

Theatre & Inclusivity: Students with Disability in University Performing Arts Programs

Brídín Clements

Diversity in Higher Education

Dr. Michael Funk

January 21, 2021

When investigating how performing arts programs within higher education institutions practice inclusivity for disabled students, there are two primary areas of research to consider: disability in theatre and disability in higher education. In order to consider inclusive practices specific to university theatre programs, one must become familiar with the landscape of theatre for and by people with disabilities, the architecture of performing arts programs, and more broadly, higher education practices around inclusivity for students with disabilities. This review refers to students with disabilities as a group, but a more extensive review would explore different types of disabilities and both barriers and inclusive practices specific to each.

There are many pieces of literature exploring disability in performance, and a prominent focus is how disabled characters are portrayed onstage. These writings are outside the scope of this literature review, however some also explore theatre as a medium for people with disabilities. Tomlinson (1982) chronicles the development of a full-time theatre company of disabled actors and makes a case for why theatre is an important medium for disabled people. He comments on how at the time when his company formed, it was not perceived as acceptable for disabled people to be actors, so even the decision for his company to use theatre was contrary to any advice they received and to most disabled people's experiences.

Tomlinson posits that performance gives power, which creates status. At the time he was writing his book, research indicated that disabled people who held jobs typically had lower-paid, lower-status jobs compared to their able-bodied counterparts. The author implies that securing a job in the theatre, often seen as a glamorous industry, could improve the perceived status of a disabled person. He goes on to explain that status breeds confidence and self-respect, as well as peer respect. Tomlinson explains that performance involves responsibility – to the audience, the writer, the director – and risk, and that both are rare experiences for the disabled person. He

claims that due to the understandable caution and apprehension of their parents, disabled children typically grow up without opportunities to take on responsibility or risk, and therefore the novelty for a disabled person to be put in complete charge of two hours of an audience's lives can be especially gratifying. He also suggests that theatre allows for enlightenment and education, allowing the reality of disability and the realities of people who have disabilities to be introduced, demonstrated, and discussed.

Promoting a framework of equality rather than one of equity, Kempe (2012) argues that drama education for children with special educational needs be no different to any of the drama work undertaken with any other group of young people. He claims that one of the values of drama in education is that it affords students the opportunity to learn from the experience of casting themselves in different parts, and experiencing what it is like to be cast in a role by others. Kempe goes on to suggest that many children with special educational needs are taught little about drama as a subject in its own right or experience it as a learning medium. Kempe proposes that:

A scheme of work in drama that takes disability as a focus “may endeavor to teach students something about disability (content), foster empathy and positive attitudes (professional development), promote an acceptance and understanding of the lives and views of others (social development) and understand the ethics, practicalities and effects of different aspects of dramatic representation (subject-specific learning). (p. 10)

Both Tomlinson and Kemp advocate for the importance of theatre as a practice for people with disabilities and articulate impacts on the disabled individuals as well as the audiences who encounter their work.

Band, Lindsay, Neelands, and Freaksley (2011) consider whether disabled students in the performing arts are being set up to succeed. Their research focuses on a series of initiatives by the U.K. Department for Education and Skills (DfES). The aim of the study was to investigate the effectiveness of three projects and identify lessons to be learned to support government policy in the arts. The DfES partnered with three employers of performers with disabilities, and all three projects – two drama-based and one dance-based – were to deliver bespoke training to suit individuals' needs and requirements, ensuring that students with disability had the opportunity to work and study with a disability focused company in an appropriate and suitable mainstream environment.

The study findings revealed that the programs achieved inclusion simply by bringing disabled artists into training they would otherwise have been unable to access; disabled students were recognized as a group and introduced to training led by tutors in high-status performing arts schools that select their students through a highly competitive audition process. For all three programs, the typical audition process included improvisation and warm up exercises, a prepared solo piece and an interview. Each program made differential use of information regarding students' impairments, however all three considered that impairment must be acknowledged if provision is to be made that avoids educational barriers. The teachers rejected any prescriptive approach to teaching disabled students, acknowledging that this sort of approach would deny the unique qualities of each person. The wide range of experience and talent represented in the cohorts brought into question the level of standards and discipline which could be appropriately applied. The researchers point out that the time needed to bring students up to production, as opposed to practice level, performance was widely perceived as a barrier to inclusive training, and claim that fully inclusive training would call for a change of ethos so that teachers and

students accepted such accommodations as simply ‘part of what we do’ rather than a concession. The authors concluded that planned and funded initiatives in the performing arts can achieve positive experiences for disabled students, however there are two additional requirements: the need to conceptualize inclusive practice as both systemic and particular, and a reconceptualization of excellence within the performing arts.

Band et al. raise a few important points specific to performant arts education: the rigorous audition process to gain acceptance to theatre programs, the time pressure involved in production, and the concept of excellence commonly recognized by the performing arts community. Courses offered by theatre programs tend to differ from the traditional college class; students may be expected to sit on the floor or stand up for long periods of time, classes may involve climbing ladders or lying on the floor, coursework may involve physical movement, singing, and emotional vulnerability.

Riddell, Tinlin, and Wilson (2005) explore the concept of reasonable adjustments in the areas of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. They compare the websites of U.S. universities and those of institutions in Scotland and England: in the U.S., universities often advise students with disabilities of their right to request alternative forms of assessment, while institutions in Scotland and England were cautious about making adjustments at all. There was a common view that ad hoc adjustments were inherently risky and formulaic adjustments, such as extra time in examinations, were the most that students should expect. Students found lecturers reluctant to make accommodations, and lecturers expressed misgivings that making reasonable adjustments in teaching and assessment was a form of ‘dumbing down’, allowing lazy students to obtain dispensations by hiding under the cloak of disability. Riddell et al. (2005) also point out the gap between rhetorical policy and practice in the academic and social experiences of students with

higher support needs. They found some institutions went to great lengths to make accommodations, however others were very reluctant to alter standardized provision, using the rhetoric of empowerment and independence to justify placing the onus on the individual disabled student to organize all aspects of support, including the employment of workers and the negotiation of physical objects. The authors use case studies to illustrate the incremental nature of barriers encountered, showing how in order to survive a course, disabled students were often required to make 'superhuman efforts' which most would find unreasonable.

A major concern of Riddell et al. (2005) was considering the extent to which widening access policies have contributed to social justice goals. They questioned how much widening access policies have challenged the dominance of socially advantaged groups within the sphere of higher education. Their findings showed a growing number of disabled students in higher education, however the students were predominantly from middle-class backgrounds, less likely to be drawn from minority ethnic groups, and skewed male. Disabled students also tended to choose art and design subjects rather than science, social science, engineering, or subjects leading to professional qualifications like law, medicine, social work, and education. The authors recommended that higher education institutions consider which groups continue to be excluded and which subject areas continue to draw from a narrow sector of the population.

Hanafin, Shevlin, Kenny, & Mc Neela (2006) conducted a small-scale Irish study examining the experiences of two groups of young people with physical disabilities and dyslexia in two higher education institutions. Irish government policy articulates a commitment to increasing access to higher education institutions for people from traditionally marginalized groups, and at the time leading up to this study this inclusivity had typically been aimed at socio-economically disadvantaged populations. At the time of the study, attention had begun to

shift to the participation of people with disabilities and access to higher education had been conceived in terms of guaranteeing physical access and providing some limited access through quotas, however people with disabilities continued to be underrepresented in higher education.

The researchers' findings showed that for students with physical disabilities and with dyslexia, assessment practices were fraught with additional limitations. Assessment practices impacted by the physical environment, the availability and use of assistive technology, and the attitudes of staff and students. In their analysis of the data, the researchers explain that the built and physical environment has additional challenges for students with disabilities during examinations. Some participants spoke of "Herculean journeys in mid-examination, to a remote toilet and back" (p. 440). Student reporting spending time and energy negotiating seemingly accessible buildings, limited institutional commitment to providing support (electronic or personal), and the biggest barrier they noted was negative attitudes. The scholars concluded that access issues within higher education have been inadequately conceptualized and as a result failed to address fundamental issues around assessment for students with physical disabilities and with dyslexia. "Much emphasis can be made of standards but the nature of quality implied in those standards is rarely analysed" (p. 444). This study advocates for higher education institutions to adopt more inclusive assessment practices, but it does not go in depth about what those practices might look like. This study refers to higher education broadly and is not focused on the performing arts, but one can see how the limitations found, in particular the physical barriers, may be even bigger factors in theatre courses that demand physical activity.

Ashworth, Bloxham, and Pearce (2010) examine the tension between academic standards and inclusion for disabled students. They posit that recent developments in higher education have brought a tension between widening participation and maintaining academic standards. They

refer to the legal obligation on all higher education institutions to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ for students with disabilities, including adjustments to assessment.

Ashworth et al. refer to another article in which Stowell (2004) questions some of the taken-for-granted practices and philosophies underpinning the operation of assessment boards in higher education. Assessment boards are outside the scope of this literature review, however Stowell’s question about the social constructs of success and failure is relevant to the question of assessing disabled students in performing arts programs. Stowell examines definitions of equity and justice and considers the concept of equality of opportunity, pointing out liberal approaches to equality of opportunity which focus on equal treatment and fair procedures designed to eliminate discriminatory practices.

Ashworth et al. posit that disability legislation protects the paramount importance of maintaining academic standards. They share the results from a study of four higher education institutions which found that institutions, individual departments and staff members varied widely in their willingness to adapt teaching and learning practices. Some felt the difficulties encountered in trying to accommodate certain types of impairment through adjustments to assessment might be conferring unfair advantage on disabled students. The authors refer to the call from Hanafin et al. (2006) for the critical analysis of long-standing assessment practices, and of the unquestioning assumption of their ‘objectivity’. They propose a solution of inclusive assessment for all, suggesting that more inclusive assessment practices and the continuing availability of a range of assessment options, rather than the substitution of one in preference to another, are seen as likely to benefit many students. As Ashworth et al. suggest, “academic standards are perceived to remain intact if inclusion is realised through opportunities to

demonstrate learning which match diversity in individual students' ways of learning and the expression of that learning" (p. 212).

Riddell and Weedon (2012) utilize case studies of disabled students taking Education courses in four Scottish universities to explore the way in which their identity as disabled students is handled in different contexts, and articulates with wider aspects of identity formation. They illustrate the way in which positive and negatives about disability, reflected in learning, teaching and assessment practices can impact the identity of a student.

Across all of the literature reviewed, there was rarely any mention of the intersectional identities of students with disabilities. Riddell et al. (2005) do touch on this in their findings that disabled students in higher education are more likely to come from middle-class backgrounds and from dominant ethnic groups. As higher education practitioners consider inclusivity for students with disabilities, it would be prudent to consider how students from various other underrepresented communities may experience multiple levels of exclusion.

This literature review focuses on literature about disability in theatre and literature about disability in higher education. There were few findings that explicitly explored disability in theatre higher education; theatre educators could benefit from more research in this area. Findings about inclusive practices in higher education do apply to theatre education, however there are additional barriers in performing arts education which are not addressed by these studies. Universities 'options' for accommodations, the formulaic adjustments that they make on behalf of students with disabilities, are geared toward the typical classroom – one that includes lectures, class discussions, and student participation – but they may not be considering the typical acting class, which requires vocal work, physical activity and endurance, and emotional exploration.

References

- Ashworth, M., Bloxham, S., & Pearce, L. (2010). Examining the tension between academic standards and inclusion for disabled students: The impact on marking of individual academics' frameworks for assessment. *Studies in Higher Education, 35*(2), 209-223. doi:10.1080/03075070903062864
- Band, S. A., Lindsay, G., Neelands, J., & Freakley, V. (2011). Disabled students in the performing arts – are we setting them up to succeed? *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 15*(9), 891-908. doi:10.1080/13603110903452903
- Hanafin, J., Shevlin, M., Kenny, M., & Mc Neela, E. (2006). Including young people with disabilities: Assessment challenges in higher education. *Higher Education, 54*, 435-448.
- Kempe, A. (2012). *Drama, disability and education : A critical exploration for students and practitioners* Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780203096499
- Riddell, S., & Weedon, E. (2014). Disabled students in higher education: Discourses of disability and the negotiation of identity. *International Journal of Educational Research, 63*, 38-46. doi:10.1016/j.ijer.2013.02.008
- Stowell, M. (2004). Equity, justice and standards: Assessment decision making in higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 29*(4), 495-510.
- Tomlinson, R. (1982). *Disability, theatre, and education* (1st Midland book ed. ed.) Indiana University Press. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112012719214>