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# **ADAPting Higher Education: Revamping Curricula for the Inclusion of Theatre Students with Disabilities**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Equity, Disability, and Inclusion in Higher Education.....	1
Chapter One: Disability: A Brief Overview .....	13
Chapter Two: System Failure: How Grades Negatively Impact Students with Disabilities .....	30
Chapter Three: Who’s Canon? The Perpetuation of Disability through the Idealized Body .....	47
Conclusion: Considerations for Further ADApting Acting Pedagogies .....	65
Bibliography .....	71

## **ABSTRACT**

### **ADAPTING HIGHER EDUCATION: REVAMPING CURRICULA FOR THE INCLUSION OF THEATRE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

By Kevin Kemler, MFA.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2023.

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Department of Theatre

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion initiatives in higher education have been largely driven by administrators who have little to no contact with the students for whom they are working for. This top-down approach negatively impacts marginalized students and disproportionately affects the quality of experience for students with Disabilities, an often-overlooked demographic. For Disabled students enrolled in performance programs, barriers to access and inclusion don't just exist at the institutional level, they also exist in the traditional classroom or studio as well. Through a dismantling of ableist structures inherent within higher education (i.e., American grading practices, the Western and Theatrical Canons), I argue that a student-first model of instruction, which functions on the principles of self-reflexivity, educational autonomy, and individual growth is the most direct way to successfully incorporate the guiding principle of access, which is central to achieving equity, diversity, and inclusion within college-level Actor-Training programs.

## VITA

Kevin Kemler is a NYC-based actor, audition coach, theatre educator, and higher education professional. He began his professional career in higher education administration in 2015 and currently serves as the Director of Admission for Eugene Lang College of Liberal Arts at The New School. In both his teaching and administrative roles, he aims to extend his passion for student advocacy beyond the limiting nature of established educational structures, empowering educators to actively engage in collaborative, inclusive, and supportive pedagogies. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Acting and Theatre History & Performance Texts from Marymount Manhattan College in 2015. Kevin's research focuses on inclusive practices in actor training methods for students with disabilities.

## INTRODUCTION: EQUITY, DISABILITY, AND INCLUSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI). These three words, or rather any combination of them, have taken center stage in the world of higher education over the past two decades with increasing intensity. This can be explained by the rapidly “changing demographics of our country (which [have] been fueled by such factors as internal and external migration and the rapid growth of urban areas) as well as the wide-scale social movements [calling] for greater equality and equity [in our daily lives].”<sup>1</sup> As a pedagogical framework, EDI focuses on highlighting the systematic inequities present within our society at large and how they remain at play and further affect students of marginalized identities and underprivileged backgrounds.

To fully understand the work of EDI, it is first important to define these terms as they relate to the world of higher education. So, what is equity? Equity is an actionable practice that “ensures that access, resources, and opportunities are provided for all to succeed and grow.”<sup>2</sup> Equity recognizes that some people may face additional barriers that others do not and works to provide targeted resources, which lead those individuals towards a successful outcome. This is not to be confused with equality, which operates through a one-size-fits-all approach to accommodation, wherein every individual involved is given the same resources regardless of whether those resources will support equal success for disadvantaged individuals. Diversity refers to the recognition of exhibited differences in identity among individuals and their lived

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<sup>1</sup> Jaimie Hoffman, Patrick Blessinger, and Mandla Makhanya, “Introduction,” in *Contexts for Diversity and Gender Identities in Higher Education*, eds. Jaimie Hoffman, Patrick Blessinger, Mandla Makhanya, (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2018), 2.

<sup>2</sup> “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Definitions,” University of Washington Office of Research, University of Washington. Accessed March 20, 2023, <https://www.washington.edu/research/or/office-of-research-diversity-equity-and-inclusion/dei-definitions/>.



experiences. This can refer to classifications of “race, gender, religious orientation, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, language, disability, age, [etc.]”<sup>3</sup> Finally, Inclusion refers to an environment which values the above classifications for their differences (i.e. diversity) and fosters a community of mutual respect where all individuals are afforded the opportunity to reach their full potential.<sup>4</sup> In defining these terms, it is important to note how interdependent they are. It proves a tough task to isolate each term and their respective functions, because they rely heavily on one another to fully execute those intended functions.

As seen through the above definitions, one of the core focuses of EDI work is the central tenet of access. Access, which will be a throughline and basis for this thesis, is an idea where all persons, regardless of their individual lived experiences, are afforded “the opportunity to acquire the same information, engage in the same interactions, and enjoy the same services...with substantially equivalent ease of use.”<sup>5</sup> Recognizing how these terms exist and function symbiotically, within higher education, lays the foundation for a clearer understanding of EDI’s theoretical basis and how it currently functions in practice. My aim here will be to highlight the ways in which the current implementation of the framework falls short and to offer alternate ways for it to succeed in its practical applications.

The trouble with EDI and access work, as with many social justice-based practices, is this dichotomy of theory and practice. In this thesis, the term *theory* will be interchangeable with the term *framework*, as the framework refers to the ideas of EDI rather than the successful

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> “What Does Accessible Mean?,” NC State University Disability Resources Office, NC State University, Accessed March 20, 2023, <https://dro.dasa.ncsu.edu/what-does-accessible-mean/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CAccessible%E2%80%9D%20means%20a%20person%20with,substantially%20equivalent%20ease%20of%20use.>

implementation of the initiatives. What makes EDI successful as a framework is its cross-disciplinary application. In theory, it is not just a tool for educational systems to meet their institutional goals, but rather an actionable form of social justice that centers the individual, not the system, as the agent of change. In this successful framework, the system serves the individual and their needs, rather than the individual's ability to succeed being a byproduct of the broader system. For the purpose of this thesis, an individual—as referenced above—can serve in one of two roles within the larger educational system: the educator or the student.

Unfortunately, in practice EDI initiatives of today tend to yield superficial results, offering few solutions to an institution's core problems as they relate to equity, diversity, and inclusion. The dichotomy between successful theory and unsuccessful practice boils down to who is in control. If, as we examined above, EDI is meant to favor the individual rather than the system, as the agent of change, then it stands to reason that the basis for this work should be the empowerment of such individuals to carry out the work necessary for the intended change. Unfortunately, as is the case with most systems of oppression, the oppressors are rarely likely to give up their powers of control. What this produces then is what Robertson, Bravo, and Chaney refer to as an institution's "cosmetic desire for inclusion...which only serves to make the university appear inclusive but does not illustrate a true commitment to students."<sup>6</sup> This cosmetic desire for inclusion yields superficial solutions meant to placate the growing concerns brought forth by an institution's constituents, rather than actively working together to solve them.

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<sup>6</sup> Ray Von Robertson, Alma Bravo, and Cassandra Chaney, "Racism and the Experiences of Latina/o College Students at a PWI (Predominantly White Institution)," *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 4-5 (2016): 728, accessed March 20, 2023, DOI: 10.1177/0896920514532664.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2058 “the United States will be an older, more racially and ethnically pluralistic society” with non-Hispanic Whites no longer remaining as the country’s majority beginning in 2045.<sup>7</sup> It stands to reason that if the demographics of our country are shifting rapidly, so too will the demographics of the higher education landscape. With these projected shifts in mind, it is no wonder that the push for equity, diversity, and inclusion has taken over the collective conscience of the higher education industry. What is interesting to note is that while this research, and EDI as a whole, tends to focus on educational access for BIPOC students, it need not stop there. A wider lens must be utilized to encompass any individual who is disadvantaged from the current iteration of our educational model in order to truly fulfill the guiding principle of access.

This idea of advantage and disadvantage or, rather, access and exclusion is central to the below thesis, which aims to bring disabled and neurodivergent individuals, an often overlooked and unseen minority, to the forefront of EDI work and initiatives. More than one-billion people around the world are disabled.<sup>8</sup> In one way or another disability impacts all of us regardless of our personal identity politics. In the U.S. a reported 61 million adults live with a disability. That’s one in four, or twenty-six percent of adults.<sup>9</sup> Statistically speaking, this makes those with disabilities the largest minority group in the world, yet somehow, they still remain

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Vespa, Lauren Medina, and Davis M. Armstrong, “Demographic Turning Points for the United States: Population Projections for 2020 to 2060,” *Current Population Reports*, P25-1144, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC (2020): 13, accessed March 20, 2023, <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/p25-1144.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Emily Ladau, *Demystifying Disability* (New York: Ten Speed Press, 2021), 1.

<sup>9</sup> “Disability Impacts Us All,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Disability and Health Data System (DHDS), May 24, 2018, accessed on March 20, 2023, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html>.

one of the most disregarded and underrepresented groups in both legislation and historical prevalence.

Regardless of disability's presence in our everyday lives (i.e., closed-captioning, curb cuts at the corners of sidewalks, ramps to building entrances, elevators), the fight for disability rights is a movement that has largely been waged by and for those who identify, live with, or are directly impacted by a disability. This is in part due to the cultural milieu of our society and the devaluation of those with disabilities as "less than" or burdensome to said society. This false cultural idea of disability is a byproduct of the medical deficit model, which centers disability as an undesirable diagnosis. The medical, social, and moral models will be explored in-depth in chapter one, including how all of these models have managed to reinforce our society's lack of interest in disability advocacy. This ongoing societal devaluing of disabled and neurodivergent individuals is one of the core systemic barriers which continues to exclude this minority from the principles of access, equity, and inclusion. Because disability advocacy is so new to our country's political conscience, it has unfortunately not broken through to the forefront of EDI initiatives outside of legislative protections granted to identifying individuals by the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, and subsequently, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

While it is possible to define and outline a myriad of obstacles that the current higher educational model presents to the modern-day student, the one central to the argument explored in this thesis is the current grading system employed by U.S. educational institutions.<sup>10</sup> In their current usage, grades (whether letter-based or numerical) serve as the distinctive

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<sup>10</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, all references to the higher educational model, including the grading system refers only to the American system. While there are certainly parallels and justification for this research applying to global models of education, here they focus solely on the United States.

marker for what is deemed as positive progression and success in school. While in theory this system appears to work, in practice it holds students accountable to meeting district-wide, state-wide, and nation-wide benchmarks of success. In his article “The Case Against Grading,” Alfie Kohn highlights that issues and arguments against grading are not new. Instead, these arguments against traditional grading were “laid out forcefully and eloquently anywhere from four to eight decades ago...[and] they remind us just how long it’s been clear [that] there’s something wrong with what we’re doing as well as just how little progress we’ve made in acting on that realization.”<sup>11</sup> With the understanding that legislation advocating for individuals with disabilities did not break into mainstream politics until 1973, it is no wonder that the grading system as it stands, which was created and implemented nearly eighty-years ago, does not factor in anyone outside of the then-neurotypical and able-bodied societal norm.

While the negative impacts of the current grading will be explored more in-depth in chapter two, what is central to my research is connecting these findings to university-level actor training programs. Through an exploration of educational and grading theory, I will highlight how actor training programs reflect and perpetuate the ableist traditions and practices in which they were created. As Irvin Peckham notes in his article “Beyond Grades,” since early childhood education, students “have been insistently indoctrinated by a pedagogy (and world view) based on grades, on objectified values, on ranking performance and people, [and] on the commodification of labor.”<sup>12</sup> This indoctrination of students into a grade-centered system,

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<sup>11</sup> Alfie Kohn, “The Case Against Grades,” in *De-Testing and De-Grading Schools: Authentic Alternatives to Accountability and Standardization Counterpoints*, eds. Joe Bower, and P.L. Thomas (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2013), 144.

<sup>12</sup> Irvin Peckham, “Beyond Grades,” *Composition Studies* 21, no. 2 (1993): 16, accessed March 20, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43501895>

prioritizes outcomes and academic achievement over the process of learning itself. In the arts and humanities, specifically, this becomes a core problem because experiential learning is necessary to advance individual skillsets required for successful outcomes in those fields; grades are not. By examining the negative effects of grading practices as they relate to creative majors, it will be clear to the reader how disproportionately traditional grading practices affect students with disabilities. By re-envisioning the educational model with disability in mind, I argue for the benefit of replacing the current grading system with more holistic systems of assessment based on the basic tenets of process, self-reflexivity, educational autonomy, and individual growth. I further posit that eradicating a one-size-fits-all approach to outcome-centered grading allows students to take ownership and control of their educational pursuits, through experiential equity.

Chapter three will connect the system of grading with another oppressive structure that dominates the American educational system, the western canon<sup>13</sup>, and uncover how both systems serve to reinforce each other and further reinforce exclusionary practice. In relation to students with disabilities, these two systems detract from a disabled student's experience as they function solely on the educator's *perception* of the other rather than focusing on the other as a fully realized individual. These perceptions further disadvantage students with disabilities as they rely on comparative modes of assessment which place students against each other in relation to the achievement of an idealized "norm".<sup>14</sup> As mentioned briefly above, the canon,

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<sup>13</sup> In this thesis *the canon* refers specifically to the western theatrical canon, which is a list of specific authors, plays, and theoretical writings deemed by academics as the most important texts to use when educating young actors.

<sup>14</sup> I want to point out that the utilization of the term norm also brings with it many problems, most importantly it reinforces the idea that a cultural norm exists and fails to highlight that this norm is a societal structure enforced

as it currently exists, operates through a mode of exclusion as it “occup[ies] a privileged place in the Western (read: white, Christian, male, colonial) imaginary...as a unified and closed system [the canon] signifies an abstract tradition, a history of aesthetic production, and a set of ideals.”<sup>15</sup> These ideals, set in place by those in control, and reinforced by society at-large, actively exclude disabled bodies as part of the norm and serve to perpetuate negative social narratives of disability. In this chapter, I show how the canon can be used and reclaimed as a pedagogical tool for inclusion. I argue that by de-emphasizing the canon’s importance in performance curricula, and reclaiming traditional codified texts for students with disabilities, educators can feel empowered to use the canon in a positive way without shying away from it. This work, however, requires the educator to consider the individual student when selecting performance texts to explore in the classroom.

Leading with the individual, or student, as the ground plan for inclusive education gives the student agency to invite their lived experience into their educational plan and show, through practice, what they can do and how they can achieve it. Ultimately what is at play here is the reinforcement of (and, by contrast, the active work of dismantling) the societal *norm* and the often-detrimental narrative of *fitting in*. In her collection on inclusivity in actor training methods for students with disability and neurodivergence, Petronilla Whitfield notes that specifically “in performer training institutions, but also in professional theater, film, television and amongst audience expectations, appearance or type is frequently required to fit within pre-

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by those who hold power. Decentralizing this language is important in order to effectively implement equity for individuals from varied marginalized backgrounds and identities.

<sup>15</sup> Lindsey Mantoan, Matthew Moore, and Angela Farr Schiller, “Introduction,” in *Troubling Traditions: Canonicity, Theatre, and Performance in the US*, eds. Lindsey Mantoan, Matthew Moore, and Angela Farr Schiller (New York: Routledge 2022), 2.

conceived cultural notions of beauty, neurotypical assessments of intelligence or physical norms of ableism and behaviors.”<sup>16</sup> Taking into account that the canon functions to uphold the values of the oppressor, it is clear how perpetuating ableist narratives through canonically-based curricula would blatantly work to exclude disabled students from fully engaging with actor training methods. However, if we recontextualize and reclaim the canon with disabled bodies in mind, we can understand how canons “proliferate—they are lived, gathered, reshaped, cross-pollinated, and evolve over time as they inhabit bodies.”<sup>17</sup> In reframing the canon as an open and changeable concept rather than a finite closed system, we can move beyond the notion that “the canon” is central to actor training. Further, engaging with the canon as an open concept, which centers the bodies and lived experiences of the individuals who engage with it, highlights how disability and canon can intersect and function as a tool for radical inclusivity.<sup>18</sup>

The conclusion chapter of this thesis will function to highlight the classroom as the most important site for disability advocacy through an emphasis on inclusive pedagogies. By focusing on the student-first model outlined and supported in the previous chapters, the aim here will be to elucidate how the principles of self-reflexivity, educational autonomy, and individual growth function successfully within an acting/performance-based course and the ways in which these principles function for both the student and the teacher at different levels. Drawing on

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<sup>16</sup> Petronilla Whitfield, “Introduction,” in *Inclusivity and Equality in Performance Training: Teaching and Learning for Neuro and Physical Diversity*, ed. Petronilla Whitfield (New York: Routledge, 2022), 6.

<sup>17</sup> Mantoan, Moore, and Farr Schiller, 2.

<sup>18</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, radical inclusivity can be defined as any reformed or newly developed pedagogical practice that goes beyond the notion of reasonable accommodation. Radically inclusive pedagogies should actively work for the inclusion of all students, not just those who identify as disabled. These reformed pedagogies also benefit all students who engage with them.



the basics of emancipatory theory which “emphasizes that education should play a fundamental role in a just and democratic society, through exposing and resisting inequalities,”<sup>19</sup> I will also explore how students and educators can function as social actors for disability advocacy within the confines of the classroom. This work re-negotiates the hierarchy of the higher educational model by placing the students at the helm of their education and trusting them to communicate their needs to the educator.

If the classroom can first be viewed as a laboratory for social change and inclusive practice, then the acting studio, by extension, can serve to function as a site for social change by challenging and re-writing societal narratives of disability and how they intersect with performance. As Whitfield notes, “challenging ableist models of teaching [and] address[ing] barriers that can undermine those with a dis/ability or difference [highlights] how equality of opportunity can increase innovation and enrich creative work.”<sup>20</sup> Much of this work cannot happen unless educators work to include students with disabilities and help them to see themselves as worthy contributors to their field. If pedagogy stems from this notion of equality of opportunity, then the work of the student is to share with the instructor all the ways in which they can engage in and bring value to the creative work at hand. Instilling this trust and autonomy of experience to the student re-centers the work around their growth and shows a commitment to the individual rather than the collective.

As with grades, a one-size-fits-all approach to education cannot function successfully within the context of true equity, inclusivity, and access. This extends to the current model for

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<sup>19</sup> Whitfield, 19.

<sup>20</sup> Whitfield, i.

actor training which “relies heavily on techniques and exercises developed by Constantin Stanislavski in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century”<sup>21</sup> and later codified into the modern American systems of Adler, Meisner, Hagen, and Strasberg among many others. This type of actor-training is often referred to as the *method*, or method acting, and serves as the foundation for many college-level actor training programs. As is the problem with an unchangeable canon, these methods were developed solely with the able-bodied actors in mind and prevent students with disabilities from fully engaging in their studio classes. In this conclusion, I will highlight the ways in which current practitioners are revolutionizing actor-training methods and offer personal insight into how to adapt the method system from an unchanging closed system to an open and adaptable one.

It will be clear to the reader that many changes are necessary in order to successfully apply the frameworks of EDI initiatives for actors with disabilities into a tangible practice. By interrogating the current structures of oppression that exist within higher education and offering ways to decentralize and democratize these systems, educators will be better equipped to empower their students by providing them agency and autonomy in their education. Furthermore, bringing the classroom experience to the forefront of the educational model, will forcibly re-situate the power dynamics currently at play within institutional governance. Taking into account that students with disabilities face many barriers to education my hope is to highlight a few ways we can enhance the experiences of disabled students through simple pedagogical shifts and to further show how these changes serve to benefit all

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<sup>21</sup> Deric McNish, “The 19 Percent: Disability and Actor Training in Higher Education” (Doctor of Philosophy dissertation, University of Colorado, 2013), 4.

students, regardless of individual identity. Just as with civil rights and social justice-based initiatives, educators must work from the ground-up to dismantle larger systems of oppression in education. Mirroring the rise and success of disability advocacy in U.S. Politics, I argue that educational equity lies within the purview of the system's constituents rather than the system at-large.

## CHAPTER 1. DISABILITY: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

As I sit down to write this chapter, I am confronted with the reality that any overview of disability and its respective history will always fall short. In fact, I could write an entire book contending with the long-fraught history of the disability experience in this country and still leave out integral information that leads us to the formation of our understanding of disability at this current moment in time. My aim here is to both recognize this inevitable shortcoming, and to also provide a starting point for my readers to understand how disability as an identity and concept functions in society today and further how society continues to reinforce discriminatory practices and barriers which disadvantage disabled individuals. For this thesis, and the action-driven work I hope it will induce, an understanding of key moments, movements, and models that pertain specifically to the re-envisioning of the higher educational model for inclusive education are what will be dealt with in this chapter.

According to the CDC's website on Disability and Health Promotion, the word "disability [refers to] any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities (activity limitation) and interact with the world around them (participation restrictions)."<sup>22</sup> This definition, while concise, highlights many of the ableist ideologies that plague the disability community. Most notably, this definition reinforces the idea that disability is in and of itself a medical deficiency needing to be resolved. Unfortunately, many of the definitions of disability center this medical deficit narrative,<sup>23</sup> yet

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<sup>22</sup> "Disability and Health Overview: Impairments, Activity Limitations, and Participation Restrictions," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Disability and Health Data System (DHDS), May 24, 2018, accessed on March 20, 2023, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html>.<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/disability.html>

<sup>23</sup> The medical deficit model is a model of disability that defines disability in relation to a disease or condition that can be overcome through medical intervention.

the word disability itself, continues to serve as an umbrella term for a wide variety of disabilities present within the community. For those outside of the community, speaking about and advocating for those with disability seems like a tricky topic. As is the case with all forms of identity, the labeling and categorization of people becomes increasingly complicated as they force the individual to sort themselves into collective categories that belie the complexity of their disability. This is because “categories into which people might organize themselves and others are always being revised and their boundaries reconstituted through dynamic material-discursive configurations and intra-actions.”<sup>24</sup> Regardless of how disabled individuals identify, whether they prefer the term “disabled” or wish to reappropriate more pejorative terms, their battles against an ableist society remain the biggest obstacle to radical inclusion.

Ableism as defined by the Chicago Independent Living Center “is the discrimination of and social prejudice (whether voluntary or involuntary) against people with disabilities based on the belief that typical abilities are superior.”<sup>25</sup> Ableism as a system of oppression gives agency to ideas and attitudes which negatively impact persons with disabilities by reinforcing societal narratives of disabled persons as deficient in comparison to their able-bodied counterparts. Because the widely accepted term for non-able-bodied individuals is *disabled*/person with *disability*, I think it important to take a closer look at the word and how it functions both for and against ableism as a structure of oppression. The word, disability, itself stems from the combination of two separate root words: dis/ability. With the Latin

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<sup>24</sup> Stephanie L. Kerschbaum, “Dis-Attending,” in *Signs of Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 36.

<sup>25</sup> Ashley Eisenmenger, “Ableism 101,” Access Living, Access Living, December 12, 2019, accessed on March 21, 2023, <https://www.accessliving.org/>.

prefix *dis* meaning "in different directions, apart, asunder, away"<sup>26</sup> the word disability quite literally means *lacking ability*. Ability in this instance refers to ableist ideals inherent within a society. These ideals favor those who do not require any type of assistance or accommodations to carry out day-to-day functions of living and contributing to society. While the word itself might be fraught with varying degrees of acceptance, it has certainly been codified in civil rights legislation in the United States, as well as in the burgeoning academic field of disability studies.<sup>27</sup> The term itself has been used by the community, most recently, to reclaim agency against ableism by calling into question the barriers in society that inhibit individuals, rather than focusing on what makes individuals disabled. This utilization of the term serves to overwrite negative narratives about disability and refocus them towards the inequities present within our society.

Disability as a subject tends to be difficult to discuss as it intersects with both individual and social spheres. On one hand, disability can be defined as an individual identity but, on the other hand, those identities are constantly being controlled by society's collective understanding. Many disabled people encourage the utilization of the term disability as a catch-all label, while others insist on utilizing terms more specific to their own lived experiences. What is generally agreed upon is using the term disability to overwrite the negative labels used throughout history to demonize and dehumanize disabled people. Central to my work on bringing equity to higher education is the re-centering of the individual, as opposed to the

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<sup>26</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, online ed, last modified (2023), s.v. "dis-, prefix," <https://www-oed-com.proxy.library.vcu.edu/view/Entry/53379?>

<sup>27</sup> Disability studies is a rather recent academic field that explores disability as a social construct apart from the idea of disability as a medical impairment.

disability. However, this cannot be achieved until we first understand the societal fabrications of disability and how they work to alienate and prevent disabled people from gaining access to equity.

### **1.1 A Sampling of Disability History**

Throughout the history of the United States, the terminology used to identify varying physical and cognitive conditions have been in flux, as they were always relative to the dominant societal and political structures at any given time. Disability was often overlooked and excluded from our collective conscience as our nation developed. Defined by society, disability is inherently viewed as a deficiency, or a problem in need of fixing. This is because America was formed on the principles of independence and autonomy.

In her book, *A Disability History of the United States*, Kim E. Nielsen charts the myriad ways in which our society's understanding and re-negotiation of disability within society has remained in a state of instability from colonial America through today. She notes that, as early as 1492, "Disability was defined as the inability to 'maintain' oneself economically, [and] was largely overlooked as long as the disability did not inhibit the individual from caring for themselves financially and physically." She goes on to assert that "as long as a physical impediment didn't prevent someone from laboring, then it wasn't anything to notice."<sup>28</sup> This view of disability is relevant in our society today, as American culture remains preoccupied with productivity and commodified labor. While this view has remained constant, what has changed since then are the ways in which we define disability and how our society perceives those who are disabled.

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<sup>28</sup> Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 27.

In Colonial America, disability was a reality that was dealt with as it occurred. The colonies were small self-contained communities focused on testing the viability of life in a new land, and all involved were expected to do whatever it took to ensure the success of their community. As is the case with any new venture, risk is always involved; for the colonists, that risk included disabling conditions both of the mind and the body. Injuries, illness, and disease proved challenging to colonial communities and, as is the case now, anyone at any time was susceptible to acquiring a disability. However, with the success of the colonies remaining a paramount concern, communities at that time worked to support each other rather than ostracize those who became physically or mentally unfit to labor. Those with disabilities became dependent on their community for support, and support was gladly given. But as the colonial experiment grew, the perceptions of those with disabilities started to decline.

As the number of disabilities increased, it became harder for colonial communities to survive. Disability began to be established as a barrier to success and, by proxy, those with disabilities “became burdensome to the community and thus negative ostracizing and alienation began.”<sup>29</sup> Signs of disability began to be scrutinized as part of emigration processes and anyone who exhibited these signs were no longer allowed to board ships from England to the colonies. If they happened to make it onboard or to a colony, they would promptly be sent back to England and the captain of the vessel who brought them would be the recipient of a hefty fine.<sup>30</sup> This policing of bodies continued through the founding of our country and was documented by Nielsen through records and journals from Ellis Island. She notes that

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<sup>29</sup> Nielsen, 27.

<sup>30</sup> Nielsen, 27.



“Disability, as a concept, was [now] used to justify legally established inequalities,”<sup>31</sup> and these inequalities laid the groundwork for our country’s policies favoring ableism and exclusionary practices.

Nielsen goes on to chart how the age of enlightenment brought advances to the medical field which promoted disability as a medical deficiency. As medicine advanced, so did the idea that disabilities could and should be cured. In response to that idea, institutions began to be built in order to "treat" what was seen as a communal burden. Individuals with disabilities were now seen as patients, rather than citizens. This shift resulted in the systematic institutionalization of people with disabilities, which further prevented disabled individuals from participating in society and solidified disability as a curable societal problem.

The introduction of Eugenics, “the belief that the way to improve society is through better human breeding practices so that only those with “positive” hereditary traits reproduce,”<sup>32</sup> was introduced in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and led to legislation allowing forced sterilization of disabled people, in an effort to prevent them from reproducing. A clear division in society was now present and served to keep those with disabilities out of sight. This division depicted disabled people as defective and gave way to laws that protected able-bodied communities from those who were disabled and further legalized the act of sterilization. The goal of these laws was to relocate disabled bodies to medical facilities, render them invisible to society at-large, and most importantly prevent them from reproducing and potentially passing their disabilities on to their children.

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<sup>31</sup> Nielsen, 50.

<sup>32</sup> Nielsen, 101.

These laws, known as “ugly laws,” “were mostly municipal statutes in the United States that outlawed the appearance in public of people who were, in the words of one of these laws, ‘diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed, so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object’ (Chicago City Code 1881).”<sup>33</sup> By 1927 these laws, which began at the municipal level, made their way up to the Supreme Court in the case of *Buck v. Bell*, which determined that Virginia (and other states) could legally sterilize individuals that are deemed to be mentally unfit. To this day, this ruling has yet to be overturned.<sup>34</sup>

It is important to note that alongside the medical deficit narrative of disability, other narratives were simultaneously developing. Playing off of the taboo of disability that the medical model ascribed to disabled bodies, the charity model of disability, positioned disabled individuals as unfortunate circumstances of the human experience. This model gave way to feelings of pity, fear, and wonder when confronted with disability. Nielsen notes that:

As early as the 1840s, in traveling freak shows, in vaudeville, at P.T. Barnum’s famous American Museum in New York and similar facilities, on riverboats, at county fairs, in circus sideshows and World Fairs, the exhibition of human bodies considered both wondrous and freakish drew huge crowds always willing to hand over their cash. Exhibitors promoted armless wonders, legless wonders, conjoined twins, and humans considered unnaturally large and unnaturally small.<sup>35</sup>

This exhibition of bodies in the nineteenth century served to further the othering of disabled people by likening them to inhuman creatures and labeling them as freaks. This model is still reinforced today through the commodification of difference in media. Television channels like TLC (originally “The Learning Channel”) prey on our differences as a means to make money.

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<sup>33</sup> S. Wilson, “Ugly Laws,” Eugenics Archive, Eugenics Archive of California, February 5, 2015, accessed on March 21, 2023, <https://eugenicsarchive.ca/discover/tree/54d39e27f8a0ea4706000009>.

<sup>34</sup> Nielsen, 117.

<sup>35</sup> Nielsen, 89.

Viewers tune in, week after week, to shows like *Little People Big World*, *My 600-lb. Life*, and *My Strange Addiction* as a means to privately indulge their feelings of amusement, disgust, and awe.

In more religious communities around the U.S., the moral model was born out of the thought that disability was a direct result of moral wrongdoing. Those who subscribed to the moral model believed that disability was a consequence of sin that could be repaired through faith and prayer. This idea is reinforced today through news outlets that call for thoughts and prayers of individuals who are rendered disabled through accidents and illness. The continued reinforcement of the moral model today further solidifies the false narratives that paint disability out to be a misfortune.

Within this tumultuous and egregious history of disabled citizens in the United States, is the long-held dichotomy between how we view those who are born with disabilities versus those who acquire a disability through military service. Nielsen notes the trope of the disabled hero, where disability is accepted and largely celebrated by society. Although disability in these instances is a direct consequence of war (or public service), in these specific cases disability is able to avoid negative societal attitudes by co-opting the narratives of nationalism, duty, and pride. These types of acquired disabilities, whether from war or the rapid advancements of factory work during industrialization, simultaneously manage to create a hierarchy within the disability community, thus dismantling the idea that disability is a collective category without individual nuance. Nielsen highlights that, historically, many advancements for the disabled community, including adaptive technologies and protective laws, directly correlate to actions

taken for the betterment of disabled war veterans.<sup>36</sup> For example, “in 1943, the Disabled Veterans Rehabilitation Act went into effect to help wounded veterans find employment”<sup>37</sup> and although the “[return] of the crippled soldier force[d] the community to immediate action,” all of that assistance pertained strictly to the veteran and was not extended to the rest of the disabled community at large.<sup>38</sup>

What I hope is apparent here is the correlation between how shifts in ideology have affected the ways in which our society has viewed and treated disability. Although the practice of institutionalization was ultimately disbanded in the U.S. in the late twentieth-century, disabled individuals were left to fend for themselves with minimal government or community support. This eventually led to the creation of community schools and organizations that promoted the well-being of those who were disabled. These schools were often founded by and for those with specific disabilities. For example, the advent of specific schools for the deaf and the blind allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the disabled community by re-writing the binary classification of physical versus cognitive disability. Alternatively, “In 1963, [John F.] Kennedy signed the...Community Mental Health Act (CMHA), [which] established community mental health centers as much needed alternatives to asylums.”<sup>39</sup> These community centers welcomed those with cognitive disabilities, who were not yet seen as worthy of a traditional education. The recognition of different types of disabilities, brought by

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<sup>36</sup> Nielsen, 127.

<sup>37</sup>Emily Ladau, *Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to be an Ally* (New York: Ten Speed Press, 2021), 48.

<sup>38</sup> Amy Hamburger, “The Crippled and His place in the Community,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 77, no. 1 (1918): 36, accessed on March 21, 2023, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/000271621807700106>.

<sup>39</sup> Ladau, 50.

these community-specific spaces, was a small step toward centering the individual back into the narrative, but given the existing models and views of disability, society (and the government) would remain in control of disabled bodies until the first federal legislation protecting them was enacted in 1968.

## 1.2 Disability Rights and Protective Legislation

The notion of being perceived as valuable and able to contribute back to the larger community still plagues individuals with disabilities today. Because our society is founded on heteronormative, patriarchal, white, and ableist traditions, persons with disabilities—and disability as a blanket identity—is made to appear as the problem. What resurfaces time and time again throughout my brief historical account is the false idea that disability prevents active participation and meaningful contribution to society. The medical, moral, and charity models of disability, each reinforced at various times through history, were challenged in the 1960s by a new, more overarching view of disability. This new model, known as the social model of disability, “demonstrates that the problems disabled people face are the result of social oppression and exclusion, not their individual deficits,”<sup>40</sup> and this model was in part triggered by the community-centered spaces mentioned above and the organizing of civil rights based groups, which gave individuals with disabilities a place to come together and discuss the changes needed to make society more accessible for all. Emily Ladau, in her book *Demystifying Disability* discusses how “organizing among groups of disabled people gained momentum

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<sup>40</sup> Tom Shakespeare, “The Social Model of Disability,” in *The Disability Studies Reader: 2nd Edition*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2006), 197-204.

throughout the [1940's]," with the establishing of the National Federation for the Blind and the Paralyzed Veterans of America, among several others.<sup>41</sup>

This shift to community organizing gained momentum through the 1950's and reached a tipping point when policies and laws regarding the protection of civil rights began to pass. The disability rights movement was heavily influenced by the civil rights movement of the 60's and 70's. "The [disability rights] movement focused on legal efforts to prohibit discrimination in employment and education, access to public spaces and public transportation, and on institutional transformations that better enabled the self-determination of those with disabilities."<sup>42</sup> This movement saw its first major win in 1968 with the passage of the Architectural Barriers Act, which "stands as the first measure by Congress to ensure access to the built environment for people with disabilities. The law requires that buildings or facilities that were designed, built, or altered with federal dollars or leased by federal agencies after August 12, 1968 be accessible."<sup>43</sup> While this was a huge step towards fulfilling the ideas of universal design,<sup>44</sup> the law did not create specific measures to hold federal agencies and buildings accountable for making these changes.

Alongside the fight for physical accessibility to buildings and transportation, many disabled activists were fighting for equal access to employment and education. Two integral fights, which led to the passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 took place on opposite ends of

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<sup>41</sup> Ladau, 49.

<sup>42</sup> Nielsen, 161.

<sup>43</sup> "Architectural Barriers Act (ABA) of 1968," U.S. Access Board, United States Government Access Board, accessed on March 21, 2023, <https://www.access-board.gov/law/aba.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Universal Design Theory argues for accessibility within society, specifically when it comes to planning and designing buildings. It also maintains that accessibility, whether intended specifically with disabled people in mind, benefits all who come in contact with the designs.

the country. On the west coast at the University of California Berkeley, Ed Roberts, a polio survivor, wheelchair user, and ventilator user, became the first severely disabled student to be admitted and attend the university. As he was the first, the university system itself was not ready to accommodate Ed and had him living in the campus hospital. This led to Roberts and several other students with disabilities who followed in his footsteps to fight for equal living conditions that were granted to their non-disabled peers. This campus movement led to the first ever Center for Independent Living (CIL), a space run by and for disabled students. The founding of the CIL allowed disabled students to create a community of belonging within the ableist structures of higher education. It functioned as a living space as well as a community of peer support.<sup>45</sup>

On the other side of the country, then twenty-two-year-old disability activist, Judith Heumann filed a lawsuit against the New York City Department of Education for discriminatory practices within their hiring and licensure process. The board of education had denied Heumann her teaching license because they believed that in the event of an emergency, she would not be able to successfully evacuate herself or her students. At this point, Heumann was already known in the disability community as a fierce advocate for disability rights.<sup>46</sup> She pushed her case to the federal court and won in the landmark 1970 case *Heumann v. Board of Education of the City of New York*. This type of employment and education-based activism empowered disability rights groups to begin fighting ableism at the federal level. Heumann

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<sup>45</sup> For more information see: Lennard J. Davis, *Enabling Acts: The Hidden Story of How the Americans with Disabilities Act Gave the Largest US Minority Its Rights* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015) and *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution*, directed by James Lebrecht and Nicole Newnham (2020; Higher Ground Productions, 2018), Netflix.

<sup>46</sup> Ladau, 51.

subsequently went out to California to become the first director of Berkeley's CIL, the same center founded through Ed Roberts' campus activism.

The CIL became the headquarters for the mobilization of disability advocacy and Heumann, along with the American Coalition of Disabilities, saw new protective laws passed for the betterment of disabled individuals. In 1973, congress passed The Rehabilitation Act, which included the first ever federal protection against discrimination for individuals with disabilities. Section 504 "addressed several key issues, including the forming of the U.S. Access Board to enforce and provide guidance on the Architectural Barriers Act, and the prohibition of discrimination on the basis of disability by federal programs, federally funded programs, and federal employees."<sup>47</sup> The law, however, was not clear on how to effectively determine and enact the specific protections it intended to grant. Section 504, as written into law reads:

No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States, as defined in section 705 (20) of this title, shall, solely by reason of his or her disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance or under any program or activity conducted by any Executive agency or by the United States Postal Service.<sup>48</sup>

What allowed this law to be bypassed in the years that followed was its lack of description on what qualified an individual as disabled. Two years later the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was passed which "established the right of all disabled kids to access public

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<sup>47</sup> Ladau, 51-52.

<sup>48</sup> "Section 504, Rehabilitation Act of 1973," Office of the Assistant Secretary for Administration & Management, U.S. Department of Labor, accessed on March 21, 2023. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/oasam/centers-offices/civil-rights-center/statutes/section-504-rehabilitation-act-of-1973>



education.”<sup>49</sup> This law later became known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

As laws were written, what became apparent was how specific legislation needed to be to be properly enacted and enforced. By 1977, regulations still hadn’t been put in place to clearly define how to legally interpret Section 504 and the Rehabilitation Act. This led to one of the longest disability rights protests known as the 504 sit-ins. These sit-ins brought disabled activists to several HEW (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare) buildings around the country. The sit-in that garnered the most attention from the media was the occupation of the San Francisco HEW building led by Heumann and supported by Bradley Lomax and the Black Panthers. The occupation of this building lasted twenty-six days, with activists getting the chance to speak directly to government representatives. On the twenty-sixth day, HEW Secretary Joseph Califano Jr. (under the Carter administration) signed regulations and amendments to section 504 that gave specific guidance on how to determine an individual as disabled to other federally funded organizations. This led to the active and actionable enforcement of the law.

Years of activism eventually led to the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, also known as the ADA on July 26, 1990. The ADA was groundbreaking legislation as it was the first law to liken disability to an identity, thus allowing it to be considered a protected class. This law is:

A federal civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in everyday activities. [It] prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability just as other civil rights laws prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, national origin, age, and religion. The ADA [also] guarantees that people with disabilities have the same

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<sup>49</sup> Ladau, 52.

opportunities as everyone else to enjoy employment opportunities, purchase goods and services, and participate in state and local government programs.”<sup>50</sup>

The ADA was finally passed following a protest now known as the Capitol Crawl, where disability activists rid themselves of their assistive devices and crawled up the steps of the Capitol Building in Washington D.C. This demonstration directly impacted the passing of this law after years of it being held up in Congress. “In 2008 Congress passed the ADA Amendments Act, in an effort to redress decisions made by state courts and Supreme Court decisions that limited the ADA’s breadth.”<sup>51</sup> This amendment act broadened the definition of disability, which added protections to individuals regardless of medical interventions that could serve to improve their quality of life.<sup>52</sup>

While there have been many other demonstrations of activism and enactments of disability rights legislation, the few mentioned here clearly show the progression and changing perception of the disability narrative. Prior to the disability rights movement, the medical deficit narrative, along with the charity and moral models, portrayed disabled individuals as inferior and deficient. They also contributed to the dehumanization and othering of disability, which led to the over-generalization of disability and its place (or lack thereof) in society. With the disability rights movement calling attention to the structures of society as disabling, rather than the varying conditions of disability itself, the social model of disability was given agency within our country’s collective conscience. By calling attention to ableism and the ways in which

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<sup>50</sup> “Introduction to the Americans with Disabilities Act,” Americans with Disabilities Act, U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, accessed on March 21, 2023, <https://www.ada.gov/topics/intro-to-ada/>.

<sup>51</sup> Nielsen, 181.

<sup>52</sup> See: “The Americans with Disabilities Amendment Act of 2008,” U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, accessed on March 21, 2023, <https://www.eeoc.gov/statutes/americans-disabilities-act-amendments-act-2008>.

it intertwines with other systems of oppression, the social model allows for an exploration of the myriad ways in which disability is argued to be a societal construct that serves as the mechanism for ostracizing and disabling people.

This shift to the social model, however, does not negate the impact that the former models had—and still have—on the disability community today. Instead, it is apparent that this model functions alongside the charity, moral, and medical models which preceded it, as the narratives of human deficiency have never truly been overwritten or erased. The medical and social models are particularly integral to the empowerment of the individual as disability intersects with the current shifts in identity politics. The current movement, which followed disability rights, is called disability justice, which works towards radical inclusivity, by creating disabled specific spaces where new positive narratives of disability can be formed. It is within these spaces that Shayda Kafai, author of *The Disability Justice & Art Activism of Sins Invalid*, maintains that disabled individuals are able to bring their whole selves to enact radical change.<sup>53</sup>

Disability justice transcends disability rights as it works to include tenets of intersectionality, which is something largely ignored within disability studies and accounts of disability history. It also allows for the negotiation of new ways of self-identifying within the disability community. The introduction of person first language (PFL) and identity first language (IFL) allows the individual to determine the language best used when referring to their personal lived experience. PFL focuses on centering the person ahead of their disability (i.e., instead of “a disabled person,” saying: “a person with a disability”) and IFL centers the person’s disability first

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<sup>53</sup> Shayda Kafai, *Crip Kinship: The Disability Justice & Art Activism of Sins Invalid* (Vancouver, BC, CA, 2021), 16.

to call attention to the ways in which the disability plays a part in that individual's identity (i.e., instead of "a person who uses a wheelchair," saying: "a wheelchair user"). What is important here is that there is no universally correct choice; identities are extremely personal and specific, and therefore lie solely with the individual and their preferences.

The shift from the overgeneralization of disability to an individualized approach is important in the work of disability justice and inclusivity within higher education, as it highlights how ineffective a one-size-fits-all approach is to equity, access, and inclusion. In order to truly provide students with disability equity, it is important to center the individual student and their needs. By understanding how the social model came to be and how it serves to highlight the ableist structures that exist within our education system, disabled students, educators, and allies can become more attuned to the ways in which a student's individual needs serve to enrich and aid the entire community by providing alternate ways for everyone (regardless of their identity politics) to gain equity of access and engage freely with their own education.

## CHAPTER 2. SYSTEM FAILURE: HOW GRADES NEGATIVELY IMPACT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

The American educational system is flawed. I am aware as I write this, that many of my readers will have contended with this very sentiment many times before even picking up this thesis. What may seem like a brazen overgeneralization, is in fact, an unfortunate truth. Every day the educational system in this country is failing its students (and I don't mean frivolously handing out *F's*). While access to free appropriate education (FAPE) is outlined in the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment of the constitution and further solidified for students with disabilities in section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, access to an equitable education is not. With disparities in curriculum, pedagogical practices, funding, and a diminishing workforce of educators and administrators,<sup>54</sup> students in the U.S. K-12 public education system are held accountable for meeting standardized benchmarks of success regardless of the level of preparation they are given.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, "education is primarily a State and local responsibility in the United States. It is States and communities, as well as public and private organizations of all kinds, that establish schools and colleges, develop curricula, and determine requirements for enrollment and graduation."<sup>55</sup> No uniformity in curricula or pedagogy exists on a national level, yet students across the country are held to the same standard system of grading which has remained largely unchanged for the past century. These issues are further

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<sup>54</sup> More than 270,000 of these workers are expected to leave their occupation each year, on average, from 2016 to 2026, according to projections from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). For more information see: Elka Torpey, "Predictions for teachers: How many are leaving the occupation?," Career Outlook: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, October 2018, accessed on March 22, 2023, <https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2018/data-on-display/how-many-teachers-are-leaving.htm>.

<sup>55</sup> "The Federal Role in Education," U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Government, June 15, 2021, accessed on March 22, 2023, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/fed/role.html>.

exacerbated by the public versus charter versus private education sectors. While public education is mandated by law to be made accessible to all students who want it, charter schools and private schools exist as seemingly rigorous and selective alternatives to traditional public education. The selectivity of these schools further disadvantage students who do not qualify for admittance or who cannot afford the entrance fees to these exclusive alternatives. Students who attend private or charter schools are given more opportunity to succeed as resources are available through funding allocations and targeted fundraising initiatives that are not given to traditional public schools. Additionally, these schools are exempt from state and local regulations that dictate learning goals and educational outcomes. This exemption allows them to have full autonomy and authority over the education of their students, so long as the education they provide upholds the mission of the individual charter or private school.

While the varying types of educational institutions explored above serves to highlight large scale inequities in our educational system, it is only one way in which students across America face educational disparity. Regardless of the type of institution, most (if not all) of these schools center their educational models around a system of progress marking, largely referred to as the system of grading. This system of grading, or “grading scheme” as we know it today, has been accepted and rarely interrogated since its inception nearly two hundred years ago.<sup>56</sup> Starting with the first grading scheme originating from higher education exit

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<sup>56</sup> For a concise history on grading in the American school system see: Jack Schneider and Ethan Hut, “Making the grade: a history of the A-F marking scheme,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 46, no. 2 (2014): 201-224, accessed on March 22, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2013.790480>.  
Schneider Jack and Ethan Hutt, “Making the grade: a history of the A-F marking scheme”.

exams,<sup>57</sup> grades have been solidified as the single most important tool of “educational bureaucratization, [as well as] a primary means of quantification, and the principal mechanism for sorting students.”<sup>58</sup> What grades provide for all parties, involved and invested in a student’s educational journey, is a quick snapshot of where a student falls when stacked against their peers as well as the national averages deemed acceptable by society as “proper” academic progression. That snapshot reduces students to a quantifiable number or letter that ranks them within a system that is focused on the outcomes of learning, rather than on the learning process itself. “By the mid-twentieth century, grades in American schools had become largely standardized” to reflect the A through F system utilized today<sup>59</sup> which correlated with a 0-100 numerical system and, allowed schools to rank students from best to worst. “By the 1940s, more than 80% of U.S. schools had adopted the A-F grading scale.”<sup>60</sup> These rankings became codified as a grade point average (GPA) which remains the single most important qualifier for determining academic excellence as well as a student’s ability to succeed at the post-secondary level.

These quantitative evaluations of student performance do not factor the individual student at all into the equation. Instead, they serve to perpetuate a system of learning that places students in direct competition with each other, thus fostering a negative educational

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<sup>57</sup> 1785 Yale exit exams, William and Mary 1817, 1790 Cambridge Mathematical Tripos Examinations. See Jack Schneider and Ethan Hut, “Making the grade: a history of the A-F marking scheme,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 46, no. 2 (2014): 201-224, accessed on March 22, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2013.790480>.

<sup>58</sup> Schneider and Hutt, 202.

<sup>59</sup> Schneider and Hutt, 215.

<sup>60</sup> Susan M. Brookhart et al., “A Century of Grading Research: Meaning and Value in the Most Common Educational Measure,” *Review of Educational Research* 86, no. 4 (2016): 805, accessed March 22, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44668237>.

environment dictated by “a system of rewards and punishments that leads students to chase marks and become less interested in the learning itself.”<sup>61</sup> This becomes extremely problematic when considering students with disabilities who, in fully integrated educational systems, are held to the same standards of grading as their non-disabled peers.

Within the current K-12 education system, students with disabilities can experience two possible modes of instruction. The first is fully integrated instruction, where they are placed within the general population of students and afforded equal access to the education presented to their non-disabled peers. The second mode of instruction is one of segregation from the general population; where students with disabilities are placed in classes which provide alternative curricula adjusted specifically for those students. This segregated approach to education has been colloquially referred to as *special education*. In a study conducted by Valdes, Williamson, & Wagner in 1990, “64.2% of mainstreamed secondary students with disabilities were graded on the same standards as their general education peers, whereas 74.3% of students in special education classes were graded on standards different from those used in general education.”<sup>62</sup>

On the one hand integrated classrooms provide students with disabilities the opportunity to partake in the larger community and work toward lessening the stigma of disability as less than. However, the issue with these integrated environments is the expectation that students with disabilities will perform and achieve the same level of success as

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<sup>61</sup> Alfie Kohn, “The Case Against Grades,” in *De-Testing and De-Grading Schools: Authentic Alternatives to Accountability and Standardization Counterpoints*, eds. Joe Bower, and P.L. Thomas (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2013), 145.

<sup>62</sup> Valdes, Williamson, & Wagner (1990) qtd. in Edward A. Polloway et al., “Classroom Grading: A National Survey of Policies,” *Remedial and Special Education* 15, no. 3 (1994): 163, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.vcu.edu/10.1177/074193259401500304>.



students without disabilities. In these integrated school systems, students with disabilities are not only up against the battle of chasing the grade, but they are also additionally responsible for making up for any barriers that ableist curriculums present to them. It's important to note here that general education curriculums, pedagogy, and grading systems were created without disabled individuals in mind. The individuals, however, now presented with the opportunity of access to these environments, must shoulder the burden and do the extra work necessary to align themselves with the system's current measures of quantifiable success.

Conversely, students who participate in special education programs, where disabled populations are segregated from the general non-disabled populations and grouped together, are taught modified curricula that approaches disability education through a one-size-fits-all approach and assumes that students of varying disabilities require the same modes of instruction in order to achieve success. Moreover, these students are graded as a subsidiary group and benchmarks differ from those utilized for their non-disabled peers. This modification in curricula and grading practices serves to further negatively impact those students who then decide to pursue post-secondary education. For these students, integrating into the non-disabled educational sphere proves to be a much more difficult transition than for disabled peers who participated in integrated K-12 programs. In both cases, students with disabilities are equally disadvantaged by a grading system that seeks only to compare them to their non-disabled peers.

### **2.1 Necessary Accommodations**

For integrated classrooms, students with disabilities rely on 504 plans or IEP's to help them achieve a similar level of academic success as their non-disabled counterparts. A 504 plan

is a specialized educational plan implemented by a school, which relies on accommodations that help a student gain equal access to education. The 504 plan comes directly from the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and focuses on affording the same access to education that is given to students who are not disabled. Conversely, IEP's or individualized education programs, are plans that focus on the needs of the student in question and provide all parties involved with a legal document that outlines the measures needed to help the student succeed. IEPs are concerned with measuring meaningful educational progress and are drafted by individuals who fully understand the needs of the student.<sup>63</sup> IEP's come directly from the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which "is a law that makes available free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special education and related resources to those children."<sup>64</sup> This law differs from the Rehabilitation Act as it moves beyond being an anti-discrimination law. At its core, the IDEA is a federal funding law that ensures that the needs of students with disabilities can be met. Both plans intend to create a more equitable learning environment that fosters academic success. However, that academic success is still measured by the traditional grading system, which was not created with disabled students in mind.

In higher education, IEP's and 504 plans are replaced with individual accommodations often granted by an institution's Office of Disability Services. The federal laws mentioned above, do not extend to post-secondary education, so those students must rely on

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<sup>63</sup> For more information on the differences between 504 plans and IEP's see: "Knowing the Difference: 504 Plan or IEP," Office of the Student Advocate, D.C. State Board of Education, accessed March 21, 2023, [https://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/multimedia\\_content/Understanding%20the%20Differences%20Between%20504s%20and%20IEPs.pdf](https://sboe.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/sboe/multimedia_content/Understanding%20the%20Differences%20Between%20504s%20and%20IEPs.pdf).

<sup>64</sup> "About IDEA," IDEA: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, U.S. Department of Education, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/>.

administrators to continue to address their academic access needs. According to the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights, “Unlike high school...postsecondary school is not required to provide FAPE. Rather, postsecondary school is required to provide appropriate academic adjustments as necessary to ensure that it does not discriminate on the basis of disability.”<sup>65</sup> The two laws that govern disability access in higher education are section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and Title II of the ADA. As written, section 504 ensures that “no handicapped student [enrolled in a post-secondary institution] is denied the benefits of, excluded from the participation in, or otherwise subjected to discrimination under the education program or activity operation by the recipient because of the absence of educational auxiliary aids.” Whereas Title II of the ADA states that “a public entity shall furnish appropriate auxiliary aids and services where necessary to afford an individual with a disability an equal opportunity to participate in, and enjoy the benefits of, a service, program, or activity conducted by a public entity.”<sup>66</sup> Both laws work together to require that post-secondary institutions provide auxiliary aids to students who identify themselves as needing such accommodations.

Post-secondary education erases the differentiation between disabled and non-disabled populations. All students are integrated into the same system of learning, and the only variable becomes the specific courses a student decides to take. Necessary accommodations are left up to the student, in consultation with the college’s access officer. Auxiliary aids, require advanced

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<sup>65</sup> “Students with Disabilities Preparing for Postsecondary Education: Know Your Rights and Responsibilities,” Office for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education, September 2011, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transition.html>

<sup>66</sup> *ibid*

notification to the proper staff members at an institution and may require further testing or proof of disability from the student's professional health care team. Once approved by the proper offices, students who receive auxiliary aids are provided a letter which affords them these accommodations, should they wish to use them. It is important to note that students enrolled in higher education institutions have the agency and autonomy to determine whether they wish to disclose their disability or needs to an individual instructor. This means that accommodations, when granted by an institution, are left up to the individual student to use if, and only if, they decide to disclose their status as disabled to their instructors. These accommodations and auxiliary aids, while well-intentioned, do nothing to help students overcome the negative impacts and barriers that traditional grading has on the learning experience as they only serve to aid disabled students in their efforts to achieve the marks deemed satisfactory by an ableist society.

## **2.2 The Negative Impacts of Grading**

To better understand how grades further disadvantage students with disabilities, let's first turn to the ways in which grades negatively impact a student's ability to engage in the process of learning. In his article "The Case Against Grades" Alfie Kohn outlines how grades work to rewire students toward a grading orientation rather than a learning orientation.<sup>67</sup> With the utilization of grades from early elementary education through college and beyond, students are led to believe that the grade is the most important aspect of their education. Kohn asserts that "the more students are led to focus on *how well* they're doing, the less engaged they tend

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<sup>67</sup> Kohn, 143-153.

to be with *what* they're doing."<sup>68</sup> This emphasis on the grading orientation is further solidified by standardized testing, college entrance exams, and traditional midterm and final exam structures inherent in higher education. When grades become the driving force behind education, students lose their desire to learn for learning's sake. Additionally, students who are inclined to focus on grades are further removed from the process of learning as they become hyper-fixated on determining what is required of them to earn the grade they desire.

This fixation is ingrained in student's minds from the first report card that is sent home to their parents in elementary school, and snowballs as they make their way towards receiving their high school diplomas. Throughout high school, grades begin to hold more weight than they had in the past, as they become the single most important factor in determining a student's future. At this point in the K-12 education system, grades don't just determine success within a specific class. As students begin to contend with their post-secondary plans, the importance of academic GPAs, class ranks, and standardized test scores bubble to the surface as they play an outsized role in the college admissions process.

For those seeking a college education at the country's elite institutions, the pressure to outrank their peers extends past the confines of their school to encompass students across the country and the world. According to Pascoe, Hetrick, and Parker in their article "The impact of stress on students in secondary school and higher education," "[high school] students commonly self-report experiencing ongoing stress relating to their education, which [is] referred to as academic-related stress, such as pressure to achieve high marks and concerns

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<sup>68</sup> Kohn, 145.

about receiving poor grades.”<sup>69</sup> This ongoing stress has been linked to poorer quality of life and wellbeing<sup>70</sup> and has been reported to have significant negative effects on the long-term mental health of students often leading them to develop depression and anxiety disorders.<sup>71</sup> These mental health issues, which students acquire throughout their education are a direct symptom of the current standardized grading system in America.

This current system, which is rooted in the *chase for the grade*, reduces student agency in the learning process and leads them to believe that their future success lies in the hands of educators who each hold their own subjective ideas on what qualifies an A from a B. This is especially prevalent in college-level theatre programs where a course like studio acting, a skill that should be learned solely for the love of the craft, is overshadowed by the fact that assessing someone’s skill level is completely subjective and varies immensely from instructor to instructor. A system of grading, which feigns academic stability, functions contrarily within these types of courses and programs. Unlike courses in mathematics and the natural sciences, where grades are achieved through a demonstration, understanding, and recitation of solidified rules and laws, courses in the arts ascribe grades to assignments and subject matter that have no objective academic grounding. Yet, regardless of this fact, grades are given usually with little to no explanation.

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<sup>69</sup> Michaela C. Pascoe, Sarah E. Hetrick, and Alexandra G. Parker, “The impact of stress on students in secondary school and higher education,” *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 25, no.1 (2020): 104, accessed March 22, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1596823>.

<sup>70</sup> Ribeiro et al. qtd. in Michaela C. Pascoe, Sarah E. Hetrick, and Alexandra G. Parker, “The impact of stress on students in secondary school and higher education,” *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 25, no.1 (2020): 104, accessed March 22, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1596823>.

<sup>71</sup> Kessler et al. qtd. in Michaela C. Pascoe, Sarah E. Hetrick, and Alexandra G. Parker, “The impact of stress on students in secondary school and higher education,” *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 25, no.1 (2020): 104, accessed March 22, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2019.1596823>.

In these specific cases, where grades are assigned subjectively to non-academic fields of study, students are left with the job of decoding their grades as well as their instructor's reasoning for assigning those specific grades. Furthermore, when instructors of the arts rely solely on grading to determine a student's proficiency in their course, students can lose interest in the subject matter as grades become the determining factor of their perceived success and provide no additional feedback for improvement. At the base level, "grades are intended to communicate messages. [However], if the message intended is not the message received, accurate communication fails."<sup>72</sup> This gap in properly communicating a student's level of achievement is one of the largest issues inherent in the standardized A-F grading system.

However, one of the most egregious negative results of the A-F grading system is the way it impacts a student's relationship to education as a whole. As mentioned earlier, "grades foster an educational environment which reduces autonomy and a desire to learn by reinforcing an educational status quo where students are 'set against one another.'"<sup>73</sup> Not only does this environment discourage students from learning, but it also discourages students from having the ability to learn from each other. As educators, much of the learning that we see our students do does not come directly from us, but instead comes out of experiential learning environments that foster engagement with the material through collaboration and application of the subject matter with their peers. This is especially true for performance-based programs where a requirement of a passing grade is solely reliant on student collaboration.

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<sup>72</sup> Dale Carpenter, "Grading Handicapped Pupils: Review and Position Statement," *RASE* 6, no.4 (1985): 54, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://doi-org.proxy.library.vcu.edu/10.1177/074193258500600409>.

<sup>73</sup> Kohn, 148.

## 2.3 Moving Beyond Traditional Grading

Many educators have argued against grades by citing many of the negative impacts that I have highlighted above, yet grades still persist as the backbone of the American education system. Some revisions to the grading system have worked to include standards-based grading which aims to align grading with a given set of objectives.<sup>74</sup> This amendment to grading practices gave way to rubric-based grading, which serves to outline levels of achievement possible with any given assignment as well as the specific grades that each level correlates to. Some educators have also opted for the pass/fail system which places student success into two finite categories of achievement rather than the traditional hierarchy of success which comes out of the traditional system. The problem with the pass/fail system is that it still functions within a larger grading scheme that values a student's grade point average and, therefore, only serves to disadvantage a student's overall academic standing when compared to their peers who opt for traditionally-graded courses. Here we see that the pass/fail system, although well-intentioned, only serves to exacerbate the competitive environment created by grades.

It stands to reason then, that in order to circumvent the negative impacts that the grading system causes, education as a whole would need to move beyond the A-F grading scale. I am not suggesting here that we abolish grades altogether, as that would be idealistic and not actionable. In fact, I understand that many traditional academic programs and courses rely too heavily on traditional grading to survey and monitor a student's retention of testable knowledge. Instead, what I am arguing for here is a revision to the current traditional academic grading system, within creative-based programs at the college level, that allows for self-

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<sup>74</sup> Kohn, 148.



reflexivity and student input. These ideas for revising the grading system will be outlined below with college-level performance courses in mind but can be applied to any other creative courses or programs which don't rely on a traditional acquisition of measurable knowledge.

When taking into consideration how subjective grading can be for students of performance courses, it is unfair to utilize the A-F scale to determine a student's creative proficiency. One way of circumventing this system and its negative impacts on education is to involve students in the process of grading, by providing them the opportunity to honestly evaluate themselves, their level of effort, and whether that level of effort coincides with the necessary work needed to achieve their desired final grade. This work starts with educators prioritizing qualitative feedback over quantitative feedback. Irvin Peckham notes that qualitative feedback when accompanied by a grade is often overshadowed by the grade. He posits that "the grade, the objectified symbol of the comments, either erases or deflects the real messages"<sup>75</sup> that are thoughtfully provided by the instructor to the student for future improvement as well as future success. This means that it is not enough to just add a narrative component to a grade. Instead, effective grading revision must work to replace the grade with the instructor's comments and let those comments serve to guide a student toward improvement. By replacing quantitative grading with qualitative feedback on individual assignments, students can refocus their attention on the feedback provided for improvement rather than the quantified outcome of the assignment. Once students are re-conditioned to

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<sup>75</sup> Irvin Peckham, "Beyond Grades," *Composition Studies* 21, no. 2 (1993): 20, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43501895>.

expect written feedback, they are then given the ability to understand areas for improvement and discuss those candidly with their instructor.

Another consideration in revising grading policy for performance curricula is to require students to provide both verbal and written feedback to their instructor evaluating their own performance on a particular assignment. In actor-training we call this self-reflexivity, and it is often a requirement following any assignment that incorporates a performative component. This allows a student to critically assess what they experienced through embodied performance and engages a practice of autonomy and self-awareness. In this practice of self-reflexivity, actors become attuned to their own needs for improvement and are given the tools necessary to continue their training regardless of the presence of a traditional instructor.

Since this is a common and effective practice already utilized within actor-training techniques, I argue that it can and should be extended to the student as a means to achieve equitable and effective grading practices. Kohn calls this type of grading authentic assessment and highlights how when students are invited “to participate in [the process of grading] either as a negotiation (such that the teacher has the final say) or by simply permitting students to grade themselves,” they are more likely to feel invested in the work required of them.<sup>76</sup> He goes on to assert that “a key element of authentic assessment...is the opportunity for students to help design the assessment and reflect on its purposes – individually and as a class.”<sup>77</sup> This type of inclusion allows students to feel valued and heard throughout the duration of a course and provides a written trail of feedback, which allows for meaningful reflection and

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<sup>76</sup> Kohn, 150.

<sup>77</sup> Kohn, 151

progression. It also allows educators the opportunity to notice any discrepancies between a student's self-assessment and their own assessment of that student. If discrepancies arise, instructors are able to incorporate conversations that highlight those inconsistencies and work to redirect a student toward reaching the intended goals of a course of assignment.

A final consideration for revising traditional grading in performance-based courses is to rely on the idea of a summative creative portfolio as a tool of overall course assessment. "Over the past twenty years, learning portfolios have slowly been gaining popularity in higher education, with professional colleges recognizing the unique combination of self-reflection, self-direction, self-analysis, and self-discipline required to create and maintain such a personalized collection."<sup>78</sup> Not only do creative portfolios demonstrate learning, but they also encourage students to actively engage in the learning through professional preparation and positive outcome-based motivation. In this way portfolios, as assessment tools, serve to overwrite the negative impact that summative gradings has on a student's desire to learn. Portfolios engage students throughout a semester by encouraging them to participate in the active creation of content and thereby engaging them in the necessary learning objectives and goals set out by an instructor in a given course. Kohn notes that portfolios are most constructive only if they replace grades, rather than being used as a means to yield them.<sup>79</sup> I go beyond this assertion to claim that portfolios can achieve the most positive effects only when utilized alongside qualitative feedback and tailored mentorship as they encourage

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<sup>78</sup> Jenna-Lynn Senger and Rani Kanthan, "Student Evaluations: Synchronous Tripod of Learning Portfolio Assessment—Self-Assessment, Peer-Assessment, Instructor-Assessment," *Creative Education* 3, no. 1 (2012): 155, accessed March 21, 2023, <https://www.scirp.org/html/17315.html>.

<sup>79</sup> Kohn, 146.

personalization of education and, therefore, emphasize a student's individual desire to engage with a course's required material.

Portfolios can be especially fruitful when used as tools of assessment in performance-based courses as they function not only for educational purposes, but also for professional preparation. Allowing students, the opportunity to engage with performance through different means (i.e., self-tape recordings, journaled book work, reel production, etc.) creates comfort and access to assessment that is not confined to the traditional studio space or classroom. This is especially important for disabled students who may require specific space modifications to aid them in their ability to perform to their best ability. For example, students with aphantasia<sup>80</sup> are able to execute a performance more effectively when they have the ability to place themselves in an environment that matches their assigned scene rather than being forced to imagine it in a studio classroom setting. Here we can see how creative portfolios extend equity to disabled students beyond the four walls of the classroom.

Each of the abovementioned recommendations for revising traditional grading practices utilize an individualized approach to evaluating students within the performance classroom. They challenge the ableist conditions of the traditional educational and grading system, which still functions under the pretenses of the medical model of disability, and work to replace it with the social model of disability, which recognizes the system itself as the problem and in need of change. Furthermore, by prioritizing an individualized and qualitative approach to grading, educators can begin to foster an equitable and democratic classroom that truly

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<sup>80</sup> A condition of reduced or absent voluntary imagery. For more information see: Alexis Black et al., "Acting Without Imagery: Aphantasia in the Theater Classroom," in *Inclusivity and Equality in Performance Training: Teaching and Learning for Neuro and Physical Diversity*, ed. Petronilla Whitfield (New York: Routledge, 2022).

engages its students, rather than one that coerces them into doing whatever they are told.<sup>81</sup>

This type of individualization is “central to the concept of equality of opportunity [which is present] in all disability policies and arises from the heterogenous nature of disabilities as well as the impact of disabling conditions on functioning.”<sup>82</sup> By acknowledging that all students, regardless of disability or individual access needs, learn in myriad ways, theatre educators can foster democratic and equitable spaces of learning that deemphasize measured output and reframe the acting classroom as a site of active experimentation.

I am aware that some who read these above suggestions may find them idealistic and hard to implement when they have been so reliant on quantitative grading structures. Let me first acknowledge this difficulty as it is born out of the status quo. It is indeed hard to imagine an educational system without traditional grades. But, it is increasingly important to acknowledge that this very resistance to the revision of grades only proves “how [they] function as a mechanism for controlling students rather than as a necessary or constructive way to report information about their performance”<sup>83</sup> and how these practices serve to disproportionately disadvantage our disabled students. It is also imperative to point out how re-envisioning the grading system, as outlined above, benefits all students, not just those with disability. If we can break down the systemic barriers caused by traditional grades, we as educators can freely work toward building equity for disabled students into both our curriculums and pedagogy.

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<sup>81</sup> Kohn, 146.

<sup>82</sup> Silverstein qtd. in Margaret McLaughlin, “Evolving Interpretations of Educational Equity and Students with Disabilities,” *Exceptional Children* 76, no. 3 (2010): 26, accessed March 22, 2023, DOI 10.1177/001440291007600302.

<sup>83</sup> Kohn, 150.

## CHAPTER 3: WHO'S CANON? THE PERPETUATION OF DISABILITY THROUGH THE IDEALIZED BODY

While exploring the negative effects of the grading system in the United States, it is interesting to highlight how difficult it is to isolate the practice of grading from the curricula for which it was created. In order for a grade to be assigned to a student, the teacher must first bear witness to the student engaging with the material as well as the assignments designated by their course syllabus. It is within the syllabus that we can see both the educator and the system's biases when it comes to abiding by and disseminating specific knowledge from an approved curriculum. These curricula are responsible for perpetuating ableist ideals as they have been utilized to exclude varying perspectives throughout a student's education. When it comes to studies in the humanities and the arts, the most relied upon entity employed to disseminate this knowledge is the western canon.

The western canon refers to a white Eurocentric body of literary works that have been deemed by the academy as holding the most artistic, educational, and aesthetic value. These works are those that have stood the test of time and continue to be taught simply because of the importance bestowed upon them. The idea of the western canon has been further codified by Harold Bloom in his 1994 book, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, wherein Bloom defines canonicity as the act of choosing which literary works hold the most aesthetic value for him and therefore should be labeled as the best and most worthy of sustained re-examination. His idea of the western canon centers around Shakespeare, which he argues holds the highest aesthetic value, and from there he goes on to codify a list of twenty-six writers (from Aristotle to Samuel Beckett) who, for him, uphold the aesthetic values and ideals

of great western thought. It is important to note that the specific canon which Bloom further codifies in his book, already existed prior to this publication. In fact, such a publication could never have been made without Bloom's own experience contending with these canonical works throughout his formal education. This highlights how the canon is religiously disseminated by educators who focus on teaching the works that were taught to them. Instead of engaging with the canon and determining the literary works that best serve the aims of their class and the identities of their students, educators fall into the comfortable cycle of teaching the canon without revision. While Bloom is arguably the most contentious defender of the western canon, many other scholars have explored the ways in which the canon functions and have called for a necessary interrogation of the practice of canonicity.

To expand on Bloom's rather personal definition of canonicity, it is important to understand the canon and its active production in relation to society at-large. For Matthew Moore, canonicity "describe[s] the critical, practical, cultural, and emotional investments in the idea—the tradition—of specified greatness and relevance as it has developed under the stewardship of exclusive and identitarian authoritative bodies."<sup>84</sup> What is integral to note in this definition is the emphasis on who creates and controls the canon. In our western educational tradition "the custodians of knowledge within the Academy have historically been White; [which] has sometimes resulted in the shaping of a curriculum that heavily leans towards a Eurocentric paradigm as the dominant knowledge canon."<sup>85</sup> By relying solely on the western

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<sup>84</sup> Lindsey Mantoan, Matthew Moore, and Angela Farr Schiller, "Introduction," in *Troubling Traditions: Canonicity, Theatre, and Performance in the US*, eds. Lindsey Mantoan, Matthew Moore, and Angela Farr Schiller (New York: Routledge 2022), 6.

<sup>85</sup> Andrews and Heleta qtd in Jason Arday, Dina Zoe Belluigi and Dave Thomas, "Attempting to break the chain: reimagining inclusive pedagogy and decolonizing the curriculum within the academy," in *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 53, no. 3 (2021): 299, accessed March 22, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1773257>.

canon, educators serve to further disadvantage their marginalized students by reinforcing an educational practice that functions through the principles of devaluing and excluding non-white/Eurocentric contributions to society.

Recently the canon has faced further interrogation as educational institutions are called upon by their students to contend with the ways in which they favor the oppressor over the oppressed within their curriculums and teaching styles. “Within higher education (HE) campaigns such as the Decolonising the Curriculum Movement and Why is my Curriculum White have sought to challenge and dismantle the existing orthodoxies by advocating a curriculum that reflects the multiple histories of Black and indigenous populations globally.”<sup>86</sup> These movements in higher education have also expanded to minorities that have often been overlooked in the western tradition, such as individuals with disabilities. This exploration of disability erasure in the canon exists most prevalently for me when examining the specific training methods, playwrights, and performance texts utilized in college-level actor-training programs across the United States.

Within these theatre programs in higher education, the western canon has been further codified through a subset known as the theatrical canon, which refers to “works of drama that are repeatedly anthologized, taught, and staged across generations of theatre classes: everyone from the white, European-derived traditions (e.g., Ibsen) to people who we consider are

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<sup>86</sup> Jason Arday, Dina Zoe Belluigi and Dave Thomas, “Attempting to break the chain: reimagining inclusive pedagogy and decolonizing the curriculum within the academy,” in *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 53, no. 3 (2021): 298, accessed March 22, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1773257>.



[currently] becoming canonized (e.g., Tony Kushner).”<sup>87</sup> This theatrical canon expands beyond the dramatic text realm by encompassing the practitioners who have influenced our conception of actor-training techniques in America (e.g. Strasberg, Hagen, Meisner, etc.), all of whom expanded upon the original concepts outlined in Constantin Stanislavski’s methodologies.<sup>88</sup> This conception of the contemporary acting method was created by and for able-bodied practitioners and therefore poses barriers for those unable to engage in the work as outlined by these master teachers.

Whether tied to enacted practice or dramatic text, actors with disabilities have been disproportionately disadvantaged by the stereotypes and tropes about disability that the theatrical canon continues to reinforce. While the applied aesthetics found in actor-training techniques function against those with disabilities through exclusion, the dramatic canon, which only contends with specific playwrights and plays, works against disabled individuals through a reinforcement of the negative narratives of disability fabricated by the medical, moral, and charity models prevalent within our society. These stereotypes and tropes of disability serve to reinforce an overarching societal narrative of otherness, which has barred disabled actor’s from fully engaging in the craft of acting. In “Naming the Trope: A Deep Dive into the Harmful Uses of Disability Stereotypes in the American Theatre,” Ben Raanan calls attention to the various tropes of disability as they exist within the canon. For Raanan *tropes* are defined as “significant and recurring character motifs present in popular culture that

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<sup>87</sup> Ann M. Fox and Carrie Sandahl, “‘Frenemies’ of the Canon: Our Two Decades of Studying and Teaching Disability in Drama and Performance,” in *Troubling Traditions: Canonicity, Theatre, and Performance in the US*, ed. Lindsey Mantoan, Matthew Moore, and Angela Farr Schiller (New York: Routledge, 2022), 147.

<sup>88</sup> For in an in-depth history of these acting methods, see: Isaac Butler, *The Method: How the Twentieth Century Learned to Act* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc.), 2022.

homogenize a group's experience."<sup>89</sup> This homogenization of disability works against the understanding of disability as an individual experience and serves to overwrite the individual into an amalgamated collective.

The main tropes that Raanan identifies within the dramatic canon are as follows: the Gentleman Freak, the Magical Freak, the Super-Crip, the Misunderstood Weirdo, the Rage-Filled Recluse, and the Ambiguous Disability.<sup>90</sup> The Gentleman Freak is defined as any character who has a physical deformity which overshadows the character's true nature, which is not able to be seen by the audience until "a brave nondisabled character sees that they are not scary at all and befriends them,"<sup>91</sup> thus transforming the character from a perceived monster to a civilized gentleman. A canonical work that best exemplifies this trope is Bernard Pomerance's *The Elephant Man*, which dramatizes the life of John Merrick "a horribly deformed young man – a victim of rare skin and bone diseases. [Who] under the care of celebrated physician Frederick Treves...slowly evolves from an object of pity to an urbane gentleman, desperate to be recognized as a man like any other."<sup>92</sup> More egregious examples of this trope can be seen with Nick Dear's stage adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, specifically the 2011 National Theatre's production which presents the monster as distinctly human from the start. Further contextualizing this character trope with the historical conception of race as a disability, Suzan-Lori Park's character, the Hottentot Venus can also be seen as fulfilling the prerequisites of this

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<sup>89</sup> Ben Raanan, "Naming the Trope: A Deep Dive into the Harmful Uses of Disability Stereotypes in the American Theatre," *Howlround* (essay), January 3, 2022, <https://howlround.com/naming-trope-deep-dive-harmful-uses-disability-stereotypes-american-theatre>.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid*

<sup>91</sup> *ibid*

<sup>92</sup> "The Elephant Man Synopsis," Concord Theatricals, Samuel French Inc., accessed March 22, 2023, <https://www.concordtheatricals.com/p/2264/the-elephant-man>.

character type. This trope co-opts the charity model and functions solely on the idea that individuals with disability, and disability itself, is linked to an unfortunate circumstance that deserves to be pitied.

In the case of the Magical Freak, the author “assigns ethereal powers to those with disabilities [thus positioning] disability as ‘other’ or ‘inhuman,’ rather than as part of the human condition.”<sup>93</sup> Raanan explores Tiresias as the prototype for this trope, a character who is always depicted as the blind prophet who possesses a magical foresight, used to predict the future of the story’s main protagonist. In the instance of the magical freak, disability is reduced to an otherworldly plot device to help move the story along. In these stories, the disabled characters are underdeveloped and only function in service of the play’s nondisabled characters.

In contrast, the Super-Crip, is a trope that “assigns inhuman physical skills to a disabled character,”<sup>94</sup> thus portraying a character who is able to achieve their goals against all odds and despite their disability. This trope interestingly accesses disability through the social model by highlighting the odds stacked against them but does not go beyond a surface utilization of this model, thus perpetuating the idea that disability is something to overcome rather than acknowledging the societal and ableist barriers that bar disabled individuals from succeeding. A contemporary example of this can be found in Simon Stephen’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, where the title character Christopher Boone (a character with autism) overcomes society’s conception of his limitations to solve a mystery of a dog’s murder, unearth

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<sup>93</sup> Raanan.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

the truth about his family, and reconcile his relationship with his father. In this case, disability is used as a superpower that helps the character achieve his goals.

Next in Raanan's lineup is the Misunderstood Weirdo, which places an emphasis on characters with cognitive disabilities<sup>95</sup> who are constantly ostracized by the non-disabled characters around them. Raanan points to the existence of this trope in Pasek, Paul, and Levinson's musical *Dear Evan Hansen*, a show that utilizes disability as the main plot device to isolate the main character Evan from the world around him which, in turn, forces him to lie to fit in. This usage of the misunderstood weirdo yet again places the character's disability, rather than his ableist surroundings, as the conflict-inciting plot device. Additionally, this trope constantly places the disabled character in direct contrast to the non-disabled characters to show how the only thing that differentiates them is the character's specific disability.

The final two tropes, as outlined by Raanan, will be the main focus of the next two sections of this chapter, where I aim to explore the Ambiguous Disability and the Rage-Filled Recluse through two of the most widely used and highly regarded characters of the western theatrical canon: Tennessee Williams' Laura from his work *The Glass Menagerie* and Shakespeare's titular character in *Richard III*. I will begin my exploration with Laura and explore how she fulfills the ambiguous disability trope and how that trope serves to reinforce the medical model of disability. Following this exploration of Laura, I will turn to one of the most performed disabled characters in the theatrical canon, Richard III, and explore how Shakespeare likens disability to intrinsic evil and, furthermore how he utilized disability in Richard III to craft a monstrous villain. By exploring these two characters in depth, I hope to

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

further elucidate how these tropes, as reinforced by the canon, serve to disadvantage disabled actors by creating a disability binary<sup>96</sup> which propagates negative disability narratives that lead to a devaluing of disabled bodies within the acting classroom and rehearsal studio.

### 3.1 The Ambiguous Disability as Weakness

Perhaps the most recognizable character of the ambiguous disability trope exists within one of the American canon's most prized plays, *The Glass Menagerie*. Although Laura is not the only character who presents a disability in William's body of work, she is the first.<sup>97</sup> Even before the play starts, Williams provides a description for the character of Laura Wingfield that fails to move beyond her physical condition. "Amanda, having failed to establish contact with reality, continues to live vitally in her illusions, but Laura's situation is even graver. A childhood illness has left her crippled, one leg slightly shorter than the other, and held in a brace. This defect need not be more than suggested on the stage. Stemming from this, Laura's separation increases till she is like a piece of her own glass collection, too exquisitely fragile to move from the shelf,"<sup>98</sup> Williams begins this description of Laura by contrasting her physical disability with her mother's lack of connection to reality, labeling Laura's disability as being a stronger obstacle to her living a fulfilled and "normal" life. This type of contrast already positions disability within the play as a condition that limits the character's ability to be perceived as

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<sup>96</sup> See Raanan, where he describes how these abovementioned tropes create a disability that functions on a binary of good versus evil. This binary does not allow for three-dimensional representations of disabled characters and therefore reinforce negative disability narratives.

<sup>97</sup> See, Williams' character of Brick from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, where his temporary disability incites the destruction of his relationship with Maggie. In both plays disability is a metaphor for being stuck and stagnant. Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (New York: New Directions Books, 1954).

<sup>98</sup> Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* (New York: New Directions Books, 1945), Character Descriptions.

“normal,” as it functions within the medical model’s assumption that disability is something meant to be overcome.

In the reality of the play, Laura’s ambiguous disability can also be seen as the physical embodiment of all the Wingfield’s issues, not just her own. While the disability functions to physically separate Laura from the other able-bodied characters, it also mirrors Amanda’s unwillingness to separate from her idealized past and live in the present as well as Tom’s inability to cope with the fact that his life is amounting to nothing. In their own way, each character in this play is stuck in their own circumstances, yet Williams chose to utilize an unnamed disability as the metaphor for being stuck, rather than focusing on the personal and societal factors that leave each character feeling the way that they do.

Carrie Sandahl highlights this type of utilization of disability within a play as a representational conundrum, which is a term that she uses to “describe challenging, puzzling, or paradoxical issues that are unique or complicated by disability’s presence.”<sup>99</sup> She goes on to note that disability is often used as a metaphor for larger social issues because the disability allows the “social issues [to be] ‘made flesh’ in the disabled character.”<sup>100</sup> In the case of Laura, her physical disability stands in as a metaphor for the overarching theme of stagnancy. Out of all the recurring tropes of disability, the ambiguous disability is the most successful in functioning as a metaphor for larger societal issues because it remains unidentified to the

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<sup>99</sup> Carrie Sandahl, “Using Our Words: Exploring Representational Conundrums in Disability Drama and Performance,” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 12, no. 2 (2018): 130, accessed on March 22, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2018.11>.

<sup>100</sup> Sandahl, 134.

audience, thus allowing the audience to accept the presented disability as a stand-in for all the problems that the characters ultimately face.

In addition to the character description, Williams consistently refers to Laura's disability in an unspecified way throughout the entire play text, never allowing the audience to fully understand who Laura is. There are very few interactions between Laura and the other characters that speak about her disability, but it is reinforced throughout the play that she is a weak character who requires others to take care of her. In an exchange between Laura and her mother Amanda in Scene 2, we see one instance of Laura trying to claim her identity as disabled:

LAURA: But, Mother –

AMANDA: Yes? [She goes over to the photograph.]

LAURA: [in a frightened tone of apology] I'm – crippled!

AMANDA: Nonsense! Laura, I've told you never, never to use that word. Why, you're not crippled, you just have a little defect – hardly noticeable, even! When people have some slight disadvantage like that, they cultivate other things to make up for it.<sup>101</sup>

In this exchange we see Laura fight against the ambiguous disability trope in an effort to claim individuality, however, she is unable to do so successfully as this trope does not allow for a nuanced character to exist beyond the thematic function of their disability. Additionally, this exchange highlights the idea that disability is something that must be made up for in other ways, specifically when she is told “by her mother to develop an extraordinary ability to ‘make up’ for her ‘little defect.’”<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Williams, 17-18.

<sup>102</sup> Ryan Donovan, “Re-membering the Canon: Sam Gold’s *The Glass Menagerie*,” *Howlround* (essay), May 9, 2017, <https://howlround.com/re-membering-canon>.

Outside of the text itself, the ambiguous disability trope has also functioned as a mode of exclusion for disabled performers. When a disability is unnamed, and written as such, disabled actors rarely get the opportunity to bring their lived experiences to the role. Ryan Donovan notes that Williams' description of Laura's disability as a defect that need only be suggested by the actor "has led to the role nearly always being cast with an able-bodied actress crippling up for the role."<sup>103</sup> Donovan goes on to explore the 2017 revival of the play, directed by Sam Gold, which was the first time a disabled actress played the role of Laura on a Broadway stage. He notes how "Gold's casting of Madison Ferris as Laura incited some measure of critical controversy because she uses a wheelchair due to what one critic referred to as her 'palpable muscular dystrophy.' [In this production,] Ferris's wheelchair apparently did not sit well with critics who prefer their disability metaphoric and their texts sacred."<sup>104</sup> The sanctity bestowed upon these canonized texts and characters highlight a very unfortunate truth about the canon and the ways in which it functions as a tool for exclusion. In the case of the 2017 revival, many felt that the inclusion of a visibly disabled actor on stage undermined the function of the ambiguous disability within the plot. The negative reception of this production, specifically of Madison Ferris's portrayal of Laura, is tied to the idea that canonized texts should be left to exist as they were originally written and performed. Apart from the limited number of disabled characters written into the canon, this ideology of retaining purity of the canon further excludes disabled actors from engaging with the issues inherent in the writing of disability tropes and, therefore, assists in the ongoing perpetuation of these stereotypes in theatre and

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<sup>103</sup> *ibid*

<sup>104</sup> *ibid*



performance. Additionally, the constant reinforcement of the canon as it currently exists, prevents students with disabilities from seeing themselves reflected as fully realized characters on stage.

### **3.2 The Rage-Filled Recluse: Villainizing Disability**

While the ambiguous disability trope serves to undermine an individual approach to character development and agency, the Rage-Filled Recluse trope likens disability to a negative character trait that almost always leads to villainy. This trope is easily recognizable in the character of Richard III; from the outset the audience, or reader, is shown that his disability and difference is the sole reason that he has chosen to pursue a path of evil. Within the first few lines of the play, Richard Gloucester accepts his deformity and acknowledges that his physical differences are the sole reason for his evil actions:

RICHARD: I that am curtailed of this fair proportion,  
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,  
Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time  
Into this breathing world scarce half made up,  
And that so lamely and unfashionable  
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them –  
Why, I in this weak piping time of peace  
Have no delight to pass away the time,  
Unless to spy my shadow in the sun  
And descant on mine own deformity.  
And therefore since I cannot prove a lover  
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,  
I am determined to prove a villain  
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.

Shakespeare's utilization of the rage-filled recluse trope does more than just liken disability with evil, it further strengthens the ideas of the moral model, which perceives disability as a condition brought on by immorality or sin. Instead of focusing on the societal factors that lead Richard to turn to villainy, which would be a positive utilization of the social model,

Shakespeare instead makes Richard inherently evil from the start, thus stripping the character of any semblance of humanity. According to Tracey Sinclaire, “The play's concept of disability as an outward sign of inner evil is hugely problematic for modern audiences”<sup>105</sup> as it reinforces the perception of disability as less than, or those with disabilities as sub-human. Drawing on the idea of the disabled monster of the gentleman freak trope, the rage-filled recluse also gives validity to the false narrative that disabled individuals are monstrous evil beings who are unable to rid themselves of their wicked disposition.

The character of Richard III is further villainized throughout the play as the other characters constantly highlight his physical deformities when calling out his murderous actions. Likening him to the devil himself, Lady Anne refers to him as a “lump of foul deformity”<sup>106</sup> and Queen Margaret refers to him as a “poisonous bunch-backed toad.”<sup>107</sup> Anne and Margaret’s purposes in calling attention to his deformities is not to highlight their disgust for his physical appearance, but instead to call him out for his responsibility in murdering their respective husbands and sons. What is interesting to note within the text is the way that Shakespeare intertwines Richard’s actions with his disabled outward appearance. By doing this, he leaves no room for the audience to feel sympathy for Richard as they have been swayed from the very start to believe that he will amount to nothing more than the story’s villain. This conscious intertwining of disability with evil, functions exceptionally within the trope of the rage-filled

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<sup>105</sup> Tracy Sinclaire, “Why Shakespeare’s Richard III became a controversial villain,” *Theatre, BBC Culture*, July 18, 2022, accessed March 22, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20220718-why-shakespeares-richard-iii-became-a-controversial-villain>.

<sup>106</sup> Shakespeare, 553.

<sup>107</sup> Shakespeare, 553.

recluse as the only qualifier is that the character remains “isolated by society and mad at the world because of the unfairness of their disability.”<sup>108</sup>

Much like Laura, the character of Richard III has been played almost exclusively by able-bodied actors. But, while the inclusion of disabled actors in the portrayal of Laura serves to bring disability out of the stereotyped realm by applying it to individual actor’s own disabled bodies (regardless of the critical reception), the rage-filled recluse presents the issue of whether or not this type of character trope should continue to be represented on stage at all. Regardless of the lived experience of the actor playing the role, the trope itself serves to perpetuate the ableist idea that equates disability as something negative. When a non-disabled actor takes on these roles, the conversation turns away from the issues inherent in the writing of the disabled character and toward the virtuosity of the actor playing the role. When a disabled actor takes on these roles, it further reinforces the false narratives of the angry disabled person who despises the world because of their disability. Because of this, roles like Richard III, which continue to be canonized, only serve to further disadvantage disabled individuals, and provide no opportunity for them to use theatre as a vehicle for fighting against the false narratives that are continually valued by the canon.

### **3.3 Boom Goes the Canon: Expanding the Canon for Inclusivity**

So, what is to be done with the canon? I do not wish to propose its eradication; rather, I hope to make a case for the expansion of it. The issue with the western canon as a static entity is that it seldom creates room for new works and perspectives. As a closed system, the canon’s only function is to uphold specific aesthetic values determined by the dominant power

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<sup>108</sup> Raanan.

structures within a given society. The practice of the canon as a closed system further alienates and devalues any works that have been ignored by or exist outside of it. Furthermore, it rejects the notion that aesthetic values change along with society. To be able to continue utilizing the canon as a pedagogical tool within actor-training programs, we must first be willing to acknowledge the canon as it currently exists and constantly interrogate it alongside the changing demographics and needs of our students.

With the reclamation of the canon as an amorphous, ever-changing, and open system, many playwrights have turned to adaptation as a tool for writing themselves and other marginalized people back into the stories that have excluded them for so long. Playwright Luis Alfaro has successfully reclaimed the great Greek tragedies for the Latinx community.<sup>109</sup> Similarly, playwright Mike Lew has taken on the burden of reworking Shakespeare's *Richard III* to include a more nuanced and three-dimensional retelling of the story in his play *Teenage Dick*.

In *Teenage Dick* the story of Richard III moves to high school, where the title character is constantly picked on for his disability by his popular non-disabled peers and must decide what measures are worth taking when seeking the role of his class president. Pitted against his arch nemesis Eddie (the current class president), Richard does what he needs to in order to outrank the one person who has continually made his life at school a living hell. By the end of the play Richard, "like all teenagers, and all despots, ...is faced with the hardest question of all: is it better to be loved, or feared?"<sup>110</sup> The conscious reworking of the play within the confines of

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<sup>109</sup> See: Luis Alfaro, *The Greek Trilogy of Luis Alfaro: Electricidad, Oedipus El Rey, Mojada*, ed. Rosa Andujar (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022).

<sup>110</sup> "Teenage Dick Synopsis," Origin Theatrical, accessed March 22, 2023, <https://origintheatrical.com.au/work/12507>.

adolescence and high school allow Richard to be forgiven by the audience as they are constantly presented with the societal reasons as to why he does the things that he does. His actions in this retelling are always in response, in reaction, and always born of the wrongdoings done to him.

What is interesting about Lew's play is his ability to rework a canonized text within the confines of society's changing values and aesthetics. Lew's play lends itself readily to Tobin Sieber's idea of a Disability Aesthetic, which "broadens the inclusion of disability found throughout modern art by affirming that disability may operate both as a critical framework for questioning aesthetic presuppositions in the history of art and as a value in its own right, important to future conceptions of what art is."<sup>111</sup> In his introduction to the play, Lew explains that the play is meant to not only "challenge Shakespeare's conception that Richard's disability makes him inherently evil"<sup>112</sup> but to also overwrite the modern day conception that "all disabled people are a metaphor for transcendence."<sup>113</sup> In his play, Lew takes on many of the aforementioned tropes of disability and challenges them through a utilization of the social model of disability, which asserts that society itself is the problem that needs to be overcome. By dismantling the previous conceptions of Richard as inherently evil, Lew's Richard is able to re-center the disabled individuals as the tellers of their own stories.<sup>114</sup> He concludes his play by resisting the notion that disability is something that must be solved by the end of the play. Instead, he pointedly highlights that it is society that needs to change their negative views of

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<sup>111</sup> Tobin, Siebers, "Disability Aesthetics," *PMLA* 120, no. 2 (2005): 546, accessed March 22, 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25486181>.

<sup>112</sup> Mike Lew, *Teenage Dick* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2019), 4.

<sup>113</sup> Lew, 4

<sup>114</sup> Lew, 5-8.

disability. The final line of the play is spoken after Richard finally exacts his revenge on Eddie by running him over and severing his spinal cord:

EDDIE: I can't feel my legs, I can't feel my legs...

RICHARD: Now who's the cripple?

ELIZABETH: Richard. What have you done?

RICHARD: The only thing left to do. You already decided who I was before it was mine to choose it, so what else could I do but act out the role that's been writ? If that makes me the *villain*, welllll.... You already knew I wasn't the hero from the moment I came limping your way. So, close your eyes and forget about me. You always do anyhow.<sup>115</sup>

Lew utilizes this final moment of the play to remind the audience of the canonized conception of Richard III. He calls on them to actively help overwrite the negative narratives of disability that the canon continually circulates. He acknowledges that this play is only the start of the conversation on disability narrative revision in theatre and offers a direct transformative moment that transitions the audience member from passive consumer to active participant. In this moment he leaves the audience member to sit in the discomfort of their ableism and the ableist society that leads someone to commit such horrible acts. By calling attention to ableism as the issue, Lew empowers his audience to continue the work of overwriting the many negative narratives of disability outside of the confines of his play.

Plays like Lew's and Martyna Majok's 2016 play *Cost of Living*, which features disabled actors portraying nuanced disabled characters grappling with issues of class, race, and isolation, give rise to a new type of theatrical canon created specifically with disabled practitioners in mind. In their article "'Frenemies' of the Canon: Our Two Decades of Studying and Teaching

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<sup>115</sup> Lew, 72.

Disability in Drama and Performance,” Ann Fox and Carrie Sandahl echo my earlier sentiments about the future of the canon as an ever-expanding system. They both point to the importance of canonical texts of the past as necessary tools for deepening conversations around disability and assert that the “works that have been canonized can be very moving, and still have deep resonance for us today, even if we also understand [that] they can be problematic.”<sup>116</sup> As educators, it is our responsibility to continually examine and expand upon the canon in order to provide our students with the most inclusive, equitable, and robust education possible. As we are in control of the specific grading systems employed within our classrooms, we are also in control of the canon(s) that we choose to share with our students. In order to truly democratize our classrooms, it is also important to survey our students and understand the types of roles and characters that they wish to explore and engage with. In the case of our disabled students, we must do our due diligence to incorporate plays about the richness and vastness of the disability experience within our curriculums. Within this work we must also ensure that the plays we choose move beyond the disability tropes of the past and present fully realized characters whose identity includes disability, rather than characters who are defined by disability.

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<sup>116</sup> Ann M. Fox and Carrie Sandahl, “‘Frenemies’ of the Canon: Our Two Decades of Studying and Teaching Disability in Drama and Performance,” in *Troubling Traditions: Canonicity, Theatre, and Performance in the US*, ed. Lindsey Mantoan, Matthew Moore, and Angela Farr Schiller (New York: Routledge, 2022), 150.

## **CONCLUSION: CONSIDERATIONS FOR FURTHER “ADA”PTING ACTING PEDAGOGIES**

As the emphasis on EDI initiatives in higher education becomes increasingly more important to the sustainability of the health of an institution, many theatre educators and practitioners have begun to interrogate the ways in which their own pedagogical practices contribute to the reinforcement of a larger exclusionary system of education. This interrogation is an integral first step towards democratizing education for all, as it awakens the idea that educators have the agency and ability to transform their classrooms into equitable and inclusive learning environments, regardless of the larger broken systems with which they function within. In this thesis, I have argued that achieving true equity, diversity, and inclusion within higher education relies on returning the agency of this work to the educators as well as the students. I assert that in order to make meaningful changes at the institutional level—that is—to fix the system, it is imperative to work from the ground up and service the two constituencies who matter most in the educational model.

Too often I hear institutions claim that they are student-centered and place the student at the forefront of all that they do, yet these same institutions still rely on teaching systems that negatively impact students, such as the standard A-F grading system and a curriculum that reinforces the importance of an exclusionary western canon. These static systems have existed as the backbone of the American education system for nearly a century with little to no revision and continue to disadvantage students with disabilities at an alarmingly higher rate than any other minority group in America. According to a 2015-16 study from the National Center for Education Statistics, students with disabilities made up only 19.4% of the overall undergraduate



student population in this country, compared to 80.6% of students without a disability.<sup>117</sup> This clearly demonstrates that we as a country are doing wrong by our students with disabilities by not providing them the necessary support and pathways they need to succeed at the post-secondary level.

This exclusion from equitable higher education opportunities further disadvantages individuals with disabilities within society by contributing to the false narratives about disabled individuals' incapability to join the workforce and contribute meaningfully to society. This disparity in educational access has led to an alarmingly low rate of persons with disability in the professional workforce. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, only 19.3% of persons who reported having a disability were employed in 2019.<sup>118</sup> By examining these statistics, it is clear to see that our society continues to function on ableist notions of disability, which unfortunately bleed into our classrooms and continue to be upheld by our educational model. In order to break through these ableist barriers inherent within our society, I assert the importance of adopting the social model of disability as a framework for re-envisioning the educational system. Understanding that this is a huge undertaking, I have chosen to focus my work specifically within college-level actor-training programs, where principles of self-reflexivity and autonomy already exist at the core of their practice.

As briefly mentioned above, much of the work outlined in this thesis argues for the revision of specific pedagogical systems (i.e., the grading system and the codified canon) in

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<sup>117</sup> "Fast Facts: Students with Disabilities," National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 2018, accessed on March 21, 2023, <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=60>.

<sup>118</sup> "Disability Resources: Statistics," U.S. Department of Labor, United States of America Department of Labor, accessed on March 21, 2023, <https://www.dol.gov/general/topic/disability/statistics>.

order to bring equity and access to our classrooms for students with disabilities. A guiding source for this thesis has been Petronilla Whitfield's book *Inclusivity and Equality in Performance Training: Teaching and Learning for Neuro and Physical Diversity*, which functions "as a devised and collected manifesto for the emancipated classroom."<sup>119</sup> In this book sixteen authors, most of whom are disabled themselves, explore their own experiences devising practical pedagogies for students with varying disabilities. Whitfield notes in her introduction that the book's purpose is to challenge "ableist models of teaching...[and] address the barriers that can undermine those with dis/ability or difference, [and highlight] how equality of opportunity can increase innovation and enrich the creative work [done in the classroom]."<sup>120</sup> While this book focuses on the specific curricular work done with disabled students in mind in relation to actor-training techniques, it left me wondering whether or not these amendments to pedagogy could function successfully when placed into context with the formalized higher education actor-training programs in this country. Recognizing that many of the practitioners who contributed to the book teach outside of the U.S. educational system, my aim here was to explore the ways in which educators can evoke systemic changes from the comfort of their own classrooms.

Expanding on the idea of the "theatre classroom as a site for revolutionary practice,"<sup>121</sup> I contend that the only way to achieve equity in the theatre classroom is by centering pedagogy through an individualized approach. This student-centered approach advocates for student

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<sup>119</sup> Kevin Kemler, Review of *Inclusivity and Equality in Performance Training: Teaching and Learning for Neuro and Physical Diversity*, by Petronilla Whitfield, *Voice and Speech Review* (2022): 1, DOI: 10.1080/23268263.2022.2138114

<sup>120</sup> Petronilla Whitfield, "Introduction," in *Inclusivity and Equality in Performance Training: Teaching and Learning for Neuro and Physical Diversity*, ed. Petronilla Whitfield (New York: Routledge, 2022), 6.

<sup>121</sup> Kemler, 1.

agency within the learning process and allows the student to actively participate in the understanding of the material as well as the creation of their own knowledge production. In order to overwrite the one-size-fits-all approach that dominates the pedagogical landscape, I have argued that educators must tackle the existing systems of oppression present within the educational model that resist the notion of individualized learning plans.

It is my sincere hope that this thesis and the ideas within can be utilized alongside practical guides, like Whitfield's book, to ensure true equity of experience for all students enrolled in actor-training programs. By examining how the current quantitative measures of grading serve to alienate and disengage students from a desire to learn, I turn to more inclusive practices of grading that center qualitative feedback and student feedback in an effort to reignite a student's passion for learning and their willingness to engage with the material presented to them in the classroom. Turning to qualitative assessment is a small and accessible change available to all educators that re-centers the student within the pedagogical model by creating a student-mentor relationship that is developed on trust, autonomy, and agency. Furthermore, qualitative grading practices provide students a linear narrative of individual success that carries over into the professional workforce, which relies on similar systems of assessment. The adoption of a qualitative grading practice also serves to break down the ableist barriers inherent within our educational system as it highlights the system as the inherent issue over an individual's perceived ability to succeed.

Once we are able to reignite a passion for learning in our students by supporting them through personalized feedback and assessment and recentering the importance of their individual growth, it is necessary to ensure that they are represented positively within the

curriculum that we choose to teach. By emphasizing the ways in which the idea of a static western canon serves to exclude the minority experience, we can begin to revise and expand our own conceptions of the canon as educators and work to find ways to teach classic texts with inclusivity in mind. One suggestion I have made is to utilize adaptations of canonical texts, which present disabled characters in a nuanced and positive light. In actor-training and the theatrical profession at-large, it is exceedingly important to ensure that individuals with disabilities see themselves included in the tradition of theatre-making. This call to expanding the canon is integral to supporting our students in actor-training programs, as many of the methodologies and characters represented in the theatrical canon exclude disabled individuals from participating in the work as fully as their non-disabled peers. Reclaiming the canon for our students also serves to further overwrite negative narratives and portrayals of disability as they currently exist within our field.

My aim in bridging the gap between the inclusive acting pedagogies presented in books like Whitfield's with the necessary revision of systemic barriers inherent within our education system, is to show how small changes to personal pedagogies can lead to large scale changes at the institutional and systemic levels. Working administratively in higher education admissions and recruitment, I am constantly faced with arguments from colleagues about how their specific institution is not set up to support students with varying disabilities and needs. These arguments, however, are ungrounded and only serve to perpetuate the ableism inherent within higher education. To diversify the demographics of the higher educational landscape, we must first overcome the notion that the responsibility of equity, diversity, and inclusion lies within the sole purview of the institution, or system, itself. By returning agency and autonomy to our

educators and students, we can begin to dismantle the systemic barriers to access that exist within the American higher education system and work to cultivate educational spaces that function on the principles of democracy, equity, and inclusivity for all students, including those with disabilities.

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