not an idealist, for wanting to produce inclusive theatre. She argues that "as cultures shift and politics and paradigms change, it seems the artists who survive the change are the realists" (Barton-Farcas XV). To keep up with how fast the world changes, we as artists need to constantly reevaluate and think of new ways to be inclusive. The idea that everyone *should* be included can now meet the reality that everyone *can* be included. Looking at inclusion through the lens of disability allows me to see the endless possibilities for inclusion in educational theatre spaces. Many of these throughlines will be explored in later chapters.

### Power Dynamics

In examining the research, I discovered how the power dynamics of an educational environment can affect every aspect of a process. In searching for ways to inclusify my rehearsal space, I must acknowledge the power dynamics in place and work to actively combat them. While examining these power dynamics, I found ways in which I can use my power as the facilitator to create an inclusive environment.

In Chapter 5, I begin this process by exploring the power dynamics of an educational space. In thinking about the goals of education, I think about the role of a facilitator. The facilitator's job is to establish an environment where students can learn and grow. As the facilitator and the adult in the room, I can directly influence my student's lives—everything I say or do has the potential to have a lasting impact. Many of the sources already mentioned in this chapter (Johnston, Hammond) investigate the dynamics of the teacher-student relationship. I use these sources to further examine these power dynamics in Chapter 5.

One of the big ideas explored in Chapter 5 is the idea of agency, giving students a voice in their learning. Agency can be implemented in an educational environment in a variety of ways including creative programming, open discussion, and dialogue. While agency is most often discussed in terms of classroom spaces, agency can also be implemented in rehearsal environments as well. Youth directors can give their actors agency by allowing them to have a say in the artistic process, such as coming up with their own blocking or having a say in design elements. Facilitators and directors can start a process that encourages agency by implementing a community agreement (a shared document that establishes community guidelines for a process). How community agreements can be beneficial to a process and their ability to establish brave spaces is discussed in further detail in Chapter 5.

### Inclusive Directing Strategies

One of my hopes for this thesis was to develop practical ways to actively implement inclusion into my rehearsal processes. Some of the ideas mentioned throughout this paper are concepts I already use. Other ideas are the result of my research and reflective practice I have yet to apply. Throughout this thesis, I examine a multitude of inclusive theories and strategies from a variety of fields including education, the arts, and disability studies. Chapter 6 is more specifically about the practical ways in which a facilitator can accomplish implementing inclusion while still acknowledging the theoretical aspects of this topic.

Chapter 6 builds off chapter 5 by acknowledging and discussing the power dynamics present in a rehearsal environment. The student-teacher relationship parallels that of an actor-director in many ways. There is a clear hierarchy and many preconceived notions about who does what. In theatre artist Charlie Peters' essay on directing, the power dynamics of this

relationship are explored while questioning how we have previously viewed the role of the director. Peters' essay is included in this thesis as a modern take on how the dynamics of a director in a rehearsal room have changed over time. Peters' view of the director mirrors my own and his essay is used to argue for the importance of seeing a director as a willing collaborator instead of a dictator. Once we understand the dynamics of a director in a rehearsal space, we can begin to combat them. As someone who works primarily with youth, I need to understand the power I have in a rehearsal room and use that for good.

In thinking about ways how I can use that power effectively, it starts with the casting and audition process. This section of Chapter 6 focuses on practical ways to inclusify the beginning of a rehearsal process. Looking to Barton-Farcas as inspiration, I dive into some of the most effective practices for inclusive auditions. This includes having appointment-based audition blocks, flexible schedules, and an audition workshop. Auditions will vary from show to show but many of these practices can be implemented into every audition to make them more inclusive.

There are many ways to implement inclusion before the process even begins. This starts with communication. Starting a line of communication between the director and stage manager as early as possible is imperative for the success of the show. This kind of communication should also be seen between all members of the team and can look different for each group. Clearly communicating between the creative team is a great way to encourage that same sort of communication from your actors. We want our actors to be able to communicate issues as they arise, either with us or the stage managers, to make our process run as smoothly as possible. This can start with a community agreement and should be implemented during the first week of rehearsals.

One of the big ideas explored in Chapter 6 is accommodation. This section dives into disability scholar Carrie Sandahl's theory, Ethics of Accommodation. This theory emphasizes the importance of accommodations coming from a place of "goodwill, creativity, and a strong dose of humor, elements that often find expression in the performances themselves" (Sandahl 229). The simple task of wanting to accommodate actors is noble but must come from a place that acknowledges the creativity of inclusion. As practitioners, we need to be creative in the ways we implement inclusion as we never know what needs will be present in the room until we are there. Sandahl's theory of accommodations also emphasizes the importance of listening. This applies to listening to our actors and our team members. To establish environments where individuals are heard and valued, we must be good listeners first and foremost.

Throughout this thesis, I explore how rehearsal environments can become more inclusive. Chapter 6 focuses on the specific ways in which directors can practically accomplish this. In engaging in this research, I think about the practicalities of inclusion and what it looks like in space. As I dive into each chapter, I use the research introduced here to further examine the potential for theatrical environments to be inclusive.

### Practice as Research- Creative Practice

In exploring this research, I often compare what I read about in terms of effective inclusion strategies to the reality of educational spaces. How much of what I'm reading can be actively implemented in classrooms and rehearsal rooms? My process used Practice as Research to examine my instincts, successes, and opportunities employing inclusive practices in theatre rehearsals. It's one thing to read about implementing inclusion into a youth space, and another to do it. Throughout this thesis, I synthesized my coursework, academic research, experiences as a

youth theatre participant, and pedagogical choices as a youth theatre director in order to better examine and improve my practice. The following section introduces two key productions used as examples throughout this thesis. They serve as concrete examples of ways in which this research has influenced my practice and vice versa. Throughout both projects, my research intersected with my practice, leading to many discoveries explored in this thesis.

### *Home of the Brave*

The first rehearsal process I examine throughout this thesis is a 2023 collegiate production of *Home of the Brave* that I directed. Written by native Hawaiian playwright, Lee Cataluna, *Home of the Brave* is a short, fifty-minute piece that follows the story of five young people, most of whom are the children of military parents. Through a series of monologues and short poetic scenes, Cataluna discusses the feelings of pride and anxiety that come along with being a military kid while exploring themes of home, change, and friendship. This play falls under the umbrella of TYA, or Theatre for Young Audiences, meaning theatre that is specifically written and performed for young people. I include college-aged actors in the demographic of young people as TYA often defines their audience as 0-18 *and* young adults. This production was part of Theatre UCF's 2022-2023 season and included a cast of eleven college-aged actors (ages 18-22), with seven cast members and four understudies. The cast included a mixture of Musical Theatre, Acting, and non-theatre majors, with none of the actors having any diagnosed neurodivergence or disability that was disclosed to the artistic team. The rehearsal process took place over six weeks and included seven performances, three of which were touring shows that occurred weeks after the initial performance weekend.



I use *Home of the Brave* as an example of my creative practice in this thesis to unpack some of the successes and “failures” encountered while establishing, or trying to establish different inclusive practices. Working with a smaller cast of older, experienced students provided the space and flexibility to focus on implementing inclusion in the rehearsal process. In later chapters, I use this experience to highlight how my practice has evolved through further research and practice, as well as how this process has influenced my practice.

### *Alice in Wonderland*

The next rehearsal process I examine throughout this thesis is a 2023 youth community theatre production I directed of *Alice in Wonderland*; an original adaptation written by Leah Porrata based on the classic story by Lewis Carroll. I directed this production after *Home of the Brave* and during the course of my thesis writing, so it most accurately reflects shifts in my practice due to this thesis research.

Produced by Central Florida Community Arts (CFC Arts), *Alice in Wonderland* included a cast of nearly one hundred young people ages four to eighteen. CFC Arts believes in having a spot for every student to participate in theatre. The production included multiple groups of students split into Companies, divided by age group, who played different subsets of the ensemble such as Seedlings, Oysters, Ladies, and the King’s Men. The lead, supporting, and featured speaking roles were filled by members of the Junior Troupe, an auditioned group of students ages eight and up, with 35 Junior Troupe members in total. For rehearsals, the Companies were only called on Monday evenings; the Junior Troupe was called throughout the rest of the week. Several of the students had previously disclosed neurodivergences and

disabilities. The rehearsal process was five weeks long and included three public performances. Throughout the process, I worked mostly with the Junior Troupe but also worked with the Companies on Mondays to integrate them into the larger scenes of the show.

I chose to include *Alice in Wonderland* as an example of my creative practice for this thesis because CFC Arts as an organization champions inclusion in all their programming. How they run their youth theatre programs, as detailed above, aligns closely with my values as a youth theatre practitioner. Since I have previously directed shows at CFC Arts, I can look back and see how my directing style has changed over time through the implementation of effective practices I discovered through my research and experience.

Both projects were in more traditional theatre spaces. Neither project was geared specifically toward working with disabled or neurodivergent artists, though *Alice in Wonderland* did involve multiple young people with neurodivergences and disabilities. Many of the strategies mentioned in this thesis are explained through this mixed-ability lens and may not apply to other contexts. Having also worked in spaces that were specifically geared toward young people with disabilities, I believe many of these strategies can be transferred to those settings. As with any project, it is important to get to know your participants so you can accurately gauge what strategies may work best for your group.

The process of diving into sources from the various sectors of inclusion and my practice has allowed me to see the varying perspectives in which one can view this topic. As a youth theatre practitioner, my unique position as someone who works with youth outside of a traditional classroom allows me to view inclusion in a different light. I am ultimately interested in discovering how to inclusify my rehearsal spaces in a way that is effective for everyone

involved. The next chapters explore how to do just that through further exploration of the research and my practice.

## CHAPTER THREE: DIVERSITY IN YOUTH THEATRE SPACES

For educational spaces to be more diverse, we need to include all types of identities in these conversations. This includes disability, gender identity, socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity, among other identifiers. If diversity is the “recognition that people have multiple identities and that social identities are intersectional and have different salience and impact in different contexts” (APA 2021c), then creating inclusive spaces requires these environments to be diverse. In this chapter, I explore the question: “how does diversity play a role in inclusive theatre and in what ways do they intersect?” through examining sources mentioned in the previous chapter (Hammond, Johnston, Barton-Farcas) and my own personal experiences directing youth theatre.

### Culture

In *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, Hammond explores diversity through a variety of lenses. One of the ways in which she breaks down diversity is through examining the different levels of culture. In the second chapter, she explains that culture operates on three levels: surface, shallow, and deep culture. Surface culture includes the things you immediately think of with culture: food, holidays, music, and clothing. Shallow culture is made up of the unspoken rules around everyday social interactions and norms. This includes the ideas of courtesy, manners, friendship, personal space, nonverbal communication, and appropriate vs. inappropriate touching (Hammond 38). Deep culture is the unconscious assumptions that formulate our worldview including ethics, spirituality, and our ideas of group harmony. As seen

in the examples, much of our culture is outside of our control. Deep culture is predetermined and varies wildly from individual to individual.

Viewing how we interact with others as a part of our culture makes me think of culture differently. Culture is not just the identity markers of race or ethnicity, but also gender, sexuality, and disability. In thinking about the culture around disability, or disability culture, I think about how I as a neurodivergent individual interact with others differently than neurotypicals do. This is especially true for shallow culture, which is less outwardly apparent but greatly influences social interactions. Hammond argues that “[shallow] culture has a strong emotional charge...social violation of norms at this level can cause mistrust, distress, or social friction” (38). What one person may find off-putting or rude, I may find normal, or even polite, and vice versa. One example of this is eye contact. In the United States, most of us are taught from a young age that eye contact signals respect. Americans are taught to look people in the eyes when talking to them, so they think you are listening—even if you aren’t. Eye contact equaling respect is so ingrained into our society that we are taught from the time we enter school that not looking adults in the eye is considered disrespectful. Many teachers say things like “1, 2, 3 eyes on me” or “listen with your eyes” to gain student attention. This may seem like a harmless instruction for most students but can have negative impacts on students from various cultures, including neurodivergent students and students from other countries where eye contact is considered rude. Students with autism, for example, often have a hard time making eye contact, so requiring them to look the teacher in the eyes to prove they are listening can cause tension between the student and teacher.

When working with an autistic actor during *Alice in Wonderland*, I noticed that asking him to look at me while giving instructions did not work. I noticed other adults in the room get

frustrated with this actor because he wouldn't look anyone in the eye. This lack of eye contact was assumed to be disrespectful. I had to remind my colleagues, and myself, that he may be listening and understanding us, he just expressed it in a different way, which for him was repeating instructions to himself under his breath. After all, this student was always following along and had no trouble keeping up with the work in rehearsal. We had no reason to believe he wouldn't be able to except for the fact that he didn't show listening in the traditional way. This makes me think about the ways educators can promote listening outside of the traditional. Some students show their listening through eye contact, others through nodding or vocally agreeing, others may listen silently, some may repeat everything you say, and others may not react at all. Educators who acknowledge and respect the different ways in which listening can be achieved allow their students the freedom to choose how they engage. Rather than assuming a student is not listening if they're looking away, it's best to give them the benefit of the doubt to establish trust. Once we acknowledged and honored that this student was listening but in a different way, we saw communication between both parties improve drastically. By understanding how nonverbal communication is affected by shallow culture, educators can build rapport and trust between them and their students.

Like shallow culture, deep culture can have an intense emotional charge affiliated with it. Much of what makes up deep culture is specific to the individual as it deals with ideas about morality and ethics. At this level, our brain is creating the worldview we take into our formative years. Individuals from different cultures can react to an event differently because of the meaning they attach to it based on their deep culture. Although our cultures evolve as we mature, Hammond argues that our core mental models stay with us. Ideals from our childhood often become a huge part of who we are. Deep culture is essentially the "part of your brain that makes

sense of the world and helps it function in our environment” (Hammond 39). When thinking about culture in an educational space, educators need to be aware of deep culture. It’s not just the surface and shallow levels of culture that impact a classroom. Deep culture is how an individual sees the world and if the goal of education is to broaden students’ worldviews, then education needs to keep culture in mind.

To be more inclusive, educators need to know and understand the different kinds of cultures, as it relates to disability, race, ethnicity, etc., and the various ways they manifest in a classroom. Acknowledging and respecting the different subsets of culture is a key aspect of DEI, and not just in diversity, but in equity and inclusion as well. As I examine and update my practices as a youth theatre practitioner, I look to the ideas of surface, shallow, and deep culture to remember that students come from a variety of backgrounds, and respecting and honoring this fact will make me a more inclusive facilitator.

### Representation

In terms of representation, disability is one area that is often overlooked in the theatre. In *Disability and Theatre: A Practical Manual for Inclusion in the Arts*, Barton-Farcas mentions that twenty percent of the U.S. is disabled; “if you ignore artists with disabilities, then you ignore twenty percent of your audience base and twenty percent of a wealth of talent” (7). From strictly a numbers perspective, it is nonsensical to ignore such a huge section of our population. This twenty percent includes actors, designers, directors, stage managers, and most importantly, audience members. Including this demographic of individuals in theatre is not only morally sound but financially sound as well.

A common misconception is that individuals with disabilities are unable to participate in theatre as artists. This is due to both companies not giving them opportunities and the individuals not feeling like they had a shot because they have never seen themselves in roles previously. It's unreasonable to expect a disabled actor to take the chance and audition for a production if they have never seen a disabled person in a production at that company. At the same time, someone must be the first, so how can practitioners encourage disabled artists to participate in their art if the artists were excluded previously? On the opposite side of things, theatre staff in charge of hiring and casting may be hesitant to hire individuals with disabilities due to a lack of education and resources. They may feel like they don't know enough to have a disabled artist on staff, or that the production "doesn't call for a disabled actor". Much of what Barton-Farcas calls for in this book is to tear down those misconceptions of when and where a disabled artist fits and to "just get them on the stage and let them do their job. That is your job, whether you are a director or an academic recruiter or a casting person" (74).

Representation is more than just hiring or casting a disabled person or a person of color. A theatre company does not accomplish inclusivity by casting one actor in a wheelchair. Inclusion is a long-term commitment that must be actively made again and again. When thinking about what it means for disabled artists to be a part of a production with mostly non-disabled artists, Barton-Farcas mentions several ways accommodations have been made at her company. Each artist is unique and has their own set of needs, so accommodation looks different for each production. Although it is the responsibility of the theatre to put accommodations in place for the artist, Barton-Farcas reminds us that "artists with disabilities are, by the nature of the beast, Olympic-class problem solvers and can teach you how to be one too" (13). This means that artists don't have to have everything figured out to hire a disabled person, practitioners just need



the desire to include them in creating art. In this vein, creating inclusive environments requires teamwork between the actors and the creative team to come up with solutions that work for everyone involved.

When working with young people, I've had many experiences where students with disabilities have challenged me to be a better educator. One experience that comes to mind was during a creative drama class. One student in the class was born with a shortened arm and no right hand. During a warm-up activity I've taught many times before, I asked the class to come together in a circle. The class made a shape that in no way resembled a circle, so I did what I normally do in that situation and asked the class to come together and hold hands to re-form a circle. Many of the students stopped and looked at me. One student immediately spoke up and said, "we can't, because of her" and pointed at the student with the shortened arm. Luckily, this student found the situation amusing and responded with "that's okay, she can just grab my nub," referring to her arm. All the students laughed, and we continued with the exercise. This moment, although small and fortunately uneventful, made me think about how I approach giving instructions. Some phrases and activities are not inherently inclusive, and it took seeing exactly how this phrase was not inclusive to make that change. I think about this moment when leading activities, especially the ones I've taught many times before, to remind myself that inclusion is a consistent choice, and I can learn from past mistakes to further inclusify my teaching.

Since this story occurred, I continue to think about how I phrase instruction. If I were to experience that situation again, I could replace the instruction of "grab hands and form a circle" with, "how can we work together to improve our circle?" I think this small change would still imply that holding hands is a way to form a circle without specifically saying that's the only way to do it. I wonder what creative ways the students will form circles with this open-ended

instruction. While this was the only time as an educator I encountered this particular incident, this situation has been a helpful reminder of the various ways in which my teaching strategies could be more inclusive. In thinking about how to be a more inclusive educator, rephrasing instructions can be a small step in the right direction.

### Diversity of Thought–Thought Inclusion

As a neurodivergent artist who has often worked with neurodivergent young people, many of my inclusive practices come from my knowledge of working with those populations. When I think about how actors might think or respond differently to me as a director, I'm reminded of what Temple Grandin, autism advocate and author, said about being autistic:

I think almost entirely in visual terms. When I read a sentence, I immediately see an image of the subjects described. 'Freedom' suggests an image of the Declaration of Independence, and 'truth', the scales of justice. If someone says 'cat' I see in my mind's eye cats I have known or read about. I also visualize abstract ideas such as relations with people. My original image for getting along with other people was a sliding glass door that must be approached gently, lest it shatter. (Grandin 16)

This quote makes me think about all the different ways individuals process information. Just because I view a scene in one way, doesn't mean an actor does, regardless of identity. As someone who is neurodivergent and very visual, how do I communicate my vision of the piece in a way that makes sense to my actors and production team? These are the people that must ultimately deliver the vision. Without a clear mutual understanding, the vision won't come to fruition. Through my varying theatrical experiences, I discovered that many theatre artists are

also visual thinkers. It is easy to explain to scenic designers, for example, my visual ideas because they are often very visual people. Actors, however, are a different story. During *Home of the Brave*, I found myself sometimes running into trouble with how to effectively convey my vision to the different types of learners in the room. Some of the actors were visual thinkers like me, so seeing me writing things out or drawing images to explain my ideas helped them understand my goal. Others were kinesthetic learners so physically doing the blocking or movement was the only way they were going to fully understand the vision. A couple were auditory learners as well, but I seemed to have the most success approaching things kinesthetically and visually. I found that a combination of sharing the little drawings I wrote in my director's notebook and having them try out blocking in the room were the most successful tactics for this cast. Of course, trial and error occurred with all these strategies and, as with any theatrical process, there was a lot of going back and tweaking things after the initial blocking. Looking back on the process, I think about how my own needs as an artist can be met throughout a rehearsal process. As a director, I have a lot of say in how others' needs are met but sometimes put my own on the back burner for the good of the group. This poses a bigger question about the director's responsibility in a process. How much do we change about our process for the other artists in the room? In terms of styles of learning, how much should I cater to each type of learner?

According to some educators and scholars, this idea of learning styles is not only outdated but false. In the book *Learning Styles, Classroom Instruction, and Student Achievement*, scholars Daniel Robinson, Henrietta Den Dekker, and Joseph Kim argue that the theory of learning styles is a neuromyth. Neuromyths refer to misconceptions about the mind or brain and usually begin with "a misunderstanding, a misreading, and in some cases a deliberate warping of

the scientifically established facts to make a relevant case for education or for other purposes” (Organization for Economic Cooperation, and Development, 2002). Dekker and Kim use this term and a slew of case studies that deny the effectiveness of learning styles to introduce the idea that these types of labels do nothing to change the effectiveness of instruction. Many sources argue that no real research supports the use of learning styles in teaching, so we must debunk all learning styles.

Despite studies arguing against the validity of learning styles or preferences, I argue that the concept is effective in helping us analyze our learning and thus the learning of others. Dr. Richard M. Felder states that, “the most common learning styles models have been used frequently and successfully to help teachers design effective instruction; help students better understand their own learning processes; and help both teachers and students realize that not everyone is like them and the differences are often worth celebrating” (5). I remember being in an undergraduate education course and taking numerous learning style tests such as the VARK questionnaire to find out what my learning style was. After taking those quizzes, I could self-identify as a visual learner and use that information to help my learning. While some have argued that having that information does improve individual learning, others argue that “the improvements in learning would be a placebo effect, rather than a result of the matched learning styles” (Robinson et al 14). Either way, I believe having a fundamental understanding of how others process information allows me to be a more effective and inclusive facilitator.

From the idea of learning styles, educators and practitioners can learn to be more understanding of the many ways in which young people process information. In the same vein, another common way people view others is as introverts or extroverts. According to the Myers-Brigg Personality test, the key difference between the two is what energizes and motivates a

person. Extroverts are said to be energized by the outside world, interacting with other people and through activities, while introverts are energized by their internal worlds, inner experiences, and by spending time alone or with a select few. As someone who has always identified as an introvert, I see the distinct difference between the two in my own classroom and rehearsal spaces. Oftentimes parents enroll their very extroverted young person in a theatre class or production because someone told them their kid is “perfect for the stage.” While being larger than life certainly helps in theatrical settings, I found that many young people who participate in theatre are actually introverted.

For me, theatre was appealing as a child because it allowed me to step into the shoes of someone else and pretend to be someone different. It was easier to play a monkey or a detective on stage than it was to speak up in class. In the rehearsal environment, I was often overlooked because I was quiet and kept to myself. Once I got on stage, however, I felt a sense of freedom to fully immerse myself in the character and the story. Nothing else mattered at that moment. I would overlook the stress and anxiety that came with auditioning and being in a rehearsal room with strangers to get a glimpse of that feeling. In theatrical spaces now as a director and educator, I think about how I can actively include the more introverted youth who might feel the way I did about theatre.

While directing *Alice in Wonderland*, I had a moment with one of my introverted students that reminded me why theatre can be the perfect environment for the quiet kids. There is a student I’ve taught and directed many times previously who is very friendly but prefers to keep to herself in rehearsals. She is often found drawing in her sketchbook or reading a book off-stage. During one rehearsal, I explained to the actors that during the following rehearsal, our costume designer was going to stop by and show us his sketches for the different characters in

the show. The students loved this and immediately began theorizing what their costumes might look like as we dismissed them for a short break. During the break, this student came up to me and my stage manager, holding her sketchbook close to her chest. I asked if she wanted to show me something and she slowly slid the book across the table. She had drawn a wonderfully detailed and intricate costume rendering for the Mad Hatter. I was so blown away that she had created something so beautiful and that she wanted to share this drawing with us. I thanked her and asked if I could show it to our costume designer. She said yes and we ended up including her design of the hat in the final costume. She was so excited, and all the other actors complimented her design once it debuted. After this moment, more and more students began interacting with her and I saw her participate within the group more. This small act of incorporating her ideas slowly helped her come out of her shell and showed other students that they could share their ideas, too.

This story reminds me that being part of a team can look different for each student and that including them may be as easy as listening to and acknowledging their ideas. It didn't matter whether the drawing was good or not (though it was). I would have incorporated it into the costume, anyway. I wanted her to know that I appreciated her sharing her drawing with me and the best way to do that was to put it on stage. Other positive reactions to this situation could include allowing the student to have a show-and-tell moment with the cast or having the student show the costume designer the design herself. This makes me think about how to further include introverted students in future productions. What special skills or talents do they have that can be included in the show? At that age, I was too shy to show something like a drawing to an adult. This moment motivates me to continue seeking ways to empower students to generate and share ideas.

## The Power of Play

Engaging in processes that encourage inclusion and community building often includes play. Play is inherently present in theatre as the nature of the art form involves playing pretend. Barton-Farcas encourages theatre practitioners to: “understand that all of us, disabled or not, sometimes need to get ‘jiggy’ and get the physical wacky out of ourselves so then we can settle down and attend to the ‘serious’ making of art (68). This makes me think of the many purposes play can serve in a rehearsal room: warm-ups, introductions to key concepts, focus exercises, etc. As a facilitator, my main goal is to bring together and include every person in the room while establishing community and trust through play.

As part of *Home of the Brave*, we held a talkback after one of the performances where team members were encouraged to share thoughts about the process and audience members could ask questions about the show. When asked about the process of working on a Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) piece, one actor mentioned that they were admittedly hesitant about TYA and the number of games we played in rehearsal, but ultimately found joy in the process. This same actor stated that this process taught them about what it means to play in a rehearsal space and how important the games and activities were in getting them out of their head. This sentiment was echoed by some of the other actors as well and made me think about the power of play in theatre. The games and activities I used throughout the process were all intentionally chosen for different purposes. Most came from Viola Spolin’s book, *Theater Games for Rehearsal: A Director’s Handbook*. As Spolin mentions in her introduction, “it cannot be emphasized too strongly that playing can pull many a director and cast out of a tight spot, freeing all of them from the fear-producing trap of memorizing, characterizing, and interpreting” (XV). To me, it was essential to engage in play from the beginning of the process for the actors to fully

embrace their young characters. Not only is play helpful in the sense that it allows actors to get out of their heads and into their characters, but it also helps to create a collaborative environment where artists can feel free to share and create. Playing games is a great way to establish a diverse environment where people can come together and connect with individuals they might not have interacted with otherwise. Play can often allow us to momentarily forget about our differences and remember that we all have the same goal: to put on a play.

In *The Home of the Brave* rehearsals, engaging in Spolin's games like "Explosion Tag" and "Stage Pictures" allowed the actors to focus on ensemble building while channeling their inner child to experience the highs and lows of playing a game together as a group. We played a game of catch to start every rehearsal, not only as a warm-up but also to practice the motions of throwing and catching a ball while speaking, something they had to do in the longest scene of the piece. When the game of catch was brought up in the talkback, I was surprised by how positively the actors viewed it. This was something I started the first week as an icebreaker, but also to introduce the concept that they were literally playing ball during one of their scenes. What originally started as a fun week-one warm-up turned into a daily ritual that bonded the group together. Another actor mentioned how playing the games together helped create a cohesive ensemble where everyone felt like an equal member of the team. As Spolin says, "true playing will produce trust" (1). I found this to be especially evident as I began to see the cast and crew evolve from strangers to a team—a team where all ideas were heard and everyone participated in every activity, even the stage managers.

The daily game of catch was essential in this process because it allowed each actor to discover different ways to engage in play. Not only that, but playing games is fun. Going back to Spolin, "fun is the antidote to the ills of our time. Fun produces a unification of mind and body



and creates full involvement. Fun is not trivial, it is essential” (15). In this production, play was vital in creating a cohesive ensemble. The playing of games in rehearsal allowed the team to get out of their own way and remember what it was like to have fun as a child. This game of catch helped to create a culture in the rehearsal room that was unique to us. In other processes, this might look different. Looking back to the story about my student with a shortened limb, she might’ve had some difficulty with playing a game of catch each day. The great thing about theatre games is they are often adaptable. I could easily change this game of catch to involve rolling the ball on the floor instead of throwing and catching it or to be a one-handed game. I also could change the game completely to not involve our hands or poll the room to see what other games we could come up with together. The game itself is not important. What is important is finding a way to play that involves every member of the team and still encourages ensemble building.

As previously mentioned, effective nonverbal communication can build rapport and trust among a team. Many theatre games focus on nonverbal communication and build upon those skills. Even games like Charades, which most students know of even before coming to a theatre class, build upon nonverbal skills that become relevant inside and outside the classroom. Theatre games then can serve multiple purposes as both an educational tool and as fun. When working with kids, the key to success is finding ways to make moments of learning fun so they forget they are learning something. I have always believed that theatre games do just that.

When talking to other theatre practitioners about theatre games, they either love or hate them. Some see them as valuable introductions to important skills, some see them as a means to an end, and others see them as a pointless waste of time. I am a firm believer in using theatre games as a technique to accomplish a wide variety of goals. As Barton-Farcas mentions in

*Disability and Theatre*, theatre games can serve as a warm-up activity to get a cast mentally ready for rehearsal. She notes that, “often for mental and developmental disabilities the response to games, music, and general silliness is the best warm-up you can do. Once they get the sillies and dancing out, the artists are usually much more able to focus on blocking or lines” (Barton-Farcas 67). Theatre games can also be an introduction to a key idea or topic, an ensemble-building tool, or a way to blow off some steam. Regardless, theatre games are fun and silly. When we are engaging with young people in these spaces, we must remember that they are ultimately there to have fun. I believe there is a world in which we can create high-quality youth theatre that is equally as fun as it is educational. There needs to be a balance. If the process is too fun, then the show suffers. If the process is too focused on the product, then it’s no fun. In educational spaces, the focus needs to be equally on the process and the product to be truly successful.

This idea that play is fundamental to an artistic process has become integral to my inclusive practice as an artist and facilitator. In examining the process of *Home of the Brave*, I reflect on how engaging in play is inherently inclusive. Play is open-ended; aspects of play can be applied in almost any context. Play in a theatrical process can allow us to step out of ourselves and into the playing space. For some, theatre and play can be therapeutic. Barton-Farcas argues that play can provide more than a distraction.

I have also, on one occasion, had an actor break down and cry after dancing as he said he felt something, ‘release and let go’ and he then moved into rehearsals with a new sense of purpose. Don’t underestimate the power of play and movement. (Barton-Farcas 68)

Through these experiences, play can build community. Playing games at the top of rehearsal can have an educational aspect but also bonds a group of people. Nothing brings people

together quite like the common goal of trying to keep the ball in the air. These types of activities, although not necessarily inclusive by nature, are easily adaptable to fit a variety of needs. With theatre games, my goal is to bring people together and to include every person in the room to establish community among a diverse group of people.

When examining inclusion in theatrical spaces, we must use a diverse lens. Diversity manifests in many forms and requires educators and practitioners to understand how diversity can be achieved in an educational space. Through understanding culture and representation, artists can create spaces where young people can thrive regardless of identity. When thinking about diversity in this context, we must remember the diversity of thought and be inclusive of the many ways in which young people can participate in theatre. Throughout this thesis, I continue to examine how inclusion can be achieved in educational theatre spaces and how practitioners can be actively inclusive.

## CHAPTER FOUR: INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE IN YOUTH THEATRE SPACES

One of the big ideas explored in this thesis is how practitioners can be practically inclusive and what that looks like in different spaces. Throughout my research and personal experience, I found that one of the key steps is inclusifying our language. To create spaces where inclusion is a fundamental ideal, we need to start by making sure our language matches our intent. Through examining my practice and research, this chapter explores the question: “how can facilitators inclusify our language and what is the importance of language in an inclusive classroom?”

### Power of Language

When used effectively, language can build bridges and create solutions. Language is powerful. It is how we can begin to understand people from all walks of life regardless of race, ethnicity, gender expression, ability, or socioeconomic status. In a political climate where our society seems more divided than ever, a shared language can help reunite us. This language can only be effective if it is inclusive and equitable. The power of language thus comes from its ability to bring people together.

According to the American Psychological Association, “inclusive language is more than just avoiding the use of a few antiquated or offensive terms and phrases... it is about creating cultures where people can feel free to be their full authentic selves” (Andoh 2022). This quote sums up the importance of language and the impact of words. A single word or phrase may feel like a small thing. The small change of respecting someone’s preferred pronouns or referring to them as a wheelchair user instead of handicapped can have an impact, not only on their self-

confidence but also on how they feel about the world around them. Likewise, a negative word choice can have an equally harmful impact. As an educator, I need to be up to date with language changes since I never know what sort of student will walk into my classroom. It is our job not to know everything, but to be willing to learn new things every day.

An article from the American Psychological Association by Efua Andoh called “Why Inclusive Language Matters” discusses the importance of language in our society today. The article explains how inclusive language has become more mainstream in recent years and argues for three main points when it comes to inclusive language: focus on people and not labels; show cultural humility; and think impact over intent. These are three points I discuss in this chapter using examples from my own experience and research.

### People Over Labels

When considering the first point—focusing on people and not labels—person-first versus identity-first language immediately comes to mind. First brought about by the disability community, this discussion centers on trying to find the best words or phrases to address each identity group. There are different schools of thought here. The first is that the person should be centered and thus we should use person-first language (e.g., person with autism). Person-first language emphasizes the person over the condition rather than centering the disability or condition. Identity-first language (e.g., autistic person), empowers the individual to claim ownership of their disability or condition. Both schools of thought have validity with various members of different communities siding with one over the other. The rule of thumb when it comes to deciding which type of identifier to use is to always default to the individual. In cases of identity, the individual's preference should trump matters of style.

As a neurodivergent artist and educator who often works with neurodivergent students, I see this conversation play out all the time. Many parents prefer person-first language for their children because they don't want their children to be thought of as only their disability or condition. However, I found students often have the opposite opinion. Many students on the autism spectrum prefer to be referred to as autistic rather than a person with autism as they find autism to be a fundamental part of their being. I also prefer to be called autistic rather than person with autism, but as I stated before, I always defer to an individual's preference over writing style or my personal preference.

Where this conversation differs slightly is when it comes to writing. In general, person-first language is the default for academic writing. Academics, authors, and experts in the field tend to utilize person-first language when discussing the nuances of various identities. However, this is not a hard and fast rule. Mixing between person-first and identity-first language can help avoid the repetition of "person with..." in an article or essay. Depending on the author's identity, they may have a personal preference as well. According to the American Psychological Association, "those who embrace their disability as part of their cultural and/or personal identity are more likely to prefer identity-first language" (Dunn & Andrews, 2015). If the author is of the identity they are writing about, they may be more likely to utilize identity-first language. Throughout this thesis, I use both interchangeably depending on the context. Neither is necessarily correct or incorrect if the language is honoring the group mentioned in the writing.

### Explicitness and Clarity of Language

The debate between person-first and identity-first language makes me think about the importance of explicitness and clarity in language. As Barton-Farcas explores throughout

*Disability and Theatre*, “clarity encourages understanding” (19). To get everyone on the same page and to ensure that language is accessible, the language must be clear. There also needs to be an emphasis on plain language that is easy for anyone to comprehend. When working with young people, we need to be as explicit and clear as possible. Instructions should be specific and detail exactly how we want things done. For autistic students, explicit instructions are particularly important. When rules or expectations are not specifically laid out, students won’t meet them, causing confusion and frustration for teachers and students. As Johnston notes in *Choice Words: How Our Language Affects Children’s Learning*, when “we don’t explicitly detail how we do things because one of the rules of conversation is that you don’t tell people what they already know...minority students often pay a high price for this assumption” (7). Minority students in this context include students with disabilities, students of color, and students from different cultures. This miscommunication becomes a problem for literal thinkers and ESL (English as a second language) students and may cause them to get further behind in content. As educators and practitioners, we should never assume that unsaid instructions will be understood and should instead be proactive in using language that is explicit and concise.

In looking back on my own choices as a facilitator, I think about when my language could’ve been clearer and more specific. When hosting an audition workshop before a weekend of youth auditions, I ran into a situation where I assumed certain instructions would be understood without explicitly saying them. During this workshop, I asked groups of students to come to the front of the room and do a mock audition for the other actors. I walked them through the process of a cold-read and explained different “dos and don’ts” when it comes to auditioning. The first few groups were given a different do or don’t to show the rest of the group. When one student came up, I asked her to stay far away from her scene partner to demonstrate the need to

interact with a scene partner. She did so and began to read her scene, but she read everything on her paper, including the stage directions. This group of actors was older, so I mistakenly assumed that they all knew not to read any stage directions on the page. This young actress didn't know this and was embarrassed when another student corrected her. I took this moment to thank her for demonstrating the other "don't" so well and explained to the whole group that this was a bonus don't. Looking back, I could have explicitly mentioned not to read the stage directions as that particular scene had quite a bit of action happening throughout. I took time to mention all the other basics like facing the audience, reading loudly, and interacting with your scene partner, but this seemed to slip my mind. I learned later that this student was new to theatre and was on the autism spectrum. Knowing not to read the stage directions was second nature to most of the students in the room since they had been a part of a show before. For this student, she had no idea. For future audition workshops, I plan to add this specific instruction as part of the example dos and don'ts. I think having someone read the stage directions on purpose could be a fun way to show anyone who might not know that reading them is a don't. This makes me think of other ways I could inclusify the audition process, such as simplifying the audition sides to just include dialogue, creating sides with larger print, or implementing a survey for auditioners to fill out before auditions that allows them to share any accommodations they may need. As the facilitator, I'm not going to always know the context like who's new and what abilities are in the room, especially on the first day. To counteract this, my instructions need to be as explicit and clear as possible so everyone in the room can be on the same page.



## Cultural Humility

Cultural humility is present in many discussions about inclusion and diversity, emphasizing the willingness to learn from others who know about their own identity. Andoh's article urges readers to "embrace that you are a learner, not an expert, when it comes to understanding the experiences of other people, their cultures, and their experiences" (Andoh 2022). Like deciding between person-first and identity-first language, it is always best to default to an individual's preference. Hammond alludes to this when she reminds us that having cultural humility may require challenging your own biases, self-reflection, and acknowledging that you may make mistakes. The key is remaining open to continuous learning and growth.

Inclusive language has changed tremendously in our society over the years. Nearly every industry, especially since the pandemic, has made strides to create environments that are more inclusive and accessible. The first step to this is creating and maintaining inclusive language. One example that comes to mind regards the drag queen competition reality TV show, *RuPaul's Drag Race*. In earlier seasons, RuPaul started each challenge by saying "gentlemen, start your engines, and may the best woman win!" Starting with season 13, the phrase was changed to "racers, start your engines, and may the best drag queen win!" The first episode with this new phrase aired in January 2021 during the middle of the pandemic (Seddon 2021). *RuPaul's Drag Race* was already known for being rather inclusive as its main goal is to showcase diverse queer talent. This small language change helped to convey to its audience that the show is continuously listening and keeping up with societal expectations. As Johnston said in his book about the importance of words, "language creates realities and invites identities" (9). Language is representational and constitutive, meaning it has the power to create the reality it wants to see. Due to critiques and fan comments, the show chose to implement more diversity in terms of

gender identity. By changing the words to this famous catchphrase, the show not only showed the world that they are inclusive of different gender identities, but that they have the potential to become more inclusive as the world continues to change. It is also interesting to note that since this change, the show, and its many international spin-offs, has seen an increasing number of non-male contestants competing. In addition, audiences for the show have steadily increased over the last several years. Not only was inclusion the right choice in this situation, but it was also the smart choice financially.

### Impact Over Intent

The final point in Andoh's article argues for is about impact over intent. According to the Anti-Defamation League, "intent is *what we mean* by our words or actions. Impact is how those words or actions are *experienced, felt or understood* by either the person they are directed to or others" (ADL 2022). This idea reminds me of a situation that occurred in a rehearsal during a youth production of *Alice in Wonderland*.

In rehearsal one day, my Assistant Director (AD) and I worked with the actors playing the flowers on the physicality of their walk. The AD wanted the flowers to enter and exit using a "princess walk," which involved delicate strides and their arms poised in a very specific way. The young actors, most of whom had never done a show before, seemed to struggle with this concept mostly because they were embarrassed to walk this way. I suggested that everyone in the room, including the adults, spend the next minute walking around the space as princesses in hopes that seeing everyone being silly would encourage the flowers to be silly as well. One student refused to participate in this activity and sat to the side. I thought nothing of it since it was a very spur-of-the-moment thing that would only last a minute. Another student pointed him

out and asked why he chose not to participate. He responded with, “I don’t walk like that, I’m a guy. That’s too girly” (keep in mind that the other boys in the space were also walking like princesses during this). I immediately responded with, “we’re all doing it right now, we’re all playing princesses.” I hoped this choice of phrasing would help him see that we were all just being silly and playing something unlike ourselves. He still refused to participate but also didn’t make any more comments.

In looking back on this scenario, I think about how I could have handled this differently. Although I was not the first adult to use the phrase “princess walk,” I could have found substitutions for the word “princess” that felt less gendered. I think the young male student was reacting to the femininity of the phrase and felt uncomfortable with it. Gender neutral words to describe the quality of movement might be fluid, floaty, delicate, or soft. I also think back on how I introduced this concept and how that phrasing could be more inclusive. Since this was a spur-of-the-moment idea, I didn’t necessarily put a lot of thought into my phrasing. I said something along the lines of, “okay, now everybody in the room is going to walk around like a princess, ready, go!” This spur-of-the-moment kind of instruction was effective for some of the students in the room, who jumped up immediately and loved participating in something they wouldn’t normally do. However, others were hesitant about the idea. Thinking back on myself as a student, I would not have liked this sort of instruction. I craved structure and predictability. Being expected to jump into something in the moment would’ve intimidated me. This makes me think about how some of the other students felt in the moment. Was the boy just thrown off and said something he didn’t necessarily mean? If I did an activity like this again, I could instead say, “okay, let us now *try* using floaty movement. Everybody is free to join!” This language change would encourage group participation without forcing it. As Johnston says in his book *Choice*

*Words: How Our Language Affects Children's Learning*, “joint activity around shared goals produces not only the ability and desire to collaborate but also a tacit understanding that doing so is normal” (66). In theatre spaces, encouraging collaboration is key. The challenge for the practitioner becomes figuring out how to do so in a way that is accessible and includes all players in the room while not isolating anyone.

As the director in the room, I needed to handle that situation calmly. I was not thrilled with the student's immediate comment but wanted to keep the activity going with little disruption. In reflecting on this moment, I'm reminded of what Zaretta Hammond said about being a culturally responsive teacher: “the culturally responsive teacher's ability to manage her emotions is paramount because she is the ‘emotional thermostat’ of the classroom and can influence students' mood and productivity” (87). If I handled the situation differently and fought the student about participating, he might have become aggressive toward me. A negative reaction from an adult might have also caused him to begin to resent me as well. I chose to say something to show the group that I wasn't going to let something like that slide but wanted to prevent the situation from escalating as well. As the emotional thermostat in the room, it's the practitioner's job to set the standard for how to react in moments of conflict that allows the best results for everyone involved.

Several rehearsals later, a different young actor mentioned that she was upset about his comment and that it made her feel like he didn't like the girls in the cast. I explained to her that he didn't mean the comment in that way and that he just didn't feel comfortable “playing a princess.” When talking to the boy about this situation, he mentioned that he only wanted to play boy characters and didn't want to do anything that would feel girly. We talked about why he felt this way and it was clear that he was just repeating things he heard at home. It made me

wonder if he would have participated in the movement activity if I used some of the substitutions mentioned earlier like floaty or fluid rather than princess. Moving on from this situation, I realized I need to be more careful about instructions and pay extra attention to making them as gender-neutral as possible. In one of the following rehearsals, we had a short discussion about the impact of our words and how they might make someone feel. Most of the students remained quiet during this conversation but a few shared their thoughts, with the situation ultimately dissolving without being mentioned again. Not all situations like this end peacefully, which makes me think about what was being said outside of rehearsal and how I could further encourage the students to share their thoughts when situations like this arise. As an educator, it's my job to not only understand the concept of impact over intent but to be able to convey it to my students in classroom and rehearsal spaces.

Regardless of intent, our words and actions can have negative impacts. When practitioners mistakes, they must focus on the impact on the other party, apologize when necessary, and commit to doing better. We're never going to know the exact right thing to do at any given moment but when we know better, we do better. When the movie adaptation of the Broadway musical *In the Heights* was released in 2021, producer and lyricist Lin-Manuel Miranda was criticized for failing to "adequately depict the dark-skinned Afro-Latino population of Washington Heights" (Jacobs). The team behind the film chose to cast light-skinned Latino actors in leading roles despite the prevalence of dark-skinned Latinos in Washington Heights, the location of the story. The Latino community critiqued this choice online, saying they felt unseen, and that this choice was a result of colorism. Miranda responded to these critiques on X (formerly known as Twitter) apologizing for the team's shortcomings by saying, "in trying to paint a mosaic of this community, we fell short" (Miranda). He continued to explain that he

originally wrote this musical because he felt invisible and that he just wanted his community to have that representation. He apologized for the impact of this choice and promised to “do better in my future projects, and I’m dedicated to the learning and evolving we all have to do to make sure we are honoring our diverse and vibrant community” (Jacobs). Miranda was not able to fully fix this situation, but with a genuine apology, he made a giant leap in the right direction. As artists, we must emphasize impact over intent by acknowledging our shortcomings and striving to do better.

As I look back on my own mistakes as an educator, I think of times when I accidentally deadnamed or misgendered a student without knowing. When working with 8–15-year-olds at an overnight summer camp in New Hampshire, one student changed their name and pronouns from the previous summer. I referred to them as the name that I knew from the past without knowing the updated one. This student politely corrected me, informing me of their new name. There was no real way for me to know this student’s new name or pronouns. I could’ve asked the student the first time I saw them that summer if their name and pronouns were the same. At this camp, pronouns are not openly talked about, so I avoided making this student feel uncomfortable by potentially outing them in front of other campers. As an educator, I need to prioritize my students’ safety and well-being over anything else. The focus should always be on how to create the best space possible for the students.

At CFC Arts, there is a nonbinary student who uses a different name and pronouns from the ones they use with their family. At check-in each day, we refer to this student by the name they were given at birth, which also appears on the show t-shirt and in the program. During rehearsals and to us, however, we know the student by their chosen name and preferred pronouns. This has been the case between this student and the theatre for many years since they

feel comfortable enough to be their true selves in rehearsal. Of course, there have been instances where new staff or students accidentally misgender or deadname this student because they are simply unaware. We do our best to educate everyone in the room about asking for pronouns and being respectful of them, but we try not to draw attention to this particular student's situation due to a lack of parental support. Creating an inclusive rehearsal room in this instance involves respecting pronouns and educating actors and staff about the importance of respecting others' preferred identifiers while acknowledging that each situation could look drastically different.

The importance of language cannot be understated. How we communicate creates the foundation for how our society runs and will run in the future. As an educator, the importance of language is always on my mind. I can inclusify my language by keeping up with the trends of the most correct phrases and terms and striving for inclusive language to be used not only by me but by my co-workers and students. After all, this sort of work to utilize inclusive language can only go so far if it doesn't translate intergenerationally. When trying to establish a space where students feel welcome, safe, and respected, the first step is showing them that you can be that person for them. Utilizing inclusive language allows your classroom or rehearsal space to be a place where everyone is included. By showing a consistent desire to do better, artists are doing the work to make theatrical spaces more inclusive.

## CHAPTER FIVE: POWER OF THE FACILITATOR IN YOUTH THEATRE SPACES

While inclusifying our language is an important first step in inclusion, there is much more that needs to be done to become an effectively inclusive facilitator. It's not enough to just update our vocabulary. We must acknowledge and begin to break down the power structures put in place by our society as educators and directors. In any rehearsal space, power dynamics can hinder effective collaboration. Young people are often not given the space nor the tools to speak up for themselves and are instead expected to blindly obey adults. As a child, I remember hearing the phrases "only speak when spoken to" and "just because" in response to a question. This teaches young people not to think for themselves and that their ideas are invaluable. Through inclusive education, we can begin to break down some of these dynamics and create spaces where students feel empowered and heard. Throughout this chapter, I examine the power structures present in educational theatre spaces while exploring the questions: "What power does the facilitator have in creating an inclusive environment? What structures are put in place that affect this, and what strategies can facilitators use to combat these structures?"

### Role of the Educator

The educator's role in a classroom is to cultivate a space where students can learn, grow, and be challenged. This is partly done through the curriculum mandated by the state or organization but is mostly accomplished by the teacher's ability to effectively reach their students through the content. School is seen as a training ground for the real world where students are expected to learn skills that will benefit them post-graduation. Inclusion as a fundamental aspect of the classroom space goes hand in hand with many of these goals. The



teacher's job is to take what they are given and find ways to effectively convey the material to their students that makes sense to them while aiming to reach all their students.

While thinking about the role of an educator, we need to keep in mind the power structures in place. Educators are positioned to directly influence a young person's life, either positively or negatively. Regardless of what an educator says or does, they are a part of a system where the educator is bestowed power; after all, they make the rules and assign the grades. How can educators use that power to create educational spaces that teach content through an inclusive lens? As Johnston says, "we cannot persistently ask questions of children without becoming one-who-asks-questions and placing children in the position of the one-who-answers-questions" (6). This structure of questioner-answerer is part of the fundamental teacher-student relationship. As educators, we ask questions of our students to stimulate conversation, to assess comprehension, and to encourage critical thinking skills. In asking questions as an educational strategy, we are enforcing the idea that adults ask questions and children answer them. Outside of the classroom, many of the questions our students are asked are meant to be answered in conformity. For example, when asked, "How are you?" we are taught to answer, "Good, and you?" regardless of how we feel. As children, we're taught not to ask questions of strangers as it may be considered rude. Much of this information is not explicitly taught yet shown through adult's actions. When young people don't follow these unspoken rules, especially in educational spaces, they are often reprimanded, causing them to not want to ask questions or genuinely share their feelings in the future. As educators and practitioners, we need to remember the importance of not only our words, but our actions in spaces with young people as everything we do or don't do has the power to influence the next generation.

## Agency

To be effective, educators need to find ways to convey material that gets students excited to learn. This can be accomplished by challenging the students through creative programming and by cultivating an environment of curiosity and collaboration. As educators, we can encourage students to do more than just retain information if we give them agency in their learning. As noted in several case studies, “children with a strong belief in their own agency work harder, focus their attention better, are more interested in their studies, and are less likely to give up when they encounter difficulties than children with a weaker sense of agency” (Johnston 40-41). Rather than offering prescribed answers and preparing students to think alike, I can empower them to ask questions and challenge the status quo. Incorporating real-life scenarios into educational settings allows students to develop problem-solving skills that will benefit them inside and outside of the classroom. One way these problem-solving skills can be developed is by having young actors have a say in their blocking during a show’s rehearsal process. I noticed that when I ask a young actor what they think their character should do in the moment, they are more invested in the scene. They almost always have ideas for what should happen next so giving them a chance to artistically participate in the process keeps them more engaged than simply dictating the blocking to them. I also encourage actors to share ideas if they feel like a moment in the show should happen differently than what I had originally pictured. This often leads to a great discussion about the story, usually involving questions about character development and storytelling. To have these conversations, I establish at the beginning of the process that these types of opinions are welcome but must be included thoughtfully and at appropriate times, this is usually done through a community agreement which will be mentioned in the next section. Young people can be great collaborators in the rehearsal room if given the

opportunity, which makes me think about how I can incorporate more of these kinds of ideas in classroom settings. As young artists, students should be encouraged to act as part of a community where they feel valued as equal participants. Giving students the freedom to think independently and creatively allows them to value their voices while also valuing the voice of the community.

### Community Agreement

As an educator, I can support my students by listening to their ideas and allowing them to be an active member of the class. For me, this starts with establishing a community agreement.

The National Equity Project defines a community agreement as:

A consensus on what every person in our group needs from each other and commits to each other in order to feel safe, supported, open, productive and trusting... so that we can do our best work, achieve our common vision, and serve our [students/families/constituents] well.” (“Developing Community Agreements”)

On the first day of a new class or rehearsal process, I offer up the idea of community agreement to create a shared understanding. I emphasize that this agreement is something we create together and is not predetermined by me as the facilitator. As Johnston mentions in his book, the word “we” is “an invitation to and an expression of solidarity” (66). Inviting students to participate in creating their own rules on the first day shows them that they will have agency in this space. Community agreements often include common rules seen in classrooms, or on any sort of team, such as the Golden Rule. Starting a process with building a community agreement sets the precedent on day one that all voices are welcome in this space. The example used in the last section about

establishing when and how opinions about the show can be shared might be included in a community agreement. I encourage all participants to share ideas of things they would like to add to the community agreement while adding some of my own as well. I bring up how we as a group agree to manage conflict and what safety measures are put in place in terms of respecting personal boundaries. At the end of the discussion, I ask everyone to sign the agreement in acknowledgment of the shared document created. By being an active member of the classroom community from the beginning, students feel empowered to share their ideas and remain invested throughout the class or rehearsal process. While community agreements don't prevent or solve every problem in an educational space, they are a useful tool in encouraging community building. I've often revisited community agreements throughout a rehearsal process when moments of conflict have come up and sometimes changed the agreements to better fit our space. Community agreements to me have been a great first step in cultivating an environment that encourages agency.

Community agreements make me think about all the things that could go wrong in an educational space. Community agreements are meant to be proactive in helping to pacify and sometimes prevent certain situations by thinking through the different scenarios that might arise. Having rules and procedures for how to problem solve in the face of different situations that might come up allows the practitioner to be prepared. Of course, we can't predict everything that might come up so we must be ready to handle anything. Barton-Farcas talks about problem-solving using accommodations and how sometimes it's more effective to let things be, saying, "many times you do not need to solve a problem at all, just relax and proceed as you would usually" (157). In my experiences working with young people, I've learned this to be especially true when working with groups with a

wide range of ages and abilities. This quote makes me think of a moment during the rehearsal process of *Alice in Wonderland*. During callbacks, I noticed one of my older actors wore headphones when he got overwhelmed. I initially didn't think much of this because we had multiple other students who used this accommodation. However, there were a few moments during callbacks where this student would not respond to directions given by me or stage management, presumably because he couldn't hear us. The other students that use headphones as accommodation never have any music playing so I assumed this was the case with the new student as well. I gave this student the benefit of the doubt during callbacks and didn't ask him to take off his headphones. Nervous that this situation might get worse, I talked to our Music Therapist about it during our first rehearsal (this organization has a Music Therapist on staff who works mostly with the younger students and those with special needs but is on call to help with all the students). This was the first day of rehearsal, so she stopped by to introduce herself to everyone. I asked her how to help him pay attention without taking his accommodation away. She simply looked at me and said, "just tap his shoulder to get his attention."

What an obvious solution. I was too busy overthinking the different possibilities to see what was right in front of me. When I tapped the student on the shoulder during our first rehearsal, the first thing he said to me was, "Oh, sorry. I couldn't hear you. I'll turn my music off." The situation solved itself. From this situation, I am reminded of the importance of communicating with students and that creating an inclusive environment sometimes means letting students solve problems themselves. I don't need to have every answer figured out; I can work with my students to solve problems, if needed, in the moment.

## Brave Spaces

Community agreements are a step in the right direction in terms of creating an inclusive space. The phrase safe space is often used to describe inclusive environments and is described as a place where individuals “can explore ideas and express themselves without feeling marginalized” (Palfrey 2017). In contrast, “in brave spaces, the search for knowledge is paramount, even if some discussions may make certain students uncomfortable” (Palfrey 2017). Brave spaces include many of the elements of a safe space but take it one step further. In a brave space, students are free to challenge ideas and have conversations that may bring about uncomfortable feelings. In these spaces, the facilitator can have these types of conversations because the expectation has been set up to do so. Students are given agency in their learning and the freedom to explore different ideas. Many colleges and universities preach the idea of brave spaces in their institutions. In the University of Maryland’s School of Social Work, Victoria D. Stubbs has established the “6 Pillars of a Brave Space.” Stubbs defines a brave space as “a classroom environment that acknowledges the challenges that both students and faculty have when attempting to have a discussion around difficult and/or sensitive topics such as race, power, privilege and the various forms of oppression for the purpose of learning” (Stubbs). To her, the six pillars of a brave space are vulnerability, perspective-taking, leaning into fear, critical thinking, examining intentions, and mindfulness. Each pillar includes a brief explanation of what she means by each word and a section entitled “we do this by.” These explicit details help to give realistic expectations of how we can enact these pillars into our everyday lives. It’s one thing to say be vulnerable and another to explain ways in which we can be vulnerable as a group. In theatre classes I’ve taught, vulnerability and bravery are ideas I encourage through not only the course content but through the space I create in the classroom as well. Brave spaces can be

implemented in educational spaces for all ages and can start with ideas of agency, community agreements, and collaboration.

As facilitators, we have the power to create an inclusive environment. We can do so by empowering our students to ask questions, giving them agency in their learning, and creating a community agreement to establish a brave space for learning. After all, I learn just as much, if not more, from my students as they do from me. I'm constantly in awe of how much my students have to teach me. Learning from my students requires the ability to admit when I've made mistakes and to confess that I don't always know the answer. This was a radical concept to me when I first started working with young people as I thought that adults were expected to have all the answers. I thought not knowing something would make me seem incompetent or unprepared. When in reality, my ability to admit when I don't know the answer allows my students to do the same. In these moments of uncertainty, we can begin to search for an answer together as collaborators.

## CHAPTER SIX: INCLUSIVE DIRECTING STRATEGIES IN YOUTH THEATRE SPACES

The director of a production plays an instrumental role in creating an inclusive rehearsal environment. Throughout this chapter, I examine the question, “What power does the director have in creating an inclusive rehearsal environment, and what strategies can I apply as a youth theatre practitioner?” I start this chapter by exploring big-picture ideas about directing, and then dive into different inclusive practices that apply to various aspects of the director’s process.

### Role of the Director

The director is often viewed as the captain of the ship whose word is law. The focus is ultimately on the destination (the performance), which can cause the director to lose sight of how they get to that final destination. When directing young people, the focus needs to be more on process rather than product, although the final product is still important. As explored in Canadian theatre artist Charlie Peters’ essay on directing, focusing on the director’s vision emphasizes the end goal more than the journey. This idea of vision centers the director and sets them up as a prophet rather than a leader. As Peters says, “when a director’s vision is centered, abuse is not just possible, but more easily defended as the necessary means of creating good art. This is not healthy leadership” (2021). As leaders, directors are not only responsible for the end product of the show but for the well-being of those who created it. Too often in community theatre and educational theatre spaces, directors abuse their power. Thinking of directing a production as a process rather than just a product allows practitioners to value the everyday interactions between members of the team over the artistic vision.



The dynamic between teachers and students parallels that of actors and directors during a theatrical production. This is even more so when working with youth, because the director often must teach younger actors how to be a part of a production. These young people are learning what it means to be a part of a community, how to learn lines, how to collaborate with other artists, and what it means to put a show together. Whether the youth director has experience teaching or not, it is part of their job to educate their actors on how to conduct themselves in a rehearsal environment and how to be artists. When youth directors take this responsibility seriously, they can help create collaborative and innovative artists.

Collaboration is a vital aspect where the director needs to lead their team collaboratively and fairly. The director needs to listen to their team, to the audiences they engage with, and to themselves with their understanding of the material. Just as it is the educator's job to expand their students' worldview and to introduce them to new ideas, the director should do the same for both their team and the audience. This requires the director to keep up with current events and the culture of the moment. It is the director's responsibility to lead their team with knowledge while still leaving space to search for answers together throughout the process.

In listening to our students and collaborators, we can begin to have an open, shared dialogue. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire argues that true dialogue requires “a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence...there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know” (90-91). Being able to have dialogue in these artistic spaces gives artists the freedom to collaborate, make mistakes, and create art. Ensuring inclusion in these spaces can help build mutual trust, thus creating dialogue. In favoring listening over vision, the theatrical process can become one in which no one voice is more important than another and all the voices can come

together in true dialogue. Dialogue is a by-product of effective collaboration as it is very difficult to create theatre alone.

In valuing collaboration, directors must acknowledge the importance of each voice on an artistic team. The director must value their team members' opinions both in theory and in practice. This doesn't mean they have to constantly agree, however, they should facilitate open conversations about ideas that don't disregard one player over another. The most effective creative teams include a wide variety of voices from different backgrounds and experiences. Diversifying the creative team is a noble endeavor that cannot fully benefit from the breadth of knowledge and experience if the space is dominated by a single voice. The director should not be expected to have all the answers and should be able to rely on their team to serve as equal collaborators. Ideally, "a listening, dialoguing director is one with a whole team of collaborators with whom to identify and address the inevitable issues—artistic and otherwise—that arise whenever people come to create" (Peters 2021). As the captain of the ship, the director steers the team in the right direction but must trust in their crew to get them to their destination.

### Casting and Auditions

Committing to more inclusive practices impacts every level of a rehearsal process, beginning with casting. To promote a diverse and inclusive casting process, practitioners must encourage people of all identities to audition. This reminds me of a question Barton-Farcas poses: to what extent do actors owe us their identity? As practitioners, we can't require or force actors to "come out" as autistic or epileptic just because a show calls for a character of that identity. When directing a cast that includes actors with hidden disabilities, Barton-Farcas

suggests bringing up the term at the first cast meeting in an open discussion about what it means and requesting that if anyone has anything to share, they let you know privately afterward.

In working with youth, this discussion looks a little different. In some spaces, practitioners are given information from parents about various diagnoses and the subsequent accommodations. Other times, students come to us directly with this information. Legally, no actor has to disclose medical information or diagnoses nor can a facilitator or educator require it. Regardless of how, when, and if we discover the information, practitioners need to acknowledge the intimacy of disability. Barton-Farcas describes this concept: “you as director or producer are privy to knowledge about an artist’s body (and their emotions) and how it functions in a way you are usually not privy to with a non-disabled artist” (9). The circle of intimacy created becomes a special place where artists can work together and is often more important than any of the practical work. Even if we have these conversations and offer accommodations, not every artist will feel comfortable disclosing that sort of personal information. Creating a space where artists feel safe to disclose their identity comes with time and goodwill.

Auditions and callbacks set the tone for the production so if practitioners want to prioritize establishing a space that is open for all, they must show that during auditions. This can be done in many ways. Barton-Farcas argues that appointment-based auditions are the most inclusive. This ensures that each actor will be seen and shows the artists that the artistic team values their time. There’s nothing worse than waiting all day to be seen at an audition to be told “that’s all for today.”

I found appointments to be especially effective during the callbacks for *Home of the Brave*. Inspired by how one of my undergrad directors structured her callbacks, I split all the called-back performers into groups of five and gave each group a timeslot of twenty minutes. In

that time slot, the actors did a movement call, read a side altogether, read two-person sides, and read a monologue. Before callbacks, I separated each actor by which part, or parts, I wanted them to read for and placed them randomly into groups, with each actor being called back for one or two parts. This way was effective because the show only calls for a cast of eight so I was confident I could see everything I needed to see within that time. After the callbacks, I received feedback from multiple actors saying that their *Home of the Brave* callback was one of the most fun and least stressful callbacks they had experienced. During this same weekend, there were callbacks for another school production where many actors were asked to stay for several hours and were only seen once, if at all. Since these actors are students, I thought this was an important educational opportunity for them to not only practice performing in a callback, but to also learn about the different kinds of callbacks they may encounter outside of school. With this format, I was even able to call back more performers than I originally planned to fill out the groups of five perfectly. This type of appointment-based callback is especially helpful when working with students with disabilities as it allows for more flexibility with accommodation. With this format, everyone's time is respected, the actors are guaranteed the opportunity to be seen, and accommodations can be more easily implemented than with a general call, making it inherently more inclusive.

Another inclusive strategy during the audition process is the implementation of an audition workshop. At CFC Arts, the director leads a workshop before auditions to help students prepare. This workshop is optional but serves as an opportunity for students to become familiar with not only the director but also how the auditions will run. The workshop lasts about as long as the actual audition block and includes an overview of the audition structure, a question-and-answer session with the director, and a mock acting audition. We have received great feedback

regarding how these workshops help newer students learn what to expect so they can feel prepared.

During the most recent audition process, I noticed the importance of this workshop with one particular student. As mentioned in a previous chapter, an autistic student came to this workshop who was brand new to theatre. She didn't know how auditions worked and was specifically unfamiliar with reading from a script. Getting the opportunity to be introduced to these concepts at the workshop allowed her to be successful in her audition. At the audition, she did a wonderful job during the cold-read portion because she knew what to expect. She was also notably more confident in the cold-read portion of the audition, as opposed to the singing and dancing sections, perhaps because the workshop focused on cold reading. Knowing the logistics of what to expect and the various dos and don'ts allowed her to walk into the audition confidently, ready to give it her all. After seeing her audition, I wondered how other new students, neurodivergent and not, might have performed differently if they had attended the workshop. It also makes me think about how to incorporate some of the information from the workshop into the actual audition. Time constraints are often an issue when it comes to auditions, but I wonder how I can make future auditions more inclusive for newer students like the one mentioned above.

This idea of an audition workshop is a perfect example of how my research and practice have intersected throughout this process. Audition workshops are something I read about in both Barton Farcas' book and in other sources during my research. I also encountered audition workshops when working at a community theater in undergrad. It was not until working at CFCArts, however, that I fully saw the potential of these workshops. Getting to incorporate one of these workshops into my own process allowed me to see how research actively influences a

process and vice versa. After giving this particular workshop, I continued to research how others are using this idea in their processes to learn more about their potential as an inclusive process. I plan to continue this cycle of research-practice-research in future projects as well.

### Rehearsals

After exploring how directors can make auditions and callbacks more inclusive, the next step is examining the rehearsal process holistically. As discussed previously, language is powerful. What a director says throughout the rehearsal process has just as much impact on their team as their actions. To use that power correctly, directors need to be intentional with how they communicate. Barton-Farcas emphasizes the importance of communicating early and often. Stage managers are a crucial part of this communication as they are often the ones with whom the actors communicate the most. A strong line of communication between the directors and the stage managers helps the process to be successful for everyone involved. What this line of communication looks like may vary from production to production, from theatre to theatre, and from team to team. Oftentimes some combination of in-person communication and text/email chains is utilized. In my experience, long email chains are more common in professional theatres and with the older generations whereas the younger generations often prefer text chains. In my opinion, there is no such thing as over-communication when it comes to a theatrical process because I would rather hear the information twice than not at all.

In thinking about implementing inclusion during a rehearsal process, the first week is the most important. By then, directors should have at least started a line of communication between the stage management team and the artistic team, had a read-through with the whole cast, and

established a community agreement. The read-through is also the perfect time to talk through expectations and the various accommodations that are available.

Directors can make choices that extend beyond traditional rehearsal proceedings to build an inclusive environment. One of the best ways to encourage inclusion and community bonding is by encouraging shared meals. This may look different for each production, but the benefits are the same. Eating together encourages team building, empathy, self-care, and cohesion within an ensemble. I noticed the benefits of sharing a meal during an inclusive rehearsal process I was involved with this past summer, *Building a Shared Home*. This process brought together young adults with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) to devise a piece around the theme of “home” based on collective lived experiences. During our hour-long lunch break each day, we would walk to the nearby student union as a group and eat lunch together. This was something we planned to do from the beginning of the process, so we allocated funds for group meals each day. This shared experience of eating together allowed us to get to know each other outside of rehearsal and encouraged us to continue the bonds we were forming inside rehearsal. If meals during the rehearsal day are not viable, after-rehearsal meet-ups are another option. In general, shared meals or other unstructured social opportunities throughout the rehearsal process can have a wonderful impact in terms of cohesion and ensemble building.

In thinking about what accommodations mean for an inclusive process, I think of Carrie Sandahl’s *Ethics of Accommodation* where she lays out the different steps of accommodation. The first step defines accommodation as “including everyone wanting to participate, often necessitating that the majority makes difficult changes in its practices and environment. These changes are not made begrudgingly, but with goodwill, creativity, and a strong dose of humor, elements that often find expression in the performances themselves” (Sandahl 229). Inclusion is

radically creative and requires artists to come up with unique ways to involve all members of the team. For *Home of the Brave*, I decided to include a pre-show that involved the actors interacting with audience members in a game of catch and an interactive music lesson. Not only did this activity allow audience members to be included in part of the show, but it also served as a way for our offstage understudies to be more involved in the process and production. During rehearsals, the offstage understudies stepped into role as children when we practiced the preshow. This way, the onstage actors had children to interact with and the offstage understudies were more involved. Understudies normally sit during the entire rehearsal and observe the action onstage, rarely getting to participate. I wanted to find creative ways to engage them more throughout the process that also served a purpose.

The understudies during *Home of the Brave* were exceptional and wanted to be involved in the process as much as possible. They were often asking for opportunities to step into roles and contributed several ideas about the show during rehearsals. This makes me think about other ways to further include understudies. What else can they do throughout the process to become involved? Before this show, I had never directed a production where offstage understudies were a part of the cast. I was often overthinking about how to best include them throughout the process, so I looked again to the Ethics of Accommodation. Sandahl's second step argues for the importance of listening: "listening, here, means being taken into consideration, being attended to" (229). This quote makes me think about how I can actively include students in new ways, like how I did with my introverted student in *Alice in Wonderland* with her costume rendering. For *Home of the Brave*, this looked like facilitating discussions about the show and being open to my actor's ideas. One example that comes to mind was when we were creating a soundscape for the scene that's a memory of the ocean. During the blocking, one actor mentioned they could do



several different bird calls and that they felt like we might hear birds in this scene. I asked them to play around with different ones and we ended up incorporating multiple of those bird calls into the show. This small moment of acknowledging an actor's idea and implementing it into the show not only reassured that actor, but showed the whole team that their ideas could be heard as well. Creating a space where actors feel comfortable speaking up can start with asking for and honoring their opinions. Listening involves facilitating dialogue where all opinions can be heard and respected, encouraging others to speak, and allowing others to listen.

As Sandahl says in step three, true accommodation involves “making room for difference, letting go of preconceived notions of perfectibility, and negotiating complex sets of needs” (229). Some actors will speak up more than others, but an inclusive director also creates space for the quieter actors to speak up. This involves questioning what it means to actively participate. As a quieter student myself, I know how intimidating it can be to get called on by the facilitator. I often prefer to listen and watch what is happening around me. This doesn't mean that I'm not actively participating, however. When I have something to say, I will speak up, but only in the spaces where I feel comfortable doing so. Knowing this about myself and knowing many of my students feel similarly, how can I as a facilitator create spaces where the quiet students feel comfortable to speak out while allowing all members of the team to share their ideas? After all, participation manifests in many forms and can look different for each individual. Inclusion, in this sense, is necessary in fostering an environment where all members of the team feel equally empowered to speak up and are accommodated to do so.

In terms of accommodation in the rehearsal room, what is presently available is going to vary drastically from production to production. Some companies may be well-equipped with resources to accommodate a variety of needs while others may not. In terms of approaching

accommodations from an inclusive standpoint, we must remember that “the key is approaching the needs from all angles and then filling in the blanks as needed” (Barton-Farcas 66). Despite how much money the production has or the experience the team has in dealing with various needs, accommodation is possible. Many individuals with disabilities can provide their accommodation while others are relatively easy to provide. While this may be the case, it’s unreasonable to expect every disabled person to provide their own accommodations. Examples of accommodations I’ve encountered in educational theatre spaces include noise-canceling headphones, fidget toys, mobility aids, hearing aids, and electronic versions of scripts. Many of these were provided by the students themselves while others were asked for during the beginning of the rehearsal process. In terms of providing accommodation, it’s important to listen to actors’ needs and to find a solution that works for both parties.

Through examining various inclusive directing strategies, I found many ways in which facilitators can begin to inclusify their rehearsal rooms. This looks different for each practitioner but starts with the desire to do better for your students. Facilitators have the power to make our rehearsal rooms environments where young people can thrive if we make the consistent choice to actively inclusify. We can use this power to create inclusive, accessible, and accommodating theatre spaces for youth.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

At the beginning of my thesis, I set out to explore the potential for theatre practitioners and educators to create inclusive environments. Looking back on my original research questions, I think about the facilitator's ability to create real change when working with young people. Thinking of inclusion as a responsibility makes it a part of the job. It begins with the acknowledgment that inclusion is important in educational spaces and understanding that we as facilitators have the power to inclusify.

By synthesizing research in inclusive educational practices with my reflective practice as a youth theatre director, I identified practical ways in which theatre facilitators can be actively inclusive. From thoughtfully considering our language to examining and breaking down traditional power structures to implementing play into rehearsal rooms, we as youth theatre facilitators can make inclusion a fundamental aspect of our artistic process.

Through examining my artistic process and identity, I found a multitude of ways to ensure my rehearsal spaces are as inclusive as possible. Students in *Alice in Wonderland* taught me to trust my instincts and emphasize the importance of conversation in the rehearsal room. Working with this community-based organization gave me the experience of working with a variety of accommodations and taught me about the vulnerability that comes with working with disabled young people. *Home of the Brave* reminded me how play can benefit all players in the room and that a rehearsal process should always focus on process over product. Working with a cast that included understudies challenged me to find new ways to include actors that didn't involve putting them in the show. Throughout these projects, I discovered how my own identity informs my process. Seeing myself in many of the young people I work with allows me to relate

to them while also understanding that how I facilitate may need to be adapted to accommodate different identities.

Applying the theories and ideas I read about to my youth theatre practice allowed me to discover the intersections of theory and practice. Examining both Barton-Farcas' book and Sandahl's Ethics of Accommodation showed me how disability studies can inform how I approach a rehearsal process. Zaretta Hammond's book about the Culturally Responsive Teacher taught me how to be a more culturally aware practitioner and how understanding culture can make me a better facilitator. Johnston's book about language reminded me of the importance of agency and how every choice a facilitator makes has the potential for a lasting impact on our young people. Each young actor comes into the room with a very specific identity. This research encourages me to be mindful of each young person's identity in my work as a youth theatre director.

It was my hope with this thesis to find specific, tangible ways to actively inclusify my rehearsal environment. What follows is a list of ideological principles for youth theatre practitioners aiming to be more inclusive, along with actionable items for implementation. The list below is a summary of those findings:

- Principle One: Recognize and Implement Diversity in Inclusive Spaces (Chapter 3)
  - Reflect on your assumptions based on your own cultural positioning to get curious about the cultures of your students.
  - Acknowledge the different kinds of cultures and ways of listening. Open conversations about what listening looks like and different modes for

acknowledging understanding (nodding, verbal agreement, thumbs up, etc.).

- Actively incorporate artists with disabilities whenever able. Hire them, cast them, and invite them to the table. Accommodation is a process. Directors don't need an answer to every problem right away in order to include disabled artists. Engage in conversations with disabled artists about how to accomplish this together.
  - Play theatre games! Utilize warm-ups to get actors ready for rehearsal and to create art. Use the same warm-up every day to create a structure that is beneficial to all players involved. Play games to build community and trust. Adapt theatre games to fit your ensemble. Use theatre games to develop nonverbal communication skills--many theatre games don't require speaking and can be used for groups that mainly use nonverbal communication.
  - Embrace diversity of thought—thought inclusion. Use the idea of learning styles to acknowledge the different kinds of learners in your space. Incorporate students' ideas in blocking, design, and any other ways that work for your group. Your actors are collaborators and not just students.
- Principle Two: Incorporate Inclusive Language (Chapter 4)
    - Know the difference between person-first vs. identity-first language. Use the language that is preferred by the individual. Acknowledge that these preferences may differ from what their parents/guardians prefer and honor that.

- Use explicit/clear language. Make instructions gender-neutral and ability-neutral when possible. Accept that mistakes will happen and are part of the learning process.
  - Have cultural humility. Remain open to continuous learning and growth. Remember that no facilitator is perfect—everyone is learning every day.
  - Understand the concept of impact over intent. Apologize and promise to do better when you make a mistake. Listen if someone in the room brings up an issue. Having moments of conflict is normal. Work through them as a group.
- Principle Three: Acknowledge the Power Dynamics in Youth Theatre Spaces and Break Them Down (Chapter 5)
  - Acknowledge the importance of our actions and words as facilitators.
  - Give students agency—let them ask questions. Let actors have a say in blocking. Listen to all their ideas—even the “bad” ones.
  - Use a community agreement to create a brave space. Set clear expectations and procedures. Be open to young people’s ideas and be ready to have conversations about what kind of space you want to create as a group.
- Principle Four: Inclusive Rehearsal Strategies in a Youth Theatre Process (Chapter 6)
  - Use appointment-based auditions/callbacks. Respect the time of your team and your auditioners. Incorporate Audition workshops. Have accommodations ready (virtual versions of scripts, scripts with larger font, etc.).

- Communicate with all members of your team. Approach a process collaboratively through email/text chains and in-person communication. Listen—to all members of your team. Be open to conversation. Don't assume your idea is always the best one in the room.
- Have meals together if possible. Encourage bonding outside of rehearsal and on meal breaks.
- Find new ways to include understudies. Give them jobs during rehearsal such as playing audience members.
- Provide accommodations as necessary. Have conversations about what accommodations are available and ask what is needed. Work together as a team to come up with solutions.

Through research, reflecting on my practice, and examining issues related to my own identity, I discovered various ways in which inclusion can be implemented in educational theatre spaces. There are, of course, other artists and facilitators doing this kind of work, many of whom I have encountered throughout my studies and practice. Writing these ideas in a formal document is just one of the many ways in which this sort of work can be accomplished and replicated. This poses a larger question: how do we document this type of work when time and resources are so limited? While this thesis serves to fill a gap in written inquiry about inclusion in youth theatre rehearsal spaces, my research uncovered many ways in which inclusion is currently being implemented in different sectors and industries. This makes me think about the ubiquity of inclusion and its potential to exist in every area of our society.

As I move forward as a youth theatre practitioner, I think about how I can take what I learned from this process and incorporate it into future projects. One upcoming project I'm

excited about is a devised piece that's a continuation of *Building a Shared Home*, entitled *Daring to Dream*. The piece involves working with disabled young adults and involves several of the same players from the previous year. I plan to incorporate many of the ideas discussed in this thesis and am particularly interested in seeing how I can use the ideas of play and shared meals with this group. One specific goal I have is figuring out how to further incorporate the idea of thought inclusion in a space where I specifically know individuals are neurodivergent. What does this look like and how can I use this knowledge to further include those individuals? This process will involve me working as one of several facilitators so I'm also excited to collaborate with other artists and see how we can actively inclusify our space together as a team.

In thinking about the responsibility that facilitators have in implementing inclusion, I'm reminded of what Barton-Farcas says: "we take risks and if we fail, we are the richer for having taken the risks. If we do not fail, then we never learn and never create art which can cause change" (170). The projects detailed in this thesis allowed me to fail and learn from my mistakes. As I continue to work in youth theatre, I take what I have learned and can apply it to future shows. I will undoubtedly encounter new obstacles in future projects and remain excited about the challenge of figuring out how to actively inclusify each rehearsal room. While the perfectly inclusive rehearsal environment will never exist, I continue to strive for active inclusion in my practice through constantly and consistently implementing the most effective strategies.



**APPENDIX A: NOT HUMAN RESEARCH DETERMINATION**



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

Orlando, FL 32826-3246

**Institutional Review Board**

FWA00000351

IRB00001138, IRB00012110

Office of Research

12201 Research Parkway

NOT HUMAN RESEARCH DETERMINATION

March 25, 2024

Dear Christian Anderson:

On 3/25/2024, the IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	INCLUSIFYING THE REHEARSAL ROOM: CREATING ACCESSIBLE AND ACCOMMODATING THEATRICAL SPACES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
Investigator:	Christian Anderson
IRB ID:	STUDY00006570
Funding:	None
Documents Reviewed:	• Study 6570 IRB FORM.docx, Category: IRB Protocol;

The IRB determined that the proposed activity is not research involving human subjects as defined by DHHS and FDA regulations.

IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should changes outside of administrative ones (study personnel, timelines, etc.) be made. If non-administrative changes are made (design, information collected, instrumentation, funding, etc.) and there are questions about whether these activities are research involving human in which the organization is engaged, please submit a new request to the IRB for a determination by **clicking Create Modification / CR** within the study.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or [irb@ucf.edu](mailto:irb@ucf.edu). Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Kristin Badillo

UCF IRB

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