

From Directing to Accompanying: Centering Disability Justice in Theater Pedagogy

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Abstract

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In theater education, students otherwise marginalized within pK-12 schooling—namely, disabled students of color—can express themselves through multiple modalities (Collins, 2011), build interdependent agency (Zdeblick, 2023), and find homecoming in one another’s stories (Kafai, 2021). However, contrary to what theater educators might wish to believe (Finneran & Freebody, 2015; Neelands, 2004), ableism and racism circulate within normative (i.e., US, white, upper-middle class, liberal, twenty-first century) pK-12 theater education contexts, impeding these kinds of liberatory processes. In this critical ethnography (Madison, 2020), grounded in Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit; Annamma et al., 2013), I explored how expectations about “quality” circulate within normative theater education, maintaining the arts as the property of whiteness and ability (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016; Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011a) and incentivizing particular teacher-student relationships and pedagogies. To illuminate this process, I engaged a group of theater

educators, high school theater students, and adults labeled with intellectual and developmental disabilities in multimodal, collaborative narrative inquiry (Faulkner, 2006). Then, to disrupt this process, drawing on techniques and practices of community based co-design (Ishimaru, 2020a), I worked with a subset of participants (the teaching team) to plan and facilitate a six-week theater residency at a local inclusive pK-12 school. This program was rooted in principles of Disability Justice (Sins Invalid, 2019) and culminated with students performing their original adaptation of the Disability Justice picture book, *We Move Together*, onstage. I conducted retrospective cycles of inductive and deductive qualitative coding (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2021) of participants' artwork and recordings of teaching team meetings, classes, interviews with teachers and students, and informal debriefs to explore how participants understood normative "quality" constructions and collaborated to disrupt them. This study illuminated how participants negotiated their conceptualizations of ableism and racism—including their complicity in these systems—and how multimodal collaborative storytelling supported them in navigating through complexity. From analysis, I further identified a set of "quality" norms, common to normative theater education, articulated by participants and a set of reimagined "quality" norms, rooted in Disability Justice, developed by our teaching team. I explored how a mixed-ability and racially diverse teaching team designed for Disability Justice in theater education and worked alongside multiply marginalized disabled students of color through pedagogies of accompaniment, engaging with individuals as artists, bringing stories to life in interaction, and creating a vessel for collective creativity. This study offers an intersectional analysis of how ableism and racism can circulate even within creative educational spaces facilitated by educators committed to social justice. Further, it offers an example of how, through slowing down, working collaboratively, and engaging with the work of Disability Justice arts-activists, theater educators can imagine and create more liberatory spaces. It offers a framework for educators interested in creating art with multiply marginalized disabled students—pedagogies of accompaniment—and considerations for how to implement this framework in practice. Finally, this

study asks scholars to embrace a related framework—methodologies of accompaniment—to move with participants in more liberatory ways.

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Dedication

For my brother Walt, with all my love.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	i
Dedication	ii
Table of Contents	iii
List of Tables	iv
List of Figures	v
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework	6
Chapter 3: Research Methods	34
Chapter 4: Constructions of “Quality” in Normative Theater Education.....	73
Chapter 5: Rooting “Quality” in Disability Justice, Reimagining Theater Education.....	119
Chapter 6: Pedagogies of Accompaniment	154
Chapter 7: Discussion	200
References	222
Appendix A <i>BAT Story Circle Curriculum</i>	244
Appendix B <i>Composite Narrative from Story Circles</i>	246
Appendix C <i>Data Generation</i>	248
Appendix D <i>Codebook for 2nd Cycle Deductive Coding</i>	251
Appendix E <i>Director’s Note from the We Move Together Program</i>	269

List of Tables

Table 1 <i>BAT Teaching Artists</i>	44
Table 2 <i>BAT High School Interns</i>	44
Table 3 <i>Connections Participants</i>	45
Table 4 <i>ATA Student Participants</i>	64

List of Figures

Figure 1 <i>Conceptualizing “Quality” in Normative Theater Education</i>	23
Figure 2 <i>Reconceptualizing “Quality” in Theater Education, as Rooted in Disability Justice and Cultivated Through Pedagogies of Accompaniment</i>	32
Figure 3 <i>Heather and an ATA Student During We Move Together</i>	53
Figure 4 <i>Chloe During We Move Together</i>	56
Figure 5 <i>Emir’s Art Piece</i>	57
Figure 6 <i>Jason Introducing We Move Together</i>	60
Figure 7 <i>Design Framework for Disability Justice in Theater Education</i>	62
Figure 8 <i>Timeline of Data Generation Activities</i>	68
Figure 9 <i>Rose’s Self Portrait</i>	81
Figure 10 <i>Diagram of a Normal “Theater Kid”</i>	88
Figure 11 <i>Grace’s Self Portrait, Depicting How She Felt as a Shy Young Theater Student</i>	95
Figure 12 <i>Self-Portrait of Maddie Zdeblick, Created During a Connections Story Circle</i>	122
Figure 13 <i>Collaborative Collage Created by ATA Students During Our First Class on 6/28/23</i>	131
Figure 14 <i>Lobby Display for We Move Together, Depicting Students’ Initial Brainstorm (Center), Drawings Inspired by Action Verbs, and Photos from Rehearsals</i>	155
Figure 15 <i>The Cover of the We Move Together Program</i>	156
Figure 16 <i>Students Run Onstage Following the Statement, “We Move Fast!”</i>	157
Figure 17 <i>Elements of Pedagogies of Accompaniment, Arranged by Level of Focus</i>	159
Figure 18 <i>Preshow Playlist for We Move Together</i>	162
Figure 19 <i>Greg’s Initial Design for the Side Panels ATA Students Might Paint</i>	165
Figure 20 <i>Rowan, a 10th Grade ATA Student, Painting One of the Side Panels</i>	165
Figure 21 <i>The Side Panels, that ATA Students Painted and Greg Flicked with Water, Drying in the Sun</i>	166

Figure 22 <i>The Side Panels, with the Addition of Greg’s Black Outlines, Installed Onstage</i>	166
Figure 23 <i>Mark Presents His Game to the Audience</i>	170
Figure 24 <i>Scene 3: Platform Maze, an Excerpt from the We Move Together Script</i>	171
Figure 25 <i>Mark “Checks in” as “Bad”</i>	172
Figure 26 <i>Group Drawing Created by Elementary Students on 7/5/23</i>	176
Figure 27 <i>Mark’s Initial Drawing of the Platform Maze, Created 7/12/23</i>	178
Figure 28 <i>Jae’s Re-Creation of Mark’s Platform Maze Design, Using a Graphics Program</i>	178
Figure 29 <i>A Photo of Our ATA Daily Schedule</i>	179
Figure 30 <i>Still of Mark and Hanna from 7/19/23 Class Recording at ATA</i>	180
Figure 31 <i>Mark and Hanna Create a Secret Handshake</i>	180
Figure 32 <i>Switch Controller Option #1</i>	184
Figure 33 <i>Switch Controller Option #2</i>	184
Figure 34 <i>Hanna Illustrating How Mark Reached One Thumb Up and One to the Side by the End of Our Process</i>	186
Figure 35 <i>Still from The Train Scene in We Move Together, Featuring Students Tyler, Brian, and Bex</i> ...	188
Figure 36 <i>Still from The Train Scene in We Move Together, Featuring Students Kevin, Tyler, and Bex</i> ..	189
Figure 37 <i>Scene 5: The Train, an Excerpt from the We Move Together Script</i>	190
Figure 38 <i>8.5 by 11 Brainstorming Paper Labeled with the Verb “Play”</i>	194
Figure 39 <i>A Drawing Brian Created of Himself Conducting to Celebrate His Pride in the Final Performance</i>	196

Chapter 1: Introduction

“Seeing the people on stage just doing their own thing, and the audience was totally accepting and loving and supportive of it. I think that's what moved [the audience] ... there's no one right way to act or to deliver a line... there's no template for just fricking theater. You've had people do it their way in the past, but there's always room for other ways.” – Jason¹, 17

Reflecting on the audience’s reaction to watching a racially and neurodiverse² group of K-12 students perform their original play, Jason mused about the boundaries erected around what constitutes good theater and the power of defying them. A high school student himself, Jason had taken time out of his summer vacation to participate in this study as a teaching artist, co-designing and co-facilitating these students’ creative process. As a young queer Black man and artist who had been evaluated for disability, Jason had experienced pK-12 schooling at the intersection of multiple axes of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). He had seen firsthand how whiteness and ability operated, positioning some ways of being as normal and others as deviant (Annamma et al., 2013; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011a) and punishing students for “doing their own thing.” With his background, Jason could appreciate how remarkable it was to witness these multiply marginalized students onstage, moving together in difference (Sins Invalid, 2019), supported by a loving community.

This kind of theater education matters. It can ignite creativity, cultivate joy, and foster belonging, particularly for those multiply marginalized disabled³ students who continuously encounter oppression in schools. These students can flourish through theater classes that celebrate differences,

¹ All names have been changed to protect participants’ privacy.

² I follow autistic self-advocates in embracing the neurodiversity paradigm, the idea that everyone’s minds work differently and that variations in neurology are natural and desirable (Walker, 2021). I use the term “neurodiverse” here to indicate that within this group, students’ minds worked differently (e.g., multiple “neurodivergent” students had autism or ADHD labels, other “neurotypical” students had been positioned as “normal” within school) without putting a value judgment on these varying ways of being.

³ I use identity-first language (e.g., disabled people) to indicate my understanding of disability as a key aspect of identity and culture (Andrews et al., 2019). However, I recognize the lack of consensus on person-first (e.g., people with disabilities) vs. identity-first language among disabled individuals and uplift the importance of identifying individuals in the way they wish to be identified.

encourage play, invite critical thinking (Eisner, 1998), and provoke dreaming towards more just futures (Greene, 2000). Through theater, multiply marginalized students can “generate new, liberatory pathways on which to travel” (Kafai, 2021, p. 93). In supporting not only verbal, but also visual and kinesthetic communication, theater can offer speaking and nonspeaking students new tools for meaning-making and self-expression (Collins, 2011; Kleekamp, 2020; Kliewer et al., 2006). It can foster disabled students’ interdependent agency (Zdeblick, 2023). And students and educators with dominant identities can, through theater, cultivate the kind of critical consciousness needed to accompany multiply marginalized students along these paths (see e.g., Powers & Duffy, 2016; Tanner, 2018). Theater offers a platform for learning from others’ stories and perspectives: the more varied these stories and perspectives are in theater education, the richer everyone’s learning might be (Sandahl, 2005a).

Disability Justice artist-activists have demonstrated the transformative power of radically accessible theater (Kafai, 2021; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018b; Sins Invalid, 2019). Through performance collective Sins Invalid, queer disabled artists of color like Patty Berne and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha have created whole worlds within shows, worlds that welcome multiply marginalized audiences and performers as their full selves, provoke deep critiques of structural ableism and racism, and cultivate new or deepened commitments to interdependence and community care (Berne, 2015; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018b). Theater educators want to be part of this larger liberatory movement, to teach in ways that resist oppression and support marginalized students in thinking critically, imagining, and creating (Stovall, 2018).

However, enter a typical pK-12 theater classroom, and you will likely encounter something that feels very different from a Sins Invalid show. You might hear educators extolling the “universal” nature of Shakespeare’s language (Dyches, 2017) or training students to stand in “actor neutral,” code for an upright and motionless stance inaccessible to some bodies and “neutral” for even fewer (Sandahl,

2005). You might hear teachers coaching students to sound more “natural,” “free,” or “articulate,” while offering their highest praise to students who sound like white,⁴ nondisabled,⁵ native English speakers (Cahill & Hamel, 2022; Lyiscott, 2014; McAllister-Viel, 2021). These teaching artists might recognize and regret that their students are disproportionately white and nondisabled – students of color⁶ and disabled students are often excluded from the arts education their white, nondisabled peers receive (Hourigan & Hammel, 2017; Kraehe et al., 2016). However, if pushed to teach more disabled students or students of color, these same teachers might mumble about a lack of appropriate training or expertise. Educators might worry that including these students would mean lowering their artistic standards, potentially disappointing returning students, their parents, and other paying audience members. And, they might expect the few disabled students of color who *are* in their classes to make only “cute,” “inspiring,” or “therapeutic” art (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018), or risk being labeled inappropriate or even criminal (Chan, 2007). These are not hypothetical musings; I have observed, felt, and done all of these things myself in my ten years as a pK-12 theater educator.

Perhaps because theater educators find ourselves in under resourced, underfunded settings that consistently devalue the arts (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018), because we believe – wrongly – that since theater encourages empathy and perspective-taking, “all theater is theater for social justice” (Finneran & Freebody, 2015), or perhaps simply because we ourselves are an overwhelmingly white and nondisabled group (Eisner & Day, 2004; Loeppky, 2021), theater educators evade critically examining our own teaching. Racism and ableism circulate in our classrooms, as they circulate in all US nation state educational contexts, colluding to define norms and expectations (Annamma et al., 2013). Without a strong theoretical understanding of how ableism and racism shape what is taught in typical US theater

⁴ Following Gotanda (1991), I do not capitalize “white” or “whiteness” to avoid further privileging this already dominant identity.

⁵ I use the term “nondisabled” to center disability (Linton, 1998b).

⁶ Following Annamma and Handy (Annamma & Handy, 2021), I avoid capitalizing “students of color,” and instead capitalize the specific identities represented within this grouping (e.g., Black, Brown).

classrooms, theater educators and our students lack the tools to resist. Consequently, without further research, theater education will continue to fall short of its liberatory potential, and worse, reinforce systemic oppression. Importantly, while Disability Justice emphasizes the leadership of the most impacted (Sins Invalid, 2019), we cannot expect multiply marginalized disabled individuals to labor alone to unravel these systems. Ultimately, we who have benefited from the current system—researchers and theater educators—need to take responsibility for examining how ableism and racism circulate implicitly (for us) in theater education’s curriculum. Only armed with this knowledge might we accompany (Mei-Singh, 2021) disabled youth of color and disabled self-advocates in creatively expanding and transforming this curriculum towards Disability Justice (Sins Invalid, 2019).

In this critical ethnography, grounded in Disability Justice (Sins Invalid, 2019) and Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit; Annamma et al., 2013), and in partnership with several community organizations, each of whom specialized in either theater education or disability inclusion, I explored how disabled and nondisabled teaching artists and disabled self-advocates could work in solidarity with multiply marginalized disabled students to resist structural ableism and racism and embody Disability Justice in theater education. To resist the dominant paradigm in educational research, I engaged with participants not as “subjects,” but as experts on their own lived experiences with invaluable wisdom to share (Lester & Nusbaum, 2021; Paris & Winn, 2014). Participants included professional teaching artists and high school students (experts in theater education), disabled adults (experts in self-advocacy and understanding ableism), and multiply marginalized disabled students (those most impacted by ableism and racism as they circulate in educational theater). Over the course of a summer, I spent over 300 hours in these communities, investigating norms of theater education and imagining new pathways forward. Our summer culminated in the students’ performance of *We Move Together*, an original, 30-minute play, inspired by the Disability Justice picture book of the same name (Fritsch & McGuire, 2021). To facilitate accessibility and destabilize the traditional power dynamic between researcher and

researched, I employed an array of arts-based, multimodal, qualitative research methods to document and analyze findings.

This dissertation will demonstrate how intentionally designed theater education can both powerfully expand multiply marginalized disabled students' educational possibilities and disrupt constraining ideas about "quality theater" that impede all of us from encountering a more diverse set of experiences, perspectives, bodies, and minds onstage. Ultimately, I hope to encourage all educators and researchers to embrace the vital contributions of disabled people—in particular, multiply marginalized disabled people— to understanding and transforming structural injustice in education and elsewhere.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

To design for Disability Justice (Sins Invalid, 2019) in theater education, we must first understand how ableism and racism circulate through US schooling (Annamma et al., 2013), affording and constraining how teachers teach and students learn (Esmonde & Booker, 2017), with particularly harmful consequences for disabled students of color (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). In this chapter, I explore what Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit; Annamma et al., 2013) and its theoretical antecedents (e.g., Critical Disability Studies, Black Feminisms, CRT, etc.) reveal about how theater education has on occasion disrupted—but perhaps more often reproduced—these systems. Specifically, I argue that through framing “quality” theater as the property of whiteness (Harris, 1993; Thandeka, 2018) and ability (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011a), US pK-12 theater education has devalued and sometimes wholly excluded multiply marginalized students’ contributions. To imagine and animate alternatives, I will then turn to the Disability Justice theorizing and performance activism of Sins Invalid (2019). Holding Disability Justice principles alongside DisCrit, I will imagine how educators and scholars might transform theater education toward sustaining justice for all students, particularly disabled students of color. Drawing on abolitionist research methodologies (Mei-Singh, 2021) and analyses of allyship in disability arts contexts (Hadley, 2020), I will offer pedagogies of accompaniment as a framework for understanding how theater educators with dominant identities might move alongside and in support of multiply marginalized students through this reimagined form of theater education.

Disability Critical Race Theory

I framed this study through Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit), a framework that exposes the interconnectedness of racism and ableism in education, offering scholars tools to document and disrupt their material impacts on students (Annamma et al., 2013). This theory emerged from decades of community organizing and academic scholarship. As I trace this theory’s origins and describe its key

tenets, I attend particularly to ideas and constructs that resonate with opportunities and challenges of theater education.

DisCrit emerged from decades of interrelated academic and community theorizing. Building on nearly a century of organizing by Deaf and disabled activists, and inspired by the gains of the United States civil rights movement, the western Disability Rights movement gained traction in the late 1960s (Francis & Silvers, 2000; L. Patterson, 2018). Key to the movement's success was the social model of disability: the concept that impairments (differences in how people think, move, and behave) only become disabilities when confronted with inaccessible contexts (Shakespeare, 2013). From this perspective, disability rights activists argued that individual differences did not disable; contexts did. In the mid-1980s, scholars codified and embraced the social model of disability in academic scholarship. Within this burgeoning field known as disability studies (Oliver, 2013), scholars were not interested in "fixing" or "curing" disabled people but rather in reaching across disciplinary divides to study disability as a political, cultural, and social issue (Linton, 1998a). As the field expanded within the academy, disabled activists continued to evolve the theory guiding their practice. From the anti-capitalist, intersectional theorizing of Black feminist activists and scholars (see e.g., Lorde, 1984; Combahee River Collective, 1986; Crenshaw, 1991, etc.), disabled activists at the intersection of multiple axes of oppression (e.g., racism *and* ableism, ableism *and* cisheteropatriarchy) surfaced how the Disability Rights movement had supported white people with mobility impairments who could achieve access through the legal system, but failed to support others (Berne, 2015). In parallel, disability studies began to center intersectional oppressions (e.g., Kafer, 2013a; McRuer, 2006), trouble binaries between disabled/ nondisabled and individual/ social disability constructions (e.g., Kafer, 2013a; Titchkosky, 2011), and frame disability as a site of embodied knowledge (i.e., a way of understanding the world differently; Siebers, 2019).

As disability studies evolved in the twenty-first century, scholars began to consider what this growing field might offer to the historically deficit-focused (and therefore disabling) field of special education (Baglieri et al., 2011). Building on critical special education scholarship, which departed from traditional (i.e., positivist, pathologizing) approaches to special education research to examine how cultural and historical constructions of disability supported unjust labeling, segregation, and discipline practices which disproportionately targeted students of color (see e.g., Artiles, 2011; Artiles et al., 2002; McDermott et al., 2006; Shealey et al., 2011; Watts & Erevelles, 2004; Beratan, 2006; Baker, 2002), Disability Studies in Education (DSE) emerged (Ware, 2005). From this field came the recommendation that special educators “presume competence,” meaning they should expect disabled students’ agency, learn about how disabled students experience their environments, encourage disabled students’ self-advocacy, and question the social construct of normalcy (Biklen & Burke, 2006).

In parallel, scholars began to apply ideas from Critical Race Theory (CRT) within educational contexts to help illuminate why US schooling continued to perpetuate racial inequities (Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT had emerged in the early 1980s, motivated by Civil Rights activism and Derrick Bell’s scholarship (see e.g., Bell, 1980, 1989), to explain how racism continued to circulate through institutional structures (Crenshaw, 2011; Matsuda, 1987). CRT in education strengthened and supported growing recommendations that educators engage youth of color in asset pedagogies, celebrating their unique, positive contributions (see e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2000; Paris, 2012, etc. Moll, 2010). Though both DSE and CRT in education offered valuable insights for scholars and educators seeking justice with disabled youth and youth of color, neither theory adequately addressed the oppressions faced by multiply marginalized disabled youth of color in schools.

In 2013, Annamma, Connor, and Ferri proposed bringing CRT in conversation with DSE to establish a new intersectional framework for educational research: Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit). DisCrit contends with ableism and racism as two complementary, normalizing forces circulating

within schooling. By establishing a mythical “normal,” “smart,” and “productive” bodymind,⁷ and ranking and categorizing individuals based on their proximity to that norm, ableism polices all students’ and teachers’ voices, behaviors, emotions, and imaginations (Lewis, 2022). Similarly, racism upholds whiteness, while subjugating all other ways of being. Whiteness—invented in part to disenfranchise poor whites, divide American immigrants against one another, and force assimilation to a single American norm—causes even white children anger, anxiety, and loss (Thandeka, 2018). These systems of oppression inform institutional policies and interpersonal interactions in ways that materially harm individuals, especially disabled students of color. Working in tandem, ableism and racism justify pathologizing, segregating, and withholding rights and resources from these students. Often labeled “troublemakers” (Shalaby, 2017), disabled students of color are disproportionately restrained, secluded, and excluded from schools (Annamma et al., 2013; Annamma & Morrison, 2018). Yet, for many educators and students with dominant identities, ableism and racism remain invisible. Implicit bias, fear, and false beliefs, such as believing some children too young to understand ableism and racism (Beneke & Cheatham, 2020), support educators with dominant identities in evading how ableism and racism show up in their classrooms. Through a DisCrit lens, working towards social justice⁸ and liberation⁹ in education means recognizing and disrupting ableism and racism as they play out across structural, institutional, and interpersonal levels.

DisCrit offers seven tenets to guide scholars along this journey. Briefly, these tenets assert: 1) racism and ableism co-construct “normalcy;” 2) identities are multidimensional; 3) race and disability

⁷ I follow Price (2015) and use the term bodymind to signal how, although the English language separates bodies from minds, they are both intertwined and constructed within systems of power. This manifests both socially (e.g., a Black man rocking back and forth might be “mentally disturbed,” while a white boy with the same embodiments might be “high energy”) and in terms of individual experience. For example, when I worry about something, my pulse increases. I start to sweat. Would you say my anxiety is in my mind or in my body?

⁸ I follow Tuck and Yang (2018) in using the term “social justice” to signal “a *choice away*” from pathologizing individual differences and advocating for a one-size-fits-all, linear educational process (p. 5).

⁹ Working towards liberation means “supporting the capacity of historically oppressed and marginalized peoples to think and create” (Stovall, 2018, p. 52).

labels are social constructions with material impacts; 4) scholars should center historically marginalized perspectives; 5) the legal and historic implications of race and disability labels matter; 6) whiteness and ability can function as property; and 7) scholars must support activism and resistance (Annamma et al., 2013). Though all seven tenets supported my inquiry, I foregrounded tenets one, four, and seven in my exploration of theater education's potential to disrupt ableism and racism. To understand why and how theater education has more often reinscribed than disrupted these systems, I then drew on tenet six ("whiteness and ability as property"). Whiteness and ability function as property by conferring exclusive economic benefits on those who can claim these labels (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011a). From the beginnings of colonialist imperialism, to be white was to have the right to claim property (R. P. Jones, 2023). Though who counts as white has changed over time, making whiteness "hard to pin down" (Davis, 2018, p. 121), whiteness has always been associated with ownership (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018), and its economic interests continue to be protected by US law (Harris, 1993). Ability has functioned similarly, granting those closest to a mythical "normal" bodymind additional rights and economic opportunities (Baynton, 2001). There are material benefits to being regarded as nondisabled (e.g., the uncontested right to vote, being seen as an authority on one's own bodymind, etc.). By recognizing whiteness *and* ability as property, DisCrit affords an intersectional analysis of how these forces circulate together, mitigating or intensifying one another (Annamma et al., 2013). For example, the same disability label might justify giving a white student—protected by the property of whiteness—extra time on tests and moving a student of color into segregated instruction.

Below, I bring these tenets of DisCrit in conversation with theater education literature to reveal how theater pedagogies *can* resist, but *often* reinscribe, the primacy of whiteness and ability in US PK-12 schooling.

Theater Education: Resisting (and Reinscribing) Racism and Ableism

Where better to counter the normalizing process of ableism and racism (tenet one), center marginalized students' perspectives (tenet four), and cultivate activism and resistance (tenet seven; Annamma et al., 2013) than within arts¹⁰ education? Through art, students can experiment with materials, media, and meaning. They might seek discovery, playfulness, joy, beauty, or self-expression in their work, but never “normalcy.” They can surface often-missed details of the world, reframing the familiar and encouraging others to critically examine their own assumptions (Eisner, 1998). Through arts education, students can share their own stories, a valued practice of DisCrit (Annamma et al., 2013) and its ancestors, Disability Studies in Education (see e.g., Baglieri et al., 2011) and Critical Race Theory in Education (see e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1998). The question then becomes: what art form offers the most accessible tools for disabled students of color to engage in this kind of learning? With its inherent multimodality (i.e., theater is visual, auditory, and kinesthetic) and focus on collaborative rather than individual storytelling (Wilson, 2012), theater emerges as an obvious choice. Though the existing literature on social justice theater education is siloed and one-dimensional (i.e., focusing on *either* race *or* disability), I argue that theater education might prove a promising site for resisting ableism and racism and working towards liberation in pK-12 schooling.

The Liberatory Potential of Theater Education

By providing racially diverse, disabled and nondisabled students with accessible tools for transforming their contexts, theater education can cultivate agency (Munday et al., 2015; Zdeblick, 2023). This may unfold in several ways. For disabled students and others who may not score well on traditional literacy measures, the multimodal nature of theater can expand and illuminate their expressive possibilities (Kleekamp, 2020; Kliewer et al., 2006). The multimodal tools of theater can offer

¹⁰ I refer not only to the “fine arts”—which I will later discuss as indexed by whiteness and ableism (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018b)—but rather to the full spectrum of aesthetic human expression (Dissanayake, 1988).

possibilities for multiply marginalized students to share their stories and perspectives (DisCrit tenet four) in expansive, accessible ways. Further, the collaborative nature of theater-making can disrupt the individualized, high-stakes, competitive nature of schooling, and create space for students to build collective power among and across differences (Campano et al., 2020). Embracing what Tanner and McCloskey (2023) term an improvisational ethos, teachers and students can affirm differences, resist conformity, and celebrate how individuals' contributions meaningfully impact collaborative artistic products. For example, consider a group of racially diverse, disabled and nondisabled students working together on a short play. Through collaborative decision-making, these students can practice supporting one another's creative risks (Munday et al., 2015) and finding consensus, "common ground in which everyone can have room for their voices and perspectives" (Davis, 2018, p. 122). In school, some of these students might encounter racism, restrictive class placements, and behavior policing. However, through theater education, they can embrace new roles, repositioning themselves as actors, directors, designers, or even particular characters in a scene (Collins, 2011; Zdeblick, 2023). Through interdependent theater-making, students and educators can resist the normalized power dynamics of ableism and racism (DisCrit tenet 1) in pK-12 schooling.

Further, theater can support students and teachers in developing critical consciousness¹¹ that supports activism and resistance (DisCrit tenet 7). Brazilian theater practitioner Augusto Boal (1979) centered critical consciousness-raising within his Theater of the Oppressed, a pedagogy designed to transform audiences from spectators into active participants. Many scholars have employed Theater of the Oppressed in teacher education to support majority white preservice teachers in recognizing classroom power dynamics and shifting their teaching to better support marginalized students (see e.g., Bhukhanwala et al., 2017; Bhukhanwala & Dean, 2020; Desai, 2017; Powers & Duffy, 2016). Others have

¹¹ Developing critical-consciousness involves becoming aware of oppression and learning to see oneself as a change agent (Freire, 1970).

taken up Theater of the Oppressed in elementary and high school classrooms to teach critical literacy and help students wrestle with injustices in their communities (see e.g., Rozansky & Santos, 2009; Snyder-Young, 2011) Beyond Theater of the Oppressed, scholars have leveraged other theater pedagogies to develop students' critical consciousness. For example, Tanner (2018), a white English and theater educator, tasked his majority white students with researching, writing, and performing a play about whiteness in their school context. This process prompted two of Tanner's white female students to recognize their complicity in a theater program that oppressed others based on racial differences. For another example, Winn (2012) writes about incarcerated and formerly incarcerated Black and Brown young women and girls using "playwriting and performance as tools to speak back to institutions of power often for the first time in their lives" (p. 318). Theater education can provide a productive space for students and teachers with dominant and nondominant identities to analyze and transform inequitable power dynamics.

Finally, centering marginalized identities within educational theater can disrupt hegemonic ideas of normalcy (DisCrit tenet 1), revealing new ways of creating, experiencing, and valuing artistic expression. This kind of change is axiological—it is a shift in what is understood to be "good, right, true, and beautiful" (Bang et al., 2016, pp. 28–29)—and it is sometimes unexpected. For example, Trimmingham and Shaughnessy (2016) began a research project to investigate how autism's "impairments" might be "treated" with a drama-based intervention. However, participants' beautiful, innovative performances forced these scholars to question their deficit views of autism. For another example, consider ability-inclusive sensory theater, an individualized, immersive, interactive, and multisensory form of theater that positions young people labeled with developmental disabilities as its primary audience (Mattaini, 2020). The aesthetics of these shows differ from those of typical theater productions (e.g., costume design often incorporates interesting textures for young people to touch, choreography often incorporates ASL, etc.; Webb, 2022). Perhaps more importantly, instead of

expecting audiences to sit in the dark, motionless and silent (except when “appropriate” to laugh, cheer, or applaud), these shows reject the idea of the “reasonable audience” (Sedgman, 2018). Performers actively welcome audience members’ agentic engagement in the theatrical experience (Mattaini, 2020). Scholars have even leveraged performance as a research method with disabled participants, noting how this methodological choice affords an opportunity to build reciprocal relationships across disability identities in research (see e.g., Clive, 2021; Leighton, 2009). When theater enters education and research spaces, it can destabilize and shift assumptions about what counts as art, what counts as knowledge, and who is qualified to produce both. In relation to ableism and racism, theater education holds liberatory potential.

Reproducing Ableism and Racism in Theater Education

However, just because theater education *can* support liberatory learning for multiply marginalized students, their educators, and their peers, does not mean it *always* or *often* does. In reality, students of color and disabled students participate in theater education at far lower rates than their white, nondisabled peers (Hourigan & Hammel, 2017; Schroeder-Arce, 2017). When these students do participate in theater education, many encounter teaching that reproduces, rather than disrupts ableism and racism. Perhaps this is because theater educators are predominantly white (Schroeder-Arce, 2017) and, like the broader population of pK-12 educators, nondisabled (Loeppky, 2021). For example, recounting his experiences participating in theater education while incarcerated, Daniels (2021), wrote about how typical it was for “Brown and Black people [to perform] while whites controlled the resources, set the curriculum, and decided what the subject of the performance would be” (p. 414). Theater education often falls short of its liberatory promise.

Compounding the issue, no empirical studies document how racism and ableism circulate together through pK-12 US theater education. This may be because the dominant paradigm in education and educational research frames the arts as fun and frivolous (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018). With

this framing, studying arts access for students labeled as “struggling” (often disabled students of color) might not be a priority. Then, among the educators and scholars who recognize the power of the arts, and theater in particular, there remains the widespread, dangerous assumption that all theater is theater for social justice (Finneran & Freebody, 2015). Educational theater evangelists share stories about theater education miraculously enabling “underprivileged” youth to “transcend” their individual circumstances. By locating the problem of oppression within individual students, these stories obscure the systemic change needed to sustain justice and liberation for all. Further, this uncritical advocacy obscures how theater itself cannot teach; rather, educators teach through theater. And, what theater educators identify as “miraculous” or “transformative” is shaped by their values, beliefs, and assumptions (Neelands, 2004; Rivière, 2008), which are perhaps rooted in white, or even white-ability (Siuty et al., 2024), saviorism (Matias, 2016). Add to this the worry that critical findings might further diminish theater education in the public eye (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018), and you can understand why theater’s champions tend to evade racism and ableism (Annamma et al., 2017) and focus on documenting theater’s benefits. Some scholars have critically examined theater education, but through examining whiteness (see e.g., Gallagher, 2007; Rivière, 2008; Tanner & McCloskey, 2023) or ableism (see e.g., Sandahl, 2005b) in isolation, rather than adopting an intersectional lens. This knowledge gap creates a problem of practice: even educators committed to social justice cannot disrupt the combined forces of racism and ableism in theater education if they do not believe they are present or do not understand what they look like.

“Quality” within Normative Theater Education

In this study, I will explore how racism and ableism circulate through normative¹² theater education, drawing on DisCrit tenet six (“whiteness and ability as property”). Scholars have illustrated

¹² I refer to *normative* theater education spaces because while I recognize that not all theater education looks, sounds, or feels the same, I posit that theater educators and students in white, upper-middle class, liberal, twenty-first century United States theater classrooms might share a relatively stable understanding of a normal, high

how labels deployed in schools (e.g., smartness, goodness) can function as property and be selectively deployed across race and ability lines (e.g., a student is much more likely to be labeled “smart” and receive its material benefits if white and nondisabled) (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011a). When schools assign labels like “high” and “low” achieving, they legitimate economic inequality by attributing it to individual, biological differences instead of the economic structures of capitalism (Erevelles, 2000). Relatedly, Gaztambide-Fernández and others (2018) argued that “the arts” can be a form of white property. They explained that “talent” and “artistic greatness” are labels—often regarded as innate or “natural,” but indexed by whiteness—that confer material benefits on their recipients. I propose that whiteness and ability might work together to police the boundaries of what counts as “good theater.” I offer that this process, if permitted to unfold within educational theater spaces, might make it difficult or impossible to sustain justice for multiply marginalized disabled students. Further, I suggest that strained financial circumstances—like the ones in which many theaters found themselves in 2023-2024—might fuel this process or make it harder to disrupt.

To identify how framing good theater as white, nondisabled property might impact US pK-12 theater education, I turn to the idea of “quality.” I use quotes around “quality” to indicate how understandings of “quality” are “neither neutral nor objective” (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Moss et al., 2000), but instead rooted in socially constructed axiological assumptions (Bang et al., 2016). Working in the early childhood context, Beneke and Love (2022) demonstrated how discourses of “quality,” rooted in ableism and racism, can encourage narrow, pre-defined learning objectives, constrain possibilities for learning, and prevent multiply marginalized youth, educators, and families from bringing their expertise into schools. It is easy to see how similar discourses might constrain possibilities for multiply

“quality” theater education, whether or not they believe their own theater spaces adhere to this norm. I choose normative over the more common “Western,” because terminology matters. “Western” is a euphemism for white; what scholars call “Western” art excludes many art forms created by artists of color in the Western hemisphere (e.g., hip hop dance) (Davis, 2018). Normative is not a euphemism; it owns its status as a social construction.

marginalized disabled students in theater education. In a theoretical exploration of whiteness in dance education, Davis (2018) argued that using so-called “universal” criteria to evaluate the “quality” of students’ performances risked reinforcing whiteness, since when educators “establish evaluation around one set of assumptions, when a dance form or creative work centers around a different set of assumptions, [they] set [their] students up for failure” (p. 122). In other words, believing in “one right way” of doing things—a pillar of white supremacy culture (Okun, 2021)—might prevent arts educators from recognizing the diverse gifts their students bring to arts classrooms, informed by their cultures, communities, or nonconforming bodyminds.

To explore how “quality” discourses in normative theater education spaces might frame good theater as the property of whiteness and ability—constraining everyone, but particularly multiply marginalized disabled youth— I will focus on three key constructs: the who (“quality” theater students), the how (“quality” rehearsal processes), and the what (“quality” youth theater productions). After unpacking these constructs, I will explore how they might impact the ways even well-meaning theater educators with self-described social justice commitments are encouraged to teach.

Student Artists

How might whiteness and ability be implicated in normative understandings of the good “quality” theater student? Or, in other words, as whiteness is marked by “conditional inclusion in communities” (Thandeka, 1999), who gets to be part of the community of “quality” theater students? I think first of “actor neutral,” a physical stance taught to theater students as young as kindergarten. In “actor neutral,” students are encouraged to stand still and upright, with their knees slightly bent, their shoulders back, and their arms resting by their sides. Calling this stance “neutral” propagates the false idea that there is one “neutral body from which... bodies deviate” (Levins Morales, 2013). Encouraging all theater students to strip away their bodies’ idiosyncrasies in pursuit of this mythical neutral excludes disabled bodies from performing (Sandahl, 2005b). I think, too, of the narrow forms of communication

theater educators deem “natural,” “free,” or “expressive.” Educators encourage theater students to strive towards a similarly mythical “neutral” voice, in ways that reinforce ableism, sexism, racism, and classism (Cahill & Hamel, 2022). They prioritize spoken language over embodied expressions (McAllister-Viel, 2021) and may encourage students of color to speak “more articulately,” a euphemism for whiteness (Lyiscott, 2014). These practices reveal the compulsory nature of ablebodiedness (McRuer, 2006)— even hyper-ablebodiedness (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018b)—that upholds white supremacy in theater education.

Research suggests that ableism and racism can circulate through teachers’ expectations about students’ emotions and creative choices. White emotions tend to be protected and validated at the expense of the emotions of people of color (Matias, 2016). White, nondisabled people emotionally invest in their place at the top of hierarchies constructed through whiteness and ableism (Beneke, Siuty, et al., 2022). Further, US pK-12 educators, who are predominantly white women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023), tend to read emotions differently on racialized bodies. These educators are more likely to perceive Black students as angry than their white peers (Halberstadt et al., 2022). Given this, students of color are disproportionately labeled with “emotional disturbance” or “behavior disorders” (Annamma et al., 2013). Whiteness is repressive—it represses ideas, feelings, and differences deemed inappropriate, offensive, or wrong (Thandeka, 1999). This leads to educators criminalizing Black children’s imaginative play, while labeling white children’s similar play “innocent” and protecting it (Bryan, 2020). Similarly, schools pathologize disabled children’s play (Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010). In theater contexts, educators often ask their students to be brave and take creative risks. However, given how educators tend to criminalize and pathologize marginalized students’ creative play, the stakes of these creative risks likely vary based on students’ identities.

Theater educators regulate students’ emotions and creative choices (Tanner & McCloskey, 2023). Without acknowledging the different meanings emotions and creative expression can carry in

different bodyminds, theater teachers can make demands of students that seem “neutral,” but in fact reinforce racist and ableist ideas of “normalcy.” For example, instructing a student to honestly express a character’s anger, sadness, and joy, then bounce back to a “neutral” emotional baseline, reflects ableist assumptions that “a person’s inner, emotional state can be read on the physical body” (Sandahl, 2005b, p. 262). It further evades how what might be a safe request of a white student (“perform anger” or even “perform your objective: destroy her”) might place a student of color at physical and emotional risk. Even if theater educators understand these risks, they may continue to encourage them. Theater educators might believe that suffering makes better art, a belief detrimental to artists’ mental health (Alacovska & Kärreman, 2022). Furthermore, theater educators expect their students to emote on cue, according to grueling rehearsal and performance schedules. These expectations about when and for how long “quality” theater students should physically, mentally, and emotionally perform are grounded in ableist ideas of productivity (Lewis, 2022). Asking all students to attend long, daily rehearsals might exclude students of color, who, due to the wealth divide (Baradaran, 2017), are balancing other financial obligations. Exploring students’ and educators’ ideas about “good” theater students might substantiate these and other ways that “quality” theater functions as the property of whiteness and ability in normative theater education.

Rehearsal Processes

How might normative theater education reinforce white, nondisabled hegemony through its assumptions about “quality” rehearsal processes? Scholars have demonstrated how disability changes one’s relationship to time (Kafer, 2013b), making creative processes that demand immediate, linear participation inaccessible (Gu, 2023). Furthermore, urgency—a characteristic of white supremacy culture—discourages intentional inclusion of marginalized communities (because it takes “too long”), reinscribes traditional power dynamics, and leads even privileged individuals to burnout (Okun, 2021). Disabled theater artists and theater artists of color have illustrated how ableism and racism circulate

through the common theater expression, “the show must go on,” in professional rehearsal processes (D. Patterson, 2020; *We See You W.A.T.*, 2020). This expression, which positions artists’ well-being as secondary to the needs of a theatrical production, also shows up in theater education. For example, at age 14, I developed bruises and swelling up and down my arms while rehearsing stage combat for a high school play. Believing my physical injuries less important than the show’s authenticity, I never complained. The next year, my director praised my resilience when I performed onstage with a fever. Ableism had taught me that my bodymind was only valuable for its “productivity” within a capitalist framework (Lewis, 2022); I had no choice but to perform. This mandate to push through illness or injury can particularly harm disabled and racialized students. For example, Gallagher (2007) documented a theater educator punishing a high-school student of color for missing a rehearsal due to illness. As he had not obtained a doctor’s note (his grandmother had treated his illness with traditional home remedies), his teacher deemed his absence invalid. Fueled by a sense of urgency, the mentality that “the show must go on” within “quality” rehearsal processes may contribute to making normative theater education inaccessible to multiply marginalized disabled students.

Youth Theater Productions

How might theater educators and their students understand what it means to create a “quality” youth theater production? Thinking about the arts more broadly, I notice how the most celebrated works of art were produced by white, European men, and how particular forms of art associated with whiteness (e.g., oil painting) are valued over those associated with communities of color (e.g., street art) (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018). Focusing on theater, I think about how the most produced plays in schools— those called “mainstream, canonical, [and] classic”— were written by white playwrights and detail white experiences (Schroeder-Arce, 2017, p. 106). Shakespeare, in particular, looms large (Dyches, 2017). And, I think about how when theater artists center accessibility, others label their work “community-based art” or “art therapy” rather than “real, professional, capital A art” (Piepzna-

Samarasinha, 2018b, p. 150). These ideas suggest ways that, particularly within the perpetually underfunded landscape of youth theater (McAvoy, 2020), “quality” youth theater productions might be framed as the property of whiteness and ability.

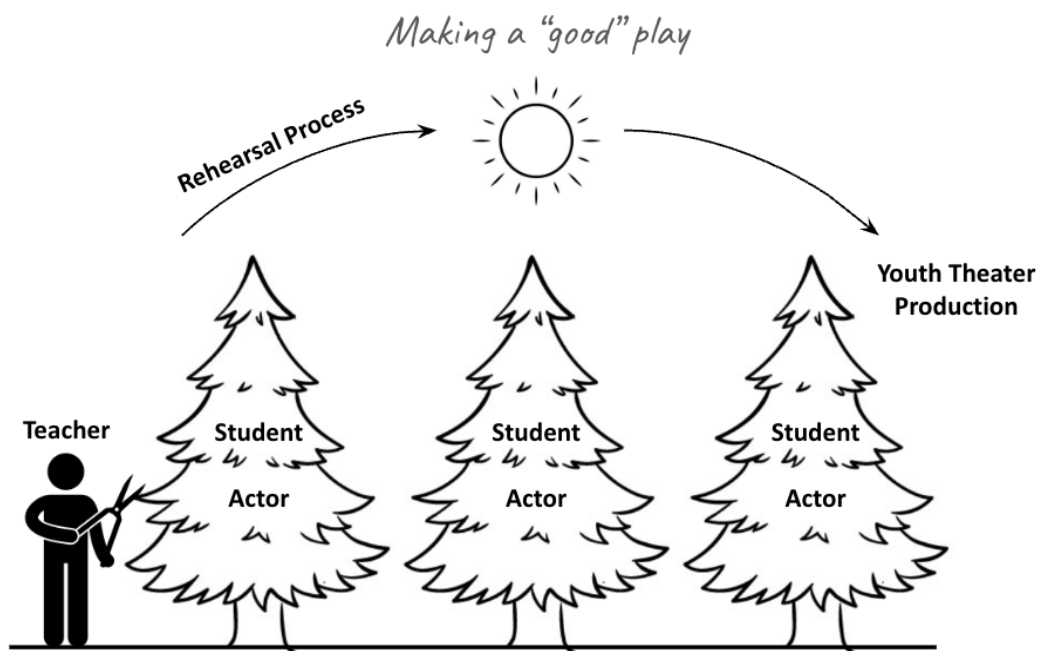
Scholars have begun to explore both how these ideas might harm disabled students and students of color and why they might persist in theater education. First, assuming all drama with disabled students must be drama therapy both obscures how any arts engagement can be therapeutic (Kempe, 2011), and, by suggesting disabled people should only engage in art to become “less disabled,” positions disability as a deficit (Geier, 2023). These ideas can also position students of color as deficient. For example, Rivière (2008) recounts the story of a white theater educator lining up his students by skin tone to demonstrate the “multicultural-school problem” of lighting all students well onstage (p. 360). Presumably, a more “normal,” all-white cast would not have been a problem. Finally, narrow definitions of “quality” productions can fuel perfectionism, a characteristic of white supremacy culture marked by an internalized sense of inadequacy (Okun, 2021). Perfectionism harms both students who fail to meet external standards and those who do, with particularly negative consequences for students of color. For example, in her exploration of Black college students in honors programs and STEM majors, Raymundo (2021) explored how Black students labeled “high-achievers” face intense pressure to be perfect because they carry the burden of disproving negative stereotypes and are hyper-visible in predominantly white classroom contexts. Marginalized students labeled “good” at theater might feel similarly burdened and hyper-visible in the predominantly white, nondisabled context of theater education. Persistent ideas about “quality” youth theater productions can perpetuate deficit views of disabled students and students of color in normative theater education, with multiply marginalized disabled youth of color likely the most impacted.

Implications for Pedagogy

With narrow ideas about who counts as “quality” theater students and what counts as a “quality” rehearsal process and youth theater production, educators might feel as if they can only teach in certain narrow ways. Imagine, for a moment, that theater students are young trees, growing through a rehearsal process, in the garden of a youth theater production. If this garden is rooted in the idea that “quality” theater is the property of whiteness and ability, the theater-educator-gardener has clearly defined tasks. Bolstered by whiteness, the ultimate right to exclude (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018), they must “weed out” students who do not meet their “quality” standards and “prune” the ones that remain to perfection. This kind of teaching is common. When I was cast in my first school play in middle school, I was told by my (older, white, male) director that there were two rules in theater: 1) The director is always right; and 2) If the director is wrong, see rule one. In Tanner and McCloskey’s (2023) review of improvisational theater pedagogies in K-12 education, they found that in half of 30 studies, improvisational theater was used to “coerce participants into complying with the author or teacher’s view of curriculum or pedagogy” (p. 20). Further, in 19 studies, they noted the conviction that the “teacher’s job is to control the participation of others to reach a predetermined outcome” (p. 22). The productions that emerge from this kind of theater education might look like a Christmas tree farm, beautiful in their uniformity. See Figure 1 for an image of this metaphorical garden.

Figure 1

Conceptualizing “Quality” in Normative Theater Education



“Quality” Theater as the Property of Whiteness and Ability

(Broderick & Leonardo, 2016; Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011)

As the only human agent in this garden, working in the typical isolation of the arts educator (Bautista et al., 2021), the theater-educator-gardener’s expertise becomes unimpeachable. Trees do not speak back to those who water them, and they certainly cannot water themselves or one another. The theater-educator-gardener does not need or seek the trees’ consent before reshaping them, nor is she at all nurtured by her student-trees. This logical way of teaching—when “quality” is the property of whiteness and ability—feels reminiscent of Freire’s banking model of education (Freire, 1970). It problematically positions the white nondisabled educator as a savior (Matias, 2016; Siuty et al., 2024), paternalistically denies marginalized students’ agency (Daniels, 2021; McDonough & Taylor, 2021), and may even explain why consent remains largely absent from actor training (Moor, 2023). The metaphorical roots of this pedagogy (whiteness and ableism) might remain invisible to the theater-

educator-gardener—they are, after all, below the surface. Even if they start to poke out, theater-educator-gardeners might not realize they have the option to cultivate differently. For example, Schroeder-Arce (2017) explored how theater educators had “no models for how to operate differently as theatre teachers from those who taught them in their high school theatre experiences” (p. 109). Or in other words, as Davis (2018) says, educators may “not have the fuel, the nutrients, or the cleared ground to grow in a new way” (p. 120). In this study, I first worked with theater educators and disabled adults to identify how the dimensions of “quality” outlined above permeate theater education, clearing this metaphorical ground. Then, with the roots of normative theater education exposed and considered, I collaborated with participants to imagine and cultivate something new.

How Might We Imagine Otherwise?

To guide our collective work, I leveraged DisCrit theory in tandem with activism and theory generated from within the disability community. Doing so both satisfied DisCrit’s tenets four and seven (Annamma et al., 2013) and made intuitive sense. Academic work around disability has always been indebted to and entangled with community activism, art, and performance. For example, beginning in the 1960s, disabled anti-apartheid activist, psychologist, and creative writer Vic Finkelstein agitated within and outside the academy for disability rights (Shakespeare, 2013). Finkelstein’s (1988) essay, “To Deny or Not to Deny Disability,” introduced the social model of disability through a society that normalized wheelchair-users and disabled non-wheelchair-users. Was this essay arts activism or academic scholarship? Was the 1990 Capitol Crawl, in which wheelchair-users left their wheelchairs to crawl up the Capitol’s eighty-three marble steps (L. Patterson, 2018), activism or performance? Imagining disability justice in theater education without engaging community activism would first, exclude invaluable insights from the disability community and second, contribute to the ableist erasure of disabled voices in academia (Dolmage, 2017). Therefore, to begin to envision alternatives to normative theater pedagogy, I will draw on DisCrit alongside Disability Justice, an intersectional

movement-building framework generated by queer Black and Brown disabled performance activists (Sins Invalid, 2019).

Sins Invalid and the Disability Justice Framework

In 2006, disabled performance activists of color met up at a Chilean cultural center in the California East Bay for a conversation. Following this conversation, disability performance collective Sins Invalid was born, and, as performers theorized in and through their performances, a new wave of Disability Justice initiated along with it (Kafai, 2021). Why performance as a means of theorizing? Founder Patty Berne once said:

“You know, I could do workshops until I was blue in the face, trying to convince white disabled people or able-bodied people of color to care about us. And I’ve done that. Or I could make a three-minute piece of performance art that shows them the inside of their dreams and nightmares and fucks their shit up. I chose that route” (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018b).

The work of Sins Invalid marked a cultural shift towards centering intersectionality in the disability community (Kafai, 2021) and away from a rights-based approach. As they wrote in their handbook:

“Rights-based strategies often address the symptoms of inequity but not the root. The root of disability oppression is ableism and we must work to understand it, combat it, and create alternative practices rooted in justice” (Sins Invalid, 2019, p. 15).

Moving away from rights and towards justice meant stepping away from legal and political advocacy and instead working to cultivate anti-ableist practices within relationships and communities. Working from Sins Invalid’s performance theorizing, conversations with Mia Mingus, Stacey Milbern, Eli Clare and Sebastian Margaret, and in relationship with NYC-based Disability Justice Collective, Seattle’s Disability Justice Collective, and Vancouver’s Disability Justice Collective, Patty Berne (2015) published a working draft of ten Disability Justice Principles, formalized in 2019. Briefly, these tenets uplift: (1) intersectionality; (2) leadership of the most impacted; (3) anti-capitalism; (4) cross-movement

organizing; (5) recognizing wholeness; (6) sustainability; (7) cross-disability solidarity; (8) interdependence; (9) collective access; and (10) collective liberation (Sins Invalid, 2019).

Rooting Theater Education in Disability Justice

Alongside DisCrit, these principles offer promising alternatives to the norms of US pK-12 theater education. For example, recognizing wholeness means acknowledging that every person (student, teacher, theater artist) is a complete person with their own thoughts, quirks, and desires. Theater education that recognized wholeness would not encourage students to hide parts of themselves (e.g., their disability, their race) for the sake of appearing “normal;” it would welcome and celebrate students for their uniqueness. Embracing sustainability, slowly moving forward while caring for one another’s needs (Sins Invalid, 2019), might prove an antidote for normative theater education’s urgent rehearsal processes. Sustainability connects to “crip time,” a concept which captures how disability challenges normative expectations about productivity (Kafer, 2013b). For Sins Invalid, taking up sustainability and working on “crip time” means centering the needs of artists, shifting rehearsal and performance timelines as needed (Kafai, 2021). In theater education, it might look like rejecting the myth of the tortured artist that normalizes arts students’ suffering (Alacovska & Kärreman, 2022) and instead flexibly adjusting curriculum and deadlines to honor students’ capacity. Finally, interdependence means acknowledging how we are all dependent on one another to meet our needs (Sins Invalid, 2019). Those who we label “independent” are those whose needs are met by supports already in place (Brown, 2012). When we acknowledge interdependence, we can begin to move towards Collective Access, sharing and meeting one another’s needs in community (Sins Invalid, 2019). This kind of work can be deeply intimate and transformative. As Mingus (2017) writes, “... it reorients our approach from one where disabled people are expected to squeeze into able bodied people’s world, and instead calls upon able bodied people to inhabit [disabled people’s] world.” These principles enable asking: what might theater education feel like if teachers strove to inhabit their multiply marginalized students’ worlds?

At its best, this kind of theater education might feel like a Sins Invalid performance, a place where every student and teacher knows on a gut level that their “bodyminds belong, despite the world’s insistence on erasing” them (Kafai, 2021, p. 44). Patty Berne labeled this the feeling of a “crip-centric liberated zone” (p. 44). Kafai (2021) equates visiting a crip-centric liberated zone to attending “crip church” (p. 53). It is a healing ritual. Sins Invalid cultivates these zones through a process of storytelling, artmaking, and education. Storytelling means recognizing “there is power in the act of naming bodymind experiences just as there is power in witnessing another’s story and perhaps finding homecoming in them” (p. 73). It is an intimate act of disclosure and recognition. This resonates with DisCrit’s attention to counter-narratives, stories by multiply marginalized people that resist how they have been framed by the dominant culture (Annamma et al., 2013).

Making art, as Sins Invalid understands it, is a form of activism, and theater specifically can provide a space for imagining and creating a more just world. For example, the altered rules of engagement within an ability-inclusive sensory theater production can help students, teachers, and families recognize that alternatives exist to the typical exclusionary norms of public spaces. Jill Dolan (2001) called these glimpses of a beautiful, imagined future the “utopian performative.” She argued that these shared experiences can “move us toward understanding the possibility of something better, can train our imaginations, inspire our dreams and fuel our desires in ways that might lead to incremental cultural change” (Dolan, 2001, p. 460). Relatedly, Munoz (2009) explored how queer artists can write themselves into the future through staging utopian performances. Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018b) wrote about how Sins Invalid acts like “the revolution has happened” by bringing together queer disabled artists and audiences of color to share accessible performances (p. 49). Through artmaking, Sins Invalid offers, multiply marginalized artists can breathe alternative realities into existence (Kafai, 2021).

Finally, Sins Invalid understands education as a liberatory process of “analyz[ing], detangl[ing], and speak[ing] back to the power structures that no longer serve” multiply marginalized disabled people

(Kafai, 2021, p. 111). This resonates with Annamma and Morrison's (2018) vision of DisCrit classroom ecology, an approach to education wherein teachers explicitly address structural inequities while recognizing and cultivating multiply marginalized students' gifts. In this ecology, teachers work to reinterpret students' "bad behaviors" as justifiable resistance to an inequitable status quo. Taking up this approach might support theater teachers in choosing artistic material that represents their students' identities, finding and nurturing their students' unique creative capacities, and subverting the hierarchical power dynamics of normative theater education.

What other axiological innovations might arise through practicing and reflecting on Disability Justice principles in theater education spaces? Theater educators might reject the tyranny of the neutral body (Sandahl, 2005b) and instead, in the language of Disability Justice pioneer Patty Berne, embrace the beauty and joy of "people in their power, including people with non-normative or nonconforming bodies" (Sins Invalid, 2019). This might be termed "disability aesthetics"—a reconceptualization of beauty that emphasizes the value of disabled bodyminds to art, culture, and human understanding (Chandler et al., 2021; Siebers, 2015). Additionally, bringing Disability Justice principles into theater education might help to shift narrow diversity and inclusion initiatives that aim to assimilate difference towards more transformative possibilities (Annamma & Booker, 2020). I draw on acclaimed Black female playwright Suzan Lori Parks's concept of "radical inclusion," or inclusion which "destabilizes the comfortable polarities of center and margin," to understand the potential of this work (Rugg, 2008, p. 58). When educators radically include marginalized young people, they invite these young people to rewrite the rules of performance. The normative center cannot hold, and new possibilities emerge.

Pedagogies of Accompaniment. How might theater teachers draw on Disability Justice principles (Sins Invalid, 2019) to reimagine their teaching within this shifting theater education paradigm? Could they and their students find a way to embody what scholar Margaret Price (2015) calls care: "moving together and being limited together" (p. 279)? Could they work towards Collective

Liberation by “mov[ing] together as people with mixed abilities, multiracial, multi-gendered, mixed class, across the sexual spectrum, with a vision that leaves no bodymind behind” (Sins Invalid, 2019, p. 26)?

While Disability Justice offers us this vision, it gives little concrete guidance for the theater educators who, while working in normative contexts, want to move in this direction. Within the broader context of pK-12 schooling, and building on DisCrit tenet seven, Annamma and Morrison (2018) offer DisCrit teacher resistance as one possible pathway. By critically addressing their biases, learning about racism and ableism, and reframing their multiply marginalized students’ classroom contributions as gifts, teachers can start to welcome their students in wholeness. While useful, their work leaves room for expansion: what would this kind of teaching look like within the specific affordances and constraints of theater education?

To probe this question, I drew on two theories from outside the realm of academic and community disability theorizing: aesthetic allyship (Hadley, 2020) and accompaniment (Mei-Singh, 2022). Hadley (2020) offered aesthetic allyship as a term to capture the specific powered considerations nondisabled artists make when aesthetically supporting disabled artists. These include:

“...choices about story, symbolism, aesthetic style, who makes the choices, how non-disabled artists propose choices to disabled artists, and when directorial advice to actors – for instance – goes beyond the give-and-take common to arts collaboration and into problematic silencing of disabled collaborators.” (p. 188)

How does one differentiate between nondisabled facilitation that scaffolds the successful participation of disabled collaborators, increasing choices, agency, and opportunities, and that which over-scaffolds and silences? I concur with Hadley that more research is needed to probe these complexities.

Perhaps, instead of positioning themselves as allies, theater teachers might imagine themselves accompanists (Mei-Singh, 2021). “Accompaniment” is an abolitionist practice which emerged from anti-imperialist resistance in Central America. While “allying” invokes images of war and hierarchical power

dynamics, “accompanying” conjures actively sustained relationships between musicians, friends, and peers. Accompaniment positions scholars and educators as supporters, contributing creatively but never conducting the orchestra or stealing the spotlight. Mei-Singh (2021) writes of accompaniment:

“Drawing from spiritual traditions, it invokes the mutual, cooperative practice of being present while walking side by side with another person, strategically deploying power differentials to leverage networks for the liberation of the oppressed.” (p. 82)

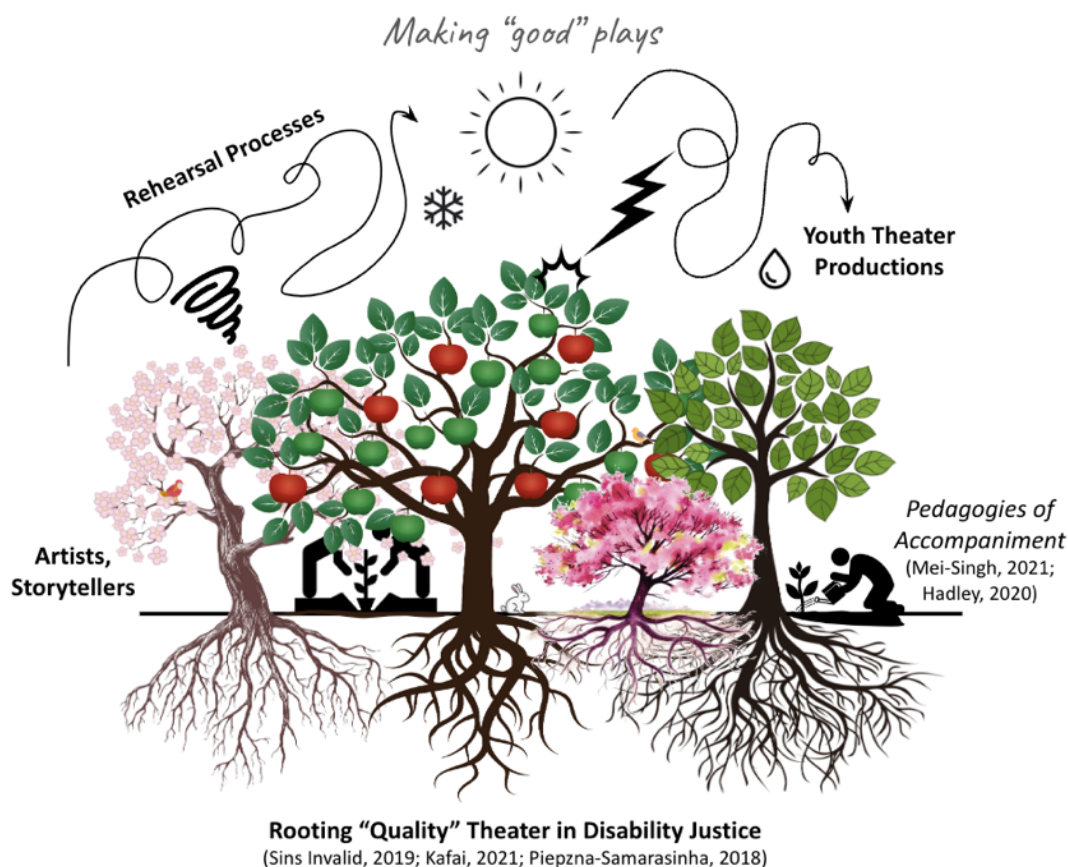
This concept holds generative potential when applied to moving alongside students in creative contexts. How might this practice be embodied? How might these relationships subvert assumptions about student-teacher or director-performer relationships? How might teachers leverage their power and privilege towards students’ liberation? How might different students wish to be differently accompanied, and how can teachers anticipate and respond to these distinct creative needs? Alongside Disability Justice and DisCrit, these questions supported me in thinking about a new way theater educators and multiply marginalized disabled students might move together: through pedagogies of accompaniment. I refer to pedagogies in the plural because, like Paris and Alim (2017), my goal is not to essentialize “good” teaching (there are many wonderful ways to teach) but rather to create a framework which might support theater educators in thinking critically about how to engage their multiply marginalized students differently.

Returning to the garden. Returning to the metaphor of theater education as a garden, how might rooting theater education in Disability Justice transform possibilities for how teachers and students might create alongside one another? First, I believe it might disrupt the idea that “quality” students should all look, sound, and behave in similar ways. Rather than “pruning” students into identical shapes, theater educators might work alongside students to help them grow into the kind of artists they want to be. It might mean embracing students’ dissent as legitimate refusals to perform (Mengesha & Padmanabhan, 2019; Taylor, 2020). After all, who says every student must perform

onstage to be recognized as a legitimate theater artist? In this metaphorical garden, students might want to be birds (i.e., sound designers) instead of trees (i.e., actors), and that should be ok. Educators might recognize everyone in the garden—including themselves—as artists and storytellers. Rather than separately shaping elements of this ecosystem into “perfection,” educators might encourage students to recognize their interdependence. After all, despite what we see aboveground, trees are not independent. They work together to share water and nutrients and warn one another of environmental dangers (Wohlleben, 2016). Second, I believe rooting our work in Disability Justice might disrupt teachers’ and students’ understandings of a linear “quality” rehearsal process. It might mean taking a break when we encounter “bad weather,” embracing disruptions as opportunities for reflection and creative innovation. Third, this shift might mean understanding that “quality” gardens (i.e., youth theater productions) can look, sound, and feel different from a “typical play” and remain beautiful not *despite*, but *because of* their difference. The productions students and teachers create might look less like a Christmas tree farm and more like wild and wonderful slices of nature (see Figure 2 for an image of this garden). Teaching through pedagogies of accompaniment, theater-educator-gardeners might work in collectives to tend to and elevate individual students’ artistic visions.

Figure 2

Reconceptualizing “Quality” in Theater Education, as Rooted in Disability Justice and Cultivated Through Pedagogies of Accompaniment



Research Questions

In this critical ethnography, in partnership with three community organizations, I engaged with a group of high-school-aged and adult theater educators and adults labeled with intellectual and developmental disabilities who were teaching or volunteering at a nonprofit theater’s summer camp. Together, we investigated how ableism and racism circulated in typical theater education settings, particularly through norms and expectations about “artistic quality”. A subset of these participants also worked with me to collaboratively design and teach a six-week theater residency in a racially diverse, inclusive, year-round, pK-12 school. This experience culminated with a group of racially and

neurodiverse students performing their original play, *We Move Together*, inspired by the Disability Justice picture book by the same name (Fritsch & McGuire, 2021). They performed onstage at the nonprofit theater for an audience of friends, family members, and members of the nonprofit theater's wider community. To guide this collaborative work and my subsequent analysis of our generated data, I asked the following research questions:

1. How do theater educators and disabled adults articulate the norms and expectations co-constructed by ableism and racism that circulate within normative theater education, particularly those concerning "quality" students, rehearsal processes, and youth theater productions?
2. How can theater educators and disabled adults reimagine theater education by instead rooting ideas of "quality" in Disability Justice?
3. How do multiply marginalized disabled students, theater educators, and disabled adults accompany one another through this reimagined version of theater education?

Chapter 3: Research Methods

In this chapter, I will describe how philosophies of critical ethnography (Fitzpatrick & May, 2022; Madison, 2020), critical qualitative research (Lester & Nusbaum, 2021), participatory design research (PDR; Bang & Vossoughi, 2016), and emancipatory research (Barnes, 2004; Barton, 2005) guided this inquiry. Next, I will introduce the three community organizations – a nonprofit theater, an inclusive pK-12 school, and a day program for adults labeled with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) – that came together through this research to support one another’s objectives. As I do so, I will critically engage my positionality as a nondisabled, white, cis-woman educator, scholar, and insider to the nonprofit theatre community. I will then introduce participants from each of these organizations, sharing their salient identities and describing their respective contributions to data generation. Drawing on tenets of co-design (Ishimaru et al., 2018), practices of narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2007) informed by community-based theater-making (Faulkner, 2006), and performance practice as research (PaR; Trimmingham, 2002) methodology, I will describe how participants and I collaborated to critique normative educational theater practices, imagine alternatives for moving together as theater students and educators across our different relationships with ableism and racism, and embody these alternatives while creating and performing an original play. Finally, I will discuss how, through arts-based approaches (Barone & Eisner, 2006) and iterative cycles of inductive and deductive qualitative coding (Saldaña, 2021), I arrived at my findings.

Methodological Foundations

To frame this study, I drew on the “expansive, eclectic, and inclusive” methodology of critical ethnography (Fitzpatrick & May, 2022, p. 4). Ethnography involves spending time in a given context, interacting with others, and interpreting and presenting findings. *Critical* ethnography—the embodiment of critical theory (Madison, 2020)—further centers questions of power and injustice, requires researchers’ critical reflexivity, and prioritizes reciprocal relationship-building with participants

(Fitzpatrick & May, 2022). Critical ethnographers embrace an “ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice... changing those conditions toward greater freedom and equity” (Madison, 2020, p. 5). Furthermore, critical ethnography directly engages tensions associated with understanding and representing others. Rather than pretend to document cultures from a mythical “neutral” or “objective” distance, or pretend to understand cultures wholly from within, critical ethnographers strive for a “dialogical stance” that brings cultures in conversation with one another (Conquergood, 2013, p. 76). In other words, critical ethnography is an ethical, relational, participatory effort to dialogue *across* and *about* differences in pursuit of justice. This requires slowing down and embracing the messiness of the research process, resisting the ableist, racist sense of urgency that permeates academic scholarship (Fitzpatrick & May, 2022). This methodological framework supported me in bringing the culture of normative theater education in productive dialogue with a culture of theater education rooted in Disability Justice (Kafai, 2021), while holding myself accountable to ethically engaging with communities.

Critical ethnographers employ various methods to generate and analyze data (Fitzpatrick & May, 2022); in this study, I drew on the philosophy and practices of critical qualitative inquiry and participatory design research (PDR). Broadly speaking, qualitative inquiry strives to create in-depth descriptions of how humans interact with their changing worlds and make sense of their experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Critical qualitative inquiry considers how systems of power and privilege, which position some forms of knowledge as more valid than others, shape these experiences. Furthermore, critical inquiry critiques research itself. It encourages scholars to ask: Whom does this research center and whom does it marginalize? What existing power structures and inequalities does it reinforce? (Lester & Nusbaum, 2021). A critical orientation towards knowledge production helped me attend to how ableism and racism circulate within both theater education spaces and my own research process. PDR takes this orientation a step further and argues that justice-driven research always advances dual aims: developing more robust learning theories that account for legacies

of injustice and advancing justice for communities (Ishimaru et al., 2018). Resonating with my conceptual framework, PDR further offers that individuals' underlying axiologies, or what they think of as good, right, true, or beautiful, shape their understandings of justice. Through PDR, scholars and communities can develop collaborative understandings of justice that reflect the futures communities envision for themselves (Bang et al., 2016). Though many scholars have leveraged PDR within racially diverse community partnerships (see e.g., Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Ishimaru et al., 2018), few have taken up this approach with disabled participants.

To attend to the ethical implications of engaging a neurodiverse group in PDR, I drew on articulations of emancipatory research from the field of Disability Studies. Emancipatory research, first proposed by Oliver (1992), confronts the way that both positivist and interpretivist research on disability have historically extracted knowledge from disabled bodyminds, alienated the disability community, and failed to improve disabled peoples' lives. Indeed, research itself has been disabling (Barton, 2005). Emancipatory research emphasizes disability's socio-political construction, destabilizes the idea of scientific objectivity, centers accountability to disabled people and organizations, contextualizes and elevates first-person perspectives of disabled people, and generates practical outcomes for the disability community. However, even within research framed as emancipatory, ableist biases can contribute to excluding disabled bodyminds from knowledge production (Pearson & Dickens, 2021). For instance, expecting researchers and research participants to engage in lengthy, synchronous, verbal, in-person interviews, while appearing calm and holding one another's gaze (Price & Kerschbaum, 2016), might render research inaccessible to neurodivergent researchers and participants. Therefore, Pearson and Dickens (2021) call on scholars to disrupt these assumptions by "critically (re)examin[ing]" and "unpack[ing] hegemonic ideologies that unconsciously and consciously encourage [stratifying] certain bodyminds over others" (p. 91). As I will later discuss, I worked to destabilize these ideologies by inviting

disabled participants to choose the data generation methods they felt would be most accessible and allowing these methods to shift when needed.

Partnering Organizations

Because of my critical ethnographic stance (Conquergood, 2013), which includes an ethical commitment to humanizing research (Paris & Winn, 2014) that exists in reciprocal, accountable relationship to disabled communities (Barnes, 2004), I am committed to conducting research that emerges from community perspectives, goals, and questions. This study design arose organically in collaboration with three partner organizations with whom I had longstanding relationships – Bay Area Theatre (BAT), Connections, and All Together Academy (ATA).¹³

BAT is a small, nonprofit theater that shares its campus with a Presbyterian church and cultivates individuals' artistic passions through community-oriented theater education. Each summer, BAT offers several annual theater production summer camps for local pK-12 youth. In these camps, over the course of between one and four weeks, students and teaching artists work together to produce traditionally high "quality" theatrical productions, which students perform onstage for friends and family. During the summer this research was conducted, BAT produced three youth theater shows: a K-8 production of *SpongeBob: The Musical Youth Edition*, a middle-school-student-created piece entitled *Into the Extraordinary*, and a high-school production of *Mean Girls*. BAT's staff and students reflect the demographics of their surrounding community (a majority-white, highly-educated suburb of San Francisco, CA, with a median household income nearly double that of the surrounding metropolitan area; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022a). According to its leadership, BAT has been committed to inclusive practices since its inception. Following the racial justice uprisings of 2020, BAT formalized this commitment through adopting a public-facing statement of racial equity and inclusion.

¹³ These names are pseudonyms.

Since 2014, I have spent all or part of my summers at BAT, first as an intern, then as a teaching artist responsible for directing shows, choreographing dances, developing co-curricular activities, teaching acting classes, and even (once, reluctantly) designing costumes. In the summer of 2015, motivated to share my summer job with my brother (who is labeled with IDD), I suggested BAT offer “access previews,” versions of their summer camp shows modified to facilitate access for disabled audience members. In partnership with teaching artists, interns, and students, I created scaffolding to support this program, including social stories for audience members and workshops on ableism in theater for nondisabled BAT student actors. This program, BAT’s first developed specifically to engage disabled community members, continues today. In the summer of 2022, I worked with teaching artists and interns to co-write and facilitate curriculum that encouraged students cast in a production of *Frozen Jr.* to engage with Elsa as a disabled character (Resene, 2017). In the process, I introduced teaching artists and interns to Disability Justice (Sins Invalid, 2019) and TL Lewis’s (2022) definition of ableism. Teaching artists, interns, and students were excited to engage, so much so that multiple high school-aged returning applicants to the 2023 summer internship program wrote about how learning about disabilities and inclusion was fundamental to their BAT experience.

The other two partner organizations in this research— Connections and ATA—had established relationships with BAT, and therefore with me. Connections, a day program for adults labeled with IDD, primarily serves residents of one group home, located five minutes from BAT’s campus, through organizing community outings and securing job and internship placements for participants. During the 2022-2023 school year, several Connections participants volunteered at BAT as teaching assistants in after school classes. However, BAT leadership worried these placements had not been meaningful—that BAT staff lacked the appropriate expertise and adequate staffing to support Connections participants in achieving their goals. As a result, when Connections leadership asked BAT leadership whether

participants could continue volunteering through the summer, BAT leadership reached out to me for guidance and support.

ATA is an inclusive, year round, private, pK-12 school, located 30 minutes from BAT in a less affluent, majority BIPOC community (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022b). A large proportion of ATA's students are students of color labeled with intellectual and developmental disabilities (e.g., autism, ADHD, cerebral palsy). ATA divides their students into four classes by age bracket, each with between seven and twelve students (i.e., preschool, elementary school, middle school, and high school). During the summer of 2022, ATA's elementary, middle, and high school classes took field trips to attend BAT's summer camp access previews. After one of these previews, the executive director of ATA thanked me (as a representative of BAT) for the access preview program but shared some concerns. She worried that having her disabled students of color sit in the audience as BAT's predominantly white, nondisabled summer campers performed would teach them that, although they might belong in the audience, they could never belong onstage. Her words prompted me to critically reflect. In creating a program intended to increase access, I had also reproduced conditions that kept disabled people, especially disabled people of color, relegated to audience roles.

As I was beginning to think about this dissertation, I realized that supporting these three community organizations (BAT, ATA, and Connections) in deepening their partnerships with one another presented an ideal setting for exploring how normative approaches to theater education might transform towards Disability Justice (Sins Invalid, 2019). Funded by the Center for the Study of Childhood Art (CSCA) at the University of Arkansas and the Harlan Hahn Endowment Fund and the Gatzert Child Welfare Fellowship at the University of Washington, I spent the summer of 2023 as a scholar in residence at BAT. Because of my commitment to conducting research in reciprocal relationships with communities (Ishimaru, 2020b), I offered my skills and resources to these three organizations. By request, I led trainings with BAT's staff and interns on the relationship between

classroom management and inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility (IDEA). Also by request, I developed and taught curriculum for their summer campers about environmental sustainability. Additionally, I supported BAT in thinking through how they might offer Connections participants meaningful summer volunteer opportunities in theater production, teaching, and administration. Coordinating between Connections and BAT leadership, I developed a structure through which six Connections participants worked one-on-one with BAT teaching artists to assist in key program areas (e.g., set design, costume design, administration). In the most direct relationship to this study, I collaborated with ATA and BAT leadership to conceptualize and schedule a six-week theater education residency at ATA that would culminate in ATA students performing a piece of original theater on the BAT stage for family, friends, and BAT community members. Their performance took place right before the access preview of *Mean Girls* and was attended by the full *Mean Girls* cast. Navigating the dynamics of sharing space, staff, and time with the *Mean Girls* cast proved significant to my findings.

Positionality Statement

I am a white, straight, cisgender, nondisabled woman with ten years of teaching experience in theater education with disabled and nondisabled students. I come to my work as a sibling of an adult brother labeled with IDD. While I have no embodied experience of disability, I have experienced ableism by proxy, much of it in theater spaces. For example, I was excluded from theaters alongside my brother when he transgressed nondisabled standards of audience behavior (i.e., screaming loudly with enthusiasm). As these experiences occurred in white contexts, I recognize that whiteness protected my brother and my family from many of the more negative consequences of ableism experienced by multiply marginalized disabled people. I also recognize that as a white educator and scholar, I have the power and responsibility to combat whiteness (Schroeder-Arce, 2017) by naming the places where voices of color are marginalized or ignored (Davis, 2018).

I am committed to reimagining theater in ways more sustainable for all theater makers and audience members. However, I understand that many theater games and exercises—many of which I’ve taught myself, with the best intentions— were designed with someone holding my identities (white, nondisabled) in mind. These exercises reify the normativity of my bodymind (and the bodyminds of my white, nondisabled students), while simultaneously positioning the bodyminds of disabled students of color as deviant or “abnormal.” In this research, I tried to move in solidarity with disabled students of color. This meant getting to know them as whole people, welcoming their emotions and behaviors as valid responses to oppressive systems, and building safe spaces for them to feel, move, and create alongside one another (Annamma & Handy, 2019). Like Leighton (2009) and Clive (2021), I recognize there are challenges for nondisabled theater researchers and practitioners working with disabled artists. Through working within a conceptual framework informed by DisCrit (Annamma, 2013), Disability Justice (Sins Invalid, 2019), Hadley’s (2020) theorizations of aesthetic allyship (Hadley, 2020), and Mei-Singh’s (2021) theorizations of accompaniment, I learned more about navigating the complexities of this work in an educational theater context.

I grew up fifteen minutes from BAT, share many salient identities with BAT’s 2023 staff and interns, and, at the time of this study, had a ten-year-long relationship with the organization. Throughout data generation, I noticed how some BAT staff saw me, a community insider and a nondisabled white woman, as a peer, and thus were more open to sharing their journeys with me. I also recognized the danger that, without criticality, my interactions with BAT staff could have reinforced white dominant, ableist norms. I strove to surface these dynamics through asking questions and voicing my own learning. For example, I frequently brought up examples from my own teaching to illustrate how ableism and racism circulated in theater education.

As a white, nondisabled, theater director and researcher, I held power, especially in relation to the multiply marginalized disabled students in this study. I worked to mitigate this dynamic by selecting

collaborative, arts-based approaches to data generation. In doing so, I tried to create settings that empowered disabled youth of color to share their expertise. Additionally, I held my methods flexibly, adapting them in response to the agency of community partners and participants. In my preliminary research, where I explored disabled participants' agency in a virtual theater space, this looked like saying yes when participants reframed research interviews as joyful, Jimmy Fallon-style talk show engagements (Zdeblick, 2023). Throughout the following section, I will illustrate how this flexible stance impacted data generation in this study.

Data Generation

Over June, July, and August of 2023, I spent over 300 hours engaging BAT's high-school-aged interns, adult teaching artists, and Connections participants in theorizing injustice in normative theater education and co-creating a theater performance project with ATA students. I organized our process through tenets of community-based co-design, a technique of participatory design research (PDR) that engages communities in critiquing existing power structures and designing towards more equitable futures (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016). Community-based co-design is cyclical, comprising macro and micro cycles of relationship and theory building, design, enactment, and reflection (Ishimaru et al., 2018). In alignment with liberatory theater pedagogies and Disability Justice (see e.g., Dolan, 2001; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018b), co-design is utopian; it engages historically marginalized communities in imagining and creating more just learning environments in the here and now (Gutiérrez et al., 2020). Co-design recognizes that "expertly" designed learning environments according to "neutral, objective" criteria tend to be neither neutral nor objective, but rather reify existing power structures (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016). To resist this, co-design focuses on developing reciprocal, accountable relationships between researchers and communities (Ishimaru et al., 2018).

Theorizing Ableism and Racism in Normative Theater Education

The first phase of co-design involves developing relationships with participants and making collective sense of existing power structures (Ishimaru et al., 2018). As I was interested in both documenting the norms and expectations of normative theater education and exploring how these norms and expectations might fail students, particularly disabled students of color, I thought expansively about whom to include in this phase. BAT's teaching artists (N=18, Table 1) and high-school aged interns (N=14, Table 2) knew how to create "quality" theater productions through a normative lens, and some held identities (nonwhite, neurodivergent) often marginalized in educational theater. However, their professional roles externally validated their belonging in normative theater education spaces. In contrast, Connections participants (N=6, Table 3) had less theater experience and expressed a lack of belonging in educational arts spaces. Though I recognize that for a variety of reasons, marginalized people cannot always see or name the systems of oppression that shape their lived experiences (e.g., not every disabled person is comfortable identifying ableism; Johnson & McRuer, 2014), Connections participants lent a particular kind of expertise to this study as disabled people.

I learned about participants' racial and disability identities through a variety of sources. Informed by my theoretical framework, I understand race and disability as social constructions with real, material impacts on human beings. Some participants chose to share (or declined to share) these identities through a demographic survey sent to them following data generation. For participants who filled out this survey, I honored their self-identifications. For participants who did not fill out the survey but participated in data generation, I noted identities that surfaced during data generation activities. As this was not a study on identity, but rather a study on how systems of oppression position individuals in proximity to "normalcy," for participants who did not fill out the survey and did not reflect on their racial and/ or disability identities during data generation, I noted how (based on their appearance and

relationship to certain institutions) they may have been broadly positioned with respect to systems of oppression (person of color/ POC vs. white, disabled vs. nondisabled).

Table 1

BAT Teaching Artists

Pseudonym	Job Title	Racial Identity/ Positioning	Disability Identity/ Positioning
Abby (she/her)	Costume Designer	White	Neurodivergent
Grace (she/her)	Stage Manager	White	Nondisabled
Della (she/her)	Costume Designer	White	Neurodivergent
Becca (she/her)	Admin Assistant	White	Nondisabled*
Vera (she/her)	Music Director	White	Nondisabled, navigating depression, anxiety or other mental health conditions
Taylor (she/they)	Hair/ Makeup Designer	White	Nondisabled
Greg (he/him)	Set Designer	White	Nondisabled
Liza (she/her)	Hair/ Makeup Designer	White	Neurodivergent, chronically ill
Heather (she/her)	Acting Instructor	White	Neurodivergent
Eliza (she/her)	Internship Coordinator	Mixed Race	Nondisabled
Cara (she/her)	Executive Director	White	Nondisabled
Valerie (they/them)	Asst. Music Director	White	Nondisabled*
Sara (she/her)	Artistic Director	White	Nondisabled
Nina (she/her)	Choreographer	POC*	Nondisabled
Tara (she/her)	Production Manager	White	Nondisabled, Neurodivergent (dyslexia)
Katie (she/her)	Managing Director	White	Nondisabled
Grant (he/him)	Stage Manager	Mixed Race	Nondisabled
Hanna (she/her)	Volunteer	White	Nondisabled

* Indicates where I am referring to participants' positioning within these systems rather than self-identifications

Table 2

BAT High School Interns

Pseudonym	Racial Identity/	Disability Identity/ Positioning
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Positioning		
Aadhya (she/her)	Indian American	Nondisabled
Emir (all pronouns)	Mixed Race	Neurodivergent
Divya (she/her)	Asian	Neurodivergent
Elizabeth (she/her)	White	Nondisabled
Zia (she/her)	White, Latinx	Neurotypical, navigating depression, anxiety, or other mental health conditions
Jason (he/him)	Black	Declined to share
Emma (she/her)	White	Nondisabled
Isla (she/her)	White	Navigating depression, anxiety, or other mental health conditions
Kyleigh (she/her)	White	Declined to share
Eloise (she/her)	White	Neurodivergent
Jae (she/he)	Asian	Neurotypical
Jenna (she/her)	Mixed Race	Nondisabled
Kayla (she/her)	White	Nondisabled
Emi (she/her)	Asian	Neurodivergent

Table 3*Connections Participants*

Pseudonym	Racial Identity/ Positioning	Disability Identity/ Positioning
Ella (she/her)	White*	Down Syndrome
Chloe (she/her)	White*	Disabled
Imogen (she/her)	White*	Disabled*
Rose (she/her)	White	Disabled*
Alexa (she/her)	POC*	Disabled*
George (he/him)	White*	Disabled*

* Indicates where I am referring to participants' positioning within these systems rather than self-identifications

I wanted to draw on participants' wisdom to form a situated theory of how ableism and racism operated in normative theater education, while foregrounding participants' humanity and without

putting participants' possible traumas on display. Given these considerations, I chose to engage BAT teaching artists, BAT interns, and Connections participants in narrative inquiry. Both qualitative inquirers and arts-based researchers employ narrative inquiry (Barone & Eisner, 2006). Through co-creating stories with participants (Leavy, 2022), narrative inquirers restore "the human subject to the center of... inquiries" (Collins, 2013, p. 195). Often, this process involves fictionalization, whether to protect the identities of participants, create distance between a participant and their stories to enable more authentic sharing, engage participants imaginatively in more accessible ways, or combine stories into collectively-representative composite narratives (Caine et al., 2017; Humphreys & Watson, 2009). While mainstream qualitative research embraces some forms of fictionalizing (e.g., pseudonyms), some forms (e.g., fictionalized narratives) remain more controversial. However, Barone and Eisner (2011) argue that fictionalized narratives can powerfully disrupt assumptions and reveal alternate ways of interpreting social phenomena. They may surface particular qualities, tensions, or questions about practice that might not otherwise be visible (Barone & Eisner, 2006). Further, within critical theoretical frameworks, scholars can employ fictionalized or semi-fictionalized narratives to highlight how individuals both reinscribe and resist systems of power (Beneke, Machado, et al., 2022; Collins, 2011). Fictionalizing can support communities in attending to how oppression circulates in their settings, rather than indicting a few "bad" individuals for their "bad" actions.

Specifically, I engaged participants in story circles, a method of narrative inquiry adapted from indigenous practice and employed by Cornerstone Theater (Faulkner, 2006; García-Romero, 2010; St. John, 2021). Story circles center Disability Justice practices of storytelling, artmaking, and education (Kafai, 2021). Story circles, like community design circles (Ishimaru et al., 2018), focus on cultivating relationships and centering community wisdom. Before each story circle, I engaged participants in informed consent processes (Bhattacharya, 2017). I emailed BAT interns and teaching artists information about this study, with a video of me talking through my research questions and going over

an attached consent form. I took additional time, care, and attention discussing the meaning of research and co-constructing inclusive processes for consent and refusal with disabled participants from Connections (Snelgrove, 2005). I visited the two group homes where Connections participants lived to introduce myself and go over consent forms. During these visits, participants gave me tours—some chose to show me their rooms, others talked me through their favorite meal prep activities—and asked me questions about my research. I emphasized that every part of the process was optional, and participants could withdraw at any time. Everyone selected their own way (in words or through nonverbal gestures; e.g., signing “all done” in ASL) to indicate they needed a break or wanted to stop participating in research. I also asked participants how they most liked to share their ideas.

I conducted four story circles, one over Zoom with BAT teaching artists, one in-person with BAT interns at BAT, and two in-person with Connections participants (one at each of the two group homes where participants lived). I chose to conduct story circles in these small groups both for participants’ convenience and to enable participants to safely share their stories with others who had similar lived experiences. At the beginning of each story circle, in pursuit of the Disability Justice principle of collective access (Sins Invalid, 2019), I invited participants to check-in about their access needs. I emphasized that everyone has access needs that shift over time, but some of us are more accustomed to these needs being met in most spaces. As an example, I offered that as a monolingual English speaker, I could not access information in other languages without an English language interpreter or English captioning. One at a time, participants either expressed their unmet access needs or shared that their access needs were currently being met. When unmet access needs arose, participants and I worked together to find a way to meet these needs in community. For example, when Chloe shared in a Connections story circle that she had an injured wrist, I offered to be her scribe (she accepted). I reiterated consent and refusal procedures to make sure participants understood their ongoing participation was voluntary and that they could opt out of any portion of the day’s activities.

The two BAT story circles followed a similar outline (see

Appendix A). Both existed as part of larger summer trainings, during which participants had dedicated time to build trust and community with one another. Returning BAT interns also had previous exposure to TL Lewis's definition of ableism (2022) and the Disability Justice Principles (Sins Invalid, 2019) from my work with them the previous summer. Both circles began with participants playing a common theater game, Emotion Ball. This game contributes to what Sandahl (2005b) calls the "tyranny of the neutral" in actor training by communicating that there is a correct way to perform different emotions. After playing, I asked participants to reflect on the question: What assumptions does this game make about your body and mind? Through reflecting on their personal experiences, participants surfaced how this game communicates that there is a "right" and "wrong" way to perform emotions, demands a level of emotional vulnerability that might not be safe for students of color or students labeled with disabilities, and, ultimately, advances a narrow view of who can succeed in a theater classroom. I used this conversation to introduce an intersectional analysis of ableism and racism in theater education (Annamma et al., 2013) and explore how ideas about good art can exclude some forms of expression (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018b). This step was especially crucial for participants with dominant identities; before theater educators with dominant identities (like myself) can shift our practices, we "must acknowledge [our] own race [and ability] and how it functions in [our] own pedagogy" (Schroeder-Arce, 2017, p. 112).

After establishing this framing, I proceeded with the next step of the story circle methodology (Faulkner, 2006): engaging participants in an independent, creative activity. I invited participants to draw or journal their responses to a series of prompts: Who are you, and what identities impact how you experience theater education? When have you felt you belonged (or noticed someone else belonged) in theater education? When have you struggled to belong (or noticed someone else struggling to belong) in theater education? How did you learn what it meant to be "normal" in theater education? Next, I invited participants to tell stories in partners about the things they had drawn or written. After

both partners had shared, I invited participants to creatively respond to their partners' stories by creating a monologue, poem, or drawing that illustrated their partner's perspective. After a short amount of time, I asked participants to share their work with one another and solicit feedback by asking questions (e.g., How well did I capture your perspective? What did I miss?). Participants then had an opportunity to revise their artwork. Though I had initially planned to video record partners' conversations, in the moment, I worried this might have negatively influenced how comfortable partners felt talking to one another. Additionally, I worried about background noise from other participants telling stories at the same time. Ultimately, I chose not to record stories told during the circle. Instead, after the story circle, I asked participants if I could photograph artifacts from their creative processes (both initial notes/ drawings and final composed monologues/ drawings) for later qualitative analysis (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Though these methods were already a departure from more traditional narrative inquiry techniques that focus on soliciting verbal stories from isolated individuals (Clandinin, 2007), sometimes reinforcing ableist, racist ideas about who counts as a storyteller (Kidd et al., 2017), I wanted to go further in my work with Connections participants. I wanted to support participants in interdependently theorizing through whichever combination of means was most accessible to them. In my initial conversations with Connections participants about research and access, participants shared various preferences around communicating their ideas (i.e., Chloe preferred direct questions and answers; Imogen liked to draw, paint, or write; Rose preferred collage). I brought a variety of art materials to Connections story circles, so participants could choose to talk, draw, paint, write, or collage, whatever was most accessible. Recognizing how available materials afford and constrain collage possibilities, I provided participants with photocopied pages of *We Move Together*, a picture book by Disability Justice artist-activists (Fritsch & McGuire, 2021), which used later in the study. I selected this book for its poetic text and vibrant illustrations, which featured multiply marginalized people engaged in Disability Justice

community activism (Annamma et al., 2013). Additionally, to cultivate interdependent narrative construction between groups of participants, I provided printouts of words, phrases, and images that emerged from story circles at BAT. Connections participants engaged in story circles with their roommates, with whom they had already cultivated community.

To make it easier for me to provide individualized support, these story circles were intentionally small; one had only two participants and one had four. Their smaller size meant I was much more involved in participants' storytelling; I was a part of all conversations as they took place. Given that participants did not privately tell one another stories, I chose to record these story circles for later analysis. In these story circles, I asked Connections participants to reflect on similar questions to BAT teaching artists and interns. Using plain language to promote accessibility, I asked: "Who are you?" "When did you belong in theater?" and "When did you not belong in theater?" However, when the time came to ask how participants had learned what it meant to be "normal" in theater education, I paused. In response to earlier prompts, multiple participants had already shared stories about being labeled "abnormal" or "deviant" in theater spaces. Asking this question about normalcy felt redundant and possibly harmful; I had no justification for asking participants to reflect on likely traumatic moments. Recognizing this, I instead asked participants to draw on their lived experiences of disability and tell me how to make theater more inclusive. I created art alongside participants in response to these questions. As we shared materials and watched one another work, we talked about how and why we were making what we were making. I again photographed artifacts from participants' creative processes for later analysis (Bhattacharya, 2017).

To support theorizing across BAT and Connections story circles, while keeping the focus on systems over individual actions (I wanted to avoid singling out individual trauma or actions perpetuating ableism and racism), I created a fictionalized composite narrative (see Appendix B) that illustrated initial themes across participants' stories (Barone & Eisner, 2006). Synthesizing across story circles enabled the

best of both worlds. Participants could safely share individual stories within affinity spaces and then see their stories become part of a larger whole. This composite narrative built community across partnering organizations and afforded a nuanced portrait of how ableism and racism circulated in theater education from diverse perspectives.

Teaching Towards Disability Justice at All Together Academy

Following these story circles, I worked with a core team of BAT staff (N=2) and interns (N=3) and one Connections participant, selected for their interest and availability, to design and teach a theater residency with the racially and neurodiverse students of All Together Academy. I describe the participants below who, along with me, made up the ATA teaching team.

Heather. Heather (see Figure 3) was a cis-gender, female teaching artist in her mid-thirties who had been teaching at BAT for seven years. Overall, Heather had experienced success and belonging in theater spaces—during a story circle, a fellow BAT staff member even wrote Heather’s name as an example of what she saw as “normal” in theater education. As someone diagnosed with ADHD in adulthood, Heather shared that theater was one of the only places she felt belonging in school. In other spaces, she shared how she had to mask to fit in, saying, “I had to really push myself to fake interest and try to stay focused in areas I just didn’t want to” (Heather, interview, 6/27/23). However, when she pursued acting professionally in New York after college, belonging became more difficult. As a plus-sized woman, Heather struggled with the “preference and favoritism shown towards people who were thinner and presented thinner” (Heather, interview, 6/27/23). After a brief stint in New York, she moved to California and applied to work at BAT. It was close to where she grew up, and she had known the current executive director, Sara, from high school. Soon after Heather started at BAT, they sent her to a teaching artist conference. At this conference, Heather joined a breakout session about students’ different learning styles. Reflecting on this experience, Heather shared, “that was kind of the first time where I really started to go, ok so I need to find various entry points for different people, different

children, to engage with the work” (Heather, interview, 6/27/23). And, when BAT created its inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility (IDEA) committee following the racial uprisings of 2020, Heather—who does not consider herself “the most activist person,” but had been involved in some activism in college (Heather, interview, 6/27/23)—was excited to get involved. Though she was busy with many other things at BAT over the summer (e.g., teaching acting classes, serving as a substitute music director), Heather was excited to join the ATA teaching team for all six weeks of our process.

Figure 3

Heather and an ATA Student During We Move Together



Hanna. Hanna was a cis-gender, white, nondisabled woman in her early twenties who had grown up doing technical theater at BAT. The previous summer, Hanna had worked at BAT as an assistant production manager. I initially approached Hanna’s younger sister, Emma, a high-school intern at BAT, to see if she wanted to be involved in the ATA teaching team. As the assistant director of BAT’s

flagship summer musical, Emma thought she would be too busy. Emma suggested I approach her sister instead. Hanna was home for the summer, after finishing up her sophomore year at a large public university in the Midwest. As she had not found a summer internship in computer science (her major), she was looking for ways to spend her time. Hanna was passionate about joining the ATA team because, as a woman studying computer science, she knew what it was like to disrupt others' expectations of "normalcy" with her very presence. She described this as experiencing "the constant shock of, 'Oh my God, we can do something'" (Hanna, interview, 6/30/23). Though she identified as nondisabled, Hanna also experienced occasional, involuntary vocal tics. Hanna also remembered the joy of working with college students when she was a child; she was eager to pass down this joy to others. For many reasons, Hanna quickly became an invaluable member of the team. First, she was the only one of us with technical theater expertise (e.g., knowledge of sound, lights, stage management, production management, etc.). Hanna also connected with individual ATA students over her love of guitar and computer science. Hanna had a passion for increasing access to theater education. Though Hanna remembered volunteering in special education classrooms as a high-school student and finding it stressful, she was adamant that we frame working at ATA as "just doing theater." She shared:

I think that having access as a kid to programs that allow you to explore a lot of different areas and do things, build up teamwork or whatever, I think that's really valuable. And I think this is a cool way to do that for people that maybe have been overlooked in that process. They're not necessarily given access to those spaces. And yeah, I don't know it, it's not, "let's bring theater to the kids" kind of thing. It's not that. That feels icky. It's weird. It's no different to me than just, "Let's go to a school and teach kids how to do theater and build people's confidence in being able to express themselves." (Hanna, interview, 6/30/23).

Throughout all six weeks of our process, Hanna advocated for the value of theater education in the lives of all young people.

Chloe. Chloe was a mid-twenties white woman labeled with IDD who came to BAT through Connections (see Figure 4). During data generation, Chloe was enrolled in a program in child development at a local community college so she could achieve her dream of being an early childhood teacher. Chloe missed roughly a third of our classes at ATA because they conflicted with her required volunteer placement in a preschool classroom. But, I agreed with Hanna that “the energy was better when [she was] there” (Hanna, interview, 8/16/23). Along with her energy, Chloe brought a passion for kids, cats, and playing guitar. She did not have much experience with theater education, save for volunteering as a teaching assistant and taking a class for Connections participants at BAT the prior spring. Chloe needed longer processing time than others on the team, which helped us all slow down—revolutionary in the fast-paced world of theater education—and make better decisions. Still, Chloe shared in her final interview that she found our meetings challenging, saying, “In the meeting some of the time I didn't really get to speak. So that was the hard part because I actually wanted to speak, and it was a fast motion” (Chloe, interview, 8/11/23). Though I was passionate about moving together in neurodiverse community, and I thought I had accommodated Chloe’s need for longer processing times, looking back, I needed to slow our group down even more. As Lazard (2019) offered, accessibility is both a promise and a practice. The moments when I fall short of its promise—as I did here with Chloe—are reminders to keep practicing.

Figure 4

Chloe During We Move Together

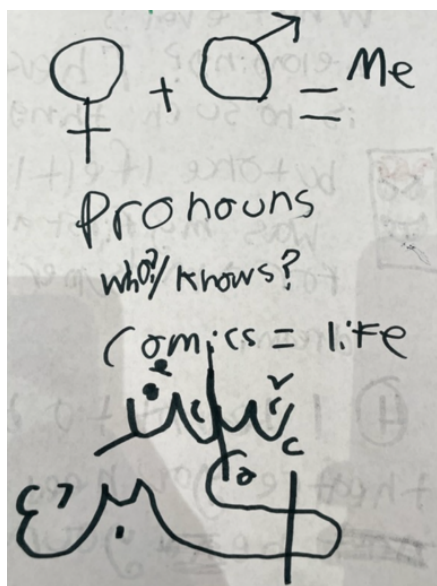


Emir. Emir, a mixed-race Pakistani American and white Muslim student with ADHD who identified as queer and used any pronouns, was an entering ninth-grade student and first-year intern at BAT, supporting the K-8 production of *SpongeBob: The Musical Youth Edition*. In his response to the story circle prompt reflecting on her identities, they created this art piece (see Figure 5). In it, notice how he uses an equation with the symbols for male and female and question marks following the word pronouns to represent her gender expansively, shares their passion for comics, and writes in Arabic. Emir brought her whole self, including their knowledge of famous actors' processes, and his expertise developed over many years as a theater student to their internship at BAT and her role on the ATA teaching team. When Emir first tried theater, they remembered it feeling like “a foreign language,” but now he felt comfortable in theater spaces (Emir, interview, 6/21/23). She hesitated to use the word belonging, however, to describe their growing comfort with theater spaces because he felt the word lacked meaning. Emir believed “everybody is so unique that there's no belonging in groups... Everybody

belongs everywhere” (Emir, interview, 6/21/23). At the beginning of our process, Emir was mostly excited about stepping into a facilitator role for the first time, especially for a devising process (a theater rehearsal process beginning with an idea, but no prewritten script). She had been a student in BAT’s devising camp the previous summer and loved it. Though Emir had an ADHD diagnosis and was open about taking medication, they did not identify as disabled. Prior to working with the students at ATA, Emir’s only experience with disability was with a student at his middle school, diagnosed with Down Syndrome. This student had made unwelcome romantic advances towards some of Emir’s classmates, and Emir felt her job was to “try to reign him in, stop from doing whatever he plans to do” (Emir, interview, 6/21/23). Emir was involved in just the first three weeks of the ATA residency, after which they joined the cast of BAT’s high-school summer camp show, *Mean Girls*, as an ensemble member. Alongside the *Mean Girls* cast, Emir did get to watch ATA students perform, and called it “super cool... a rare and awesome experience” to watch something he had worked on but then stepped away from, come together in its final version (Emir, interview, 8/13/23).

Figure 5

Emir’s Art Piece



Aadhya. Like Emir, Aadhya was an entering ninth-grade student, joining BAT as an intern for the K-8 production of *SpongeBob: The Musical Youth Edition*. Aadhya, a nondisabled, cisgender, second-generation Indian American, had been a summer camper at BAT for the past seven summers (I remember her playing a giraffe in her first production, *The Lion King Jr.*, at age six). When I asked Aadhya to reflect on her identities and her relationship to theater education, she shared how, as an Indian American, she identified with aspects of both Indian and American culture. Theater gave her a place to explore different identities, and, in doing so, become more herself. She said that in theater, “I was able to become different people and explore how I express myself and how I can change myself to become someone else. But I can still keep my identity, but explore as well” (Aadhya, interview, 6/23/23). However, Aadhya had recently taken a break from performing and chosen to try teaching theater instead. As she got older, she felt like others expected her to be “super passionate” and make theater her “whole hobby.” When she decided to take a break, she felt like, “Oh, it’s not normal for me to do that” (Aadhya, interview, 6/23/23). Going into the project with ATA, Aadhya felt excited about helping a group of new-to-theater students share their stories but nervous that, as a nondisabled person, she might come off as trying to “fix” ATA students. She shared:

... because I personally identify as someone who is nondisabled, I have a lot of my needs met in everyday life. And I am looking forward to helping other people learn about or see the world through the eyes of disabled people... And I'm super excited for the play... I think [ATA students are] going to enjoy it... because they're getting to tell their story... I am nervous too; I just don't want to come off in a wrong way. I want to make sure that I'm there for them and my goal is to help them out. And I don't want it to seem like I'm trying to fix them or anything like that.

(Aadhya, interview, 6/23/23)

Like Emir, Aadhya was only involved with the first three weeks of the ATA residency. And, because of an ankle injury, she was unable to attend ATA students’ performance. Despite her shortened involvement,

Aadhya's patience, kindness, attention to individual students' needs, and critical reflexivity made her an invaluable asset to our team. At the end of the process, Hanna stated simply, "Aadhya is always a superstar" (Hanna, interview, 8/16/23).

Jason. During data generation, Jason was in the summer between his junior and senior years of high school (see Figure 6). Jason, who identified as a gay, Black artist and storyteller, joined our team as Emir and Aadhya left. Reflecting on how anti-Blackness and cisheteropatriarchy had harmed him, Jason shared:

I'm Black and I'm also gay, just seeing my mannerisms and stuff. And that comes with a lot of blessings, but at the same time, a lot of challenges too with how people interact with me or choose to interact with me, whether I'm seen as the token Black guy or the token gay guy, or people want to show their prejudice towards me based on these identities I have. (Jason, interview, 7/17/23)

When I asked him to reflect on his relationship to disability, Jason did not share whether he identified as disabled or nondisabled. Instead, he told me a story about how a few years earlier he had pursued an evaluation for fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD). Growing up in foster care, Jason was aware that his mom drank during her pregnancies, and he wondered whether some of what he called his "behaviors" were connected to that. He shared:

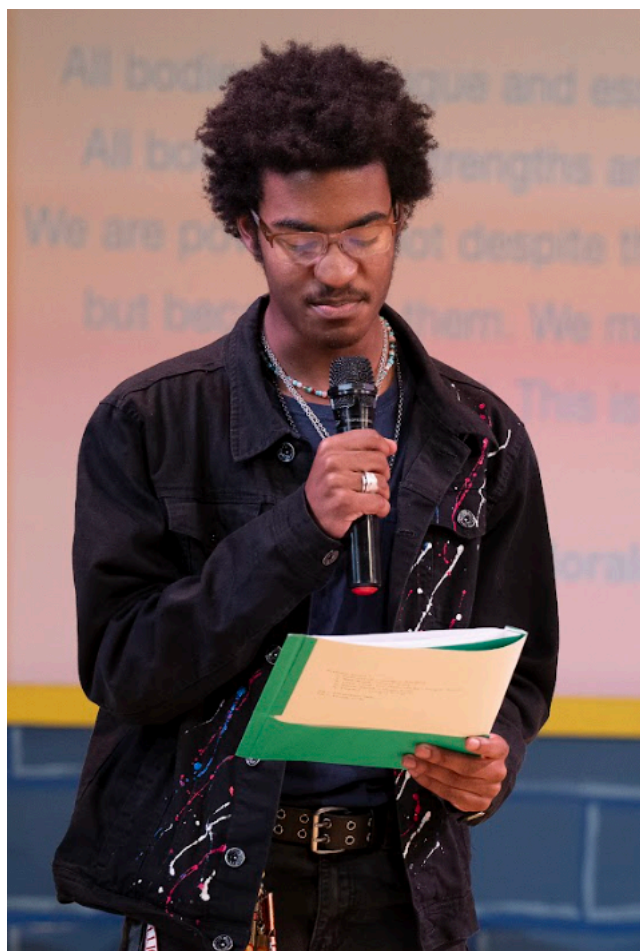
A lot of people make fun of me for walking on my toes. That's my little model walk that I do where it's like wind is blowing and I'm hopping up and down and stuff. And I don't even realize it because I'm so tall and I don't even notice. But it's, I see a lot of people making fun of me for that. And it's like, well, FASD does have a coordination kind of change that happens. So that might be why. That might mess up my coordination and stuff. (Jason, interview, 7/17/23)

I did not ask Jason about the results of this evaluation. On my own, I wondered whether Jason's "model walk" (which I had interpreted as an expression of his queer identity), had only been pathologized

because Jason was a young Black man in the foster care system. Jason jumped into his role on the ATA team with enthusiasm. As he lived at the intersections of multiple axes of oppression, Jason was keenly aware of how ableism and racism operated at BAT and helped our team see ways of shifting our work closer to Disability Justice. Jason also bonded with one ATA student over their shared love of Michael Jackson, and even stepped outside of his comfort zone—Jason identified as an actor—to run the sound cues for *We Move Together*.

Figure 6

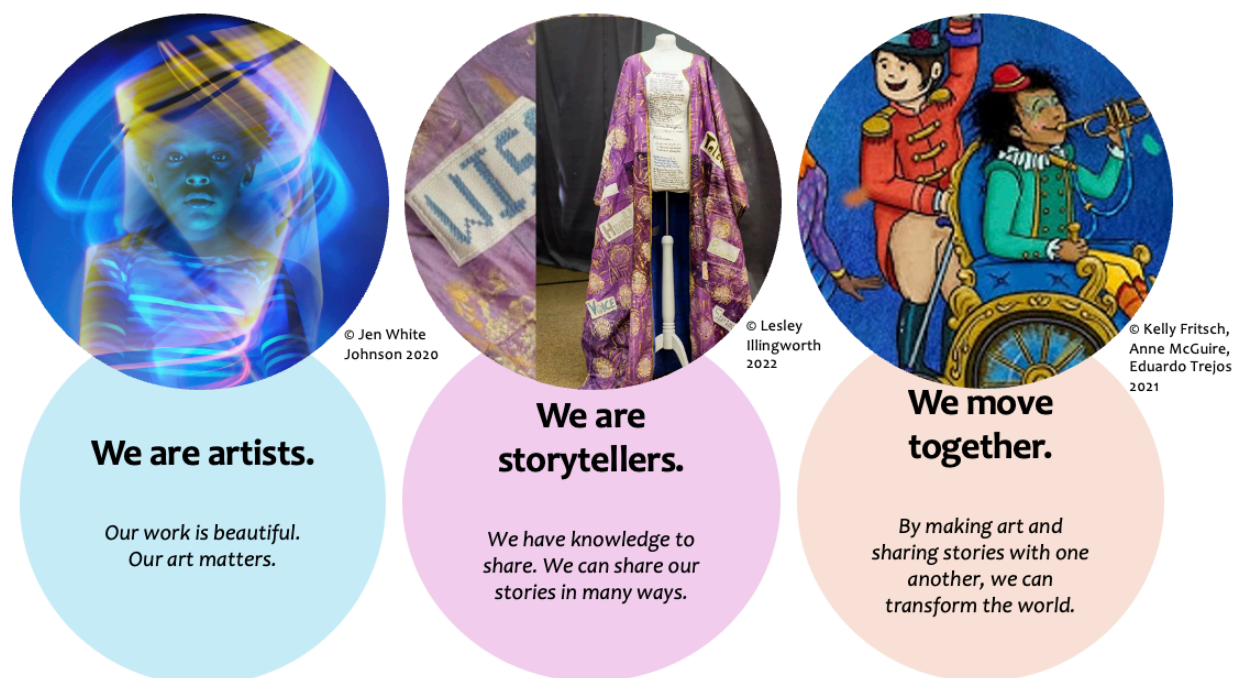
Jason Introducing We Move Together



Design Framework

Before meeting with the ATA teaching team, I considered how I might scaffold the co-design process to invite participants' agency (Vakil et al., 2022). I wanted the teaching team to be involved in designing the ATA residency from the beginning, but I also wanted to make sure that we rooted our collective design work in Disability Justice (Sins Invalid, 2019). I worried that sharing my initial theoretical and conceptual frameworks would not invite participants' agency. First, I imagined sharing these frameworks might give an impression of completeness when I knew they would shift and change throughout data generation. Second, I worried these frameworks would prove inaccessible to teaching team members who came from outside academia, especially Chloe, who was labeled with IDD, and Emir and Aadhya, who had yet to enter high school. Therefore, inspired by the process of value mapping (Ryoo & Shea, 2015), I distilled my theoretical commitments into a loose design framework, consisting of three statements (see Figure 7). I animated these statements through three images created by disabled artists, to center the Disability Justice principle of Leadership of the Most Impacted (Sins Invalid, 2019) and facilitate multimodal engagement. By highlighting disabled artists, I employed a historicized approach (Vossoughi et al., 2016) that acknowledged how disabled folks have long participated in performance and artmaking for joy, resistance, and liberation. In conversations with participants, I held this framework loosely, offering it as a starting point for our collective theorizing.

Figure 7

Design Framework for Disability Justice in Theater Education***Participatory Design and Teaching***

Our teaching team gathered for six weekly meetings (all video recorded for later analysis) over the six weeks of data generation. In the days surrounding our first meeting, I also met one-on-one with each teaching team member for a video recorded interview. We began our first meeting by sharing our names and pronouns and answering a fun question, suggested by Heather (“If you had to eat one food forever, what would it be?”). Sitting in a circle on the rug, we checked in about our access needs. I learned that sitting in chairs would be more accessible for our team than sitting on the floor and committed to locating chairs for our subsequent meetings. We read and discussed the picture book, *We Move Together*, and looked over the design framework (see Figure 7). Reflecting on the design framework catalyzed generative conversations that made our various “pedagogical philosophies and practices” explicit (Vossoughi et al., 2016, p. 215). We discussed why we cared about these ideas and how we might animate them through curriculum. Though I remained open to the idea that we might not

all care about these ideas, and they might need to shift over time, team members embraced the design framework as I presented it. Thinking with and through various sensory materials I provided (e.g., colorful scarves, noisemakers, paper and markers), we planned the first day of classes at ATA. At the end of the meeting, I distributed copies of the composite narrative I created from story circles (see Appendix B) to all participants and invited them to note things that did and did not resonate with their own experiences and add things they felt were missing. When we reviewed the composite narrative in a subsequent meeting, I was surprised by how much of the narrative resonated with each participant, including Chloe. While I expected to revise it significantly, most participants' feedback consisted of underlining accompanied by statements like "this is real" and exclamation points in the margins. No cuts or alterations were suggested.

Together, our teaching team co-taught nine sessions with each of three different age groups (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school; ATA staff did not think their preschoolers would enjoy developing a play) on campus at ATA. Before these classes, I traveled to ATA twice to observe classes in progress, build relationships, and engage potential participants in a discussion about research, consent, and refusal (Snelgrove, 2005). These visits happened alongside a more typical consent form distributed electronically to students and guardians for assent and consent. Students who declined to participate in research still participated in our residency, but I excluded their data from analysis. The students of ATA were approximately 50% white and 50% BIPOC. Most were labeled with at least one intellectual or developmental disability, and many were also labeled as gifted. For several reasons, I intentionally did not ask individual students how they identified in terms of race and disability. First, this was not a study on identity. Second, I was interested in racism and ableism, not as individual actions perpetrated against individual students, but as systems of oppression that constrain all students and educators (e.g., "you do not need to be disabled to experience ableism"; Lewis, 2022), especially those at the intersection of multiple axes of oppression. Refusing to document individual students' identities forced me to preserve

a broader analytical lens. Most importantly, I worried that a white, nondisabled community outsider questioning students, educators, or families about students' identities might have been threatening and run counter to my larger goal: building a community in which all students had the space and supports to show up as their full selves. Accordingly, in lieu of presenting students' identities in the table below, I chose to incorporate photographs of students and accompanying thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of their likes, dislikes, favored methods of communication, access needs, ways of moving, appearances, etc. into findings. By doing so, I hope to paint three-dimensional portraits of these students as our teaching team came to know them: as whole human beings (Sins Invalid, 2019). For a list of ATA student participants and their respective grade levels, see Table 4.

Table 4

ATA Student Participants

Pseudonym	Grade
James (he/him)	2nd
Juan (he/him)	2nd
Mark (he/him)	3rd
Kyle (he/him)	4th
Kevin (he/him)	5th
Liam (he/him)	5th
Sawyer (he/him)	5th
Tyler (he/him)	5th
Ben (he/him)	6th
Bex (she/her)	6th
Brian (he/him)	6th
Rowan (he/him)	10th

During nine classes at ATA (video recorded for retrospective analysis), we engaged students in a participatory performance as research (PaR) process. A subfield of arts-based research, performance PaR represents a field wherein scholar-artists not only *analyze* but *create* artistic data with participants (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2018). It shares many characteristics with PDR (Trimingham, 2002).

Like PDR, performance PaR positions researchers as both inquirers and subjects of inquiry and engages both theory and practice. Here, however, theory and practice are so enmeshed as to be inseparable. Theorizing happens in and through arts practice, meaning that—along with process documentation and supplementary writing—artistic products themselves must be shared as findings (Nelson, 2013). Guided by this philosophy, and yet resisting what I see as an overemphasis on artistic products rather than processes in arts education, I thoroughly documented our collaborative artistic work. This included recording and photographing students' final performance, but also recording rehearsals and photographing collages and drawings students created in rehearsals for later analysis. After each class at ATA, our teaching team gathered for ten–fifteen minutes to share our reflections from class. In these informal debriefs, we focused on documenting students' ideas, surfacing moments of joy, and sharing our thoughts on things we might change in future classes. We audio recorded these conversations, both to guide future team discussions and provide data for retrospective analysis. Additionally, I engaged three focal students (Liam, Brian, and Mark) in a series of two one-on-one interviews about their experiences, one held at the beginning of the six-week session, and one held midway through. Guided by my theoretical framework, I selected focal students based on my initial classroom observations. I identified students of color whose classroom behaviors (e.g., running around the classroom during instruction; communicating through sounds, gestures, or augmentative and alternative communication devices rather than spoken words) might have marked them as “disruptive” or “difficult to teach” within a normative theater education context.

To spark students' creative process, we turned to the Sins Invalid picture book, *We Move Together* (Fritsch & McGuire, 2021). As I did for Connections story circles, we selected this book for its poetic text, thematic grounding in Disability Justice, references to queer Black and Brown disabled artists, and colorful illustrations of racially and gender diverse disabled characters. Inspired by this book, each class created scenes for a thirty-minute theater piece to share with friends and family on the BAT

stage, as requested by ATA administrators. However, based on our commitment to center students' artistry and storytelling, the resulting theater piece departed dramatically from its source material in form and content. Throughout our classes at ATA, occasional access frictions (Calling Up Justice, 2023)—tensions between different students' and educators' access needs—arose. Rather than framing these frictions as competition, with winners and losers, we strove to find creative solutions for meeting one another's needs together. Several weeks before their performance, ATA high-school students came to BAT to paint their set. I documented this visit through photographs and field notes. On August 2nd, ATA students traveled to BAT for a dress rehearsal (video recorded for retrospective analysis). This dress rehearsal was the first time that all three classes (elementary, middle, and high school) rehearsed their segments of the show in order, together. Finally, on the day of the show, students rehearsed one final time and then performed their show on the BAT stage. I video recorded this final rehearsal and performance as well. Crucially, throughout all data generation activities, team members and I worked to recognize students' acts of noncooperation as legitimate forms of dissent and refusal (Taylor, 2020).

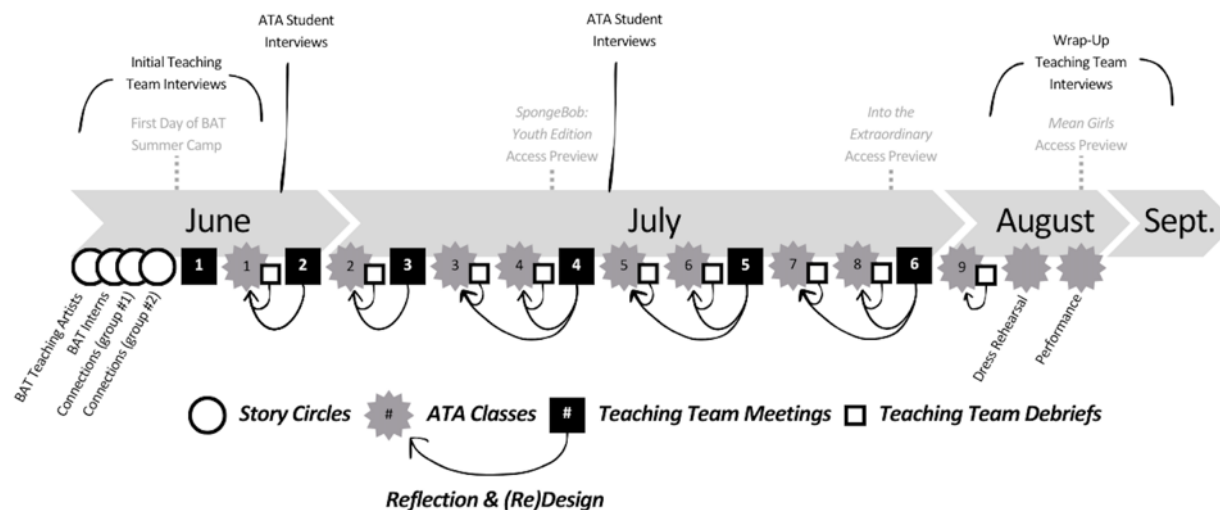
We engaged performance PaR as it was ideal for generating and capturing embodied knowledge (where the knowing is in the doing; Nelson, 2013). Though I tried to capture students' embodied theorizations of Disability Justice through photographs, recordings, and other archival documentation, these artifacts were secondary to what youth themselves generated through embodied performance. Additionally, research suggests that engaging individuals with disabilities through performance PaR can disrupt hierarchical researcher-subject dynamics and provide an inclusive space for collaborative knowledge construction. However, when these projects are led by nondisabled artist-scholars such as myself, normative ideas about "good art" and "good research" can infiltrate the process, denying disabled participants' creative agency (Clive, 2021). In collaboration with the disabled and neurodivergent individuals on our teaching team, I worked to surface and disrupt these normative ideas as they arose. Further, when facilitators center disabled participants' agency, resulting artistic products

can look different than a mainstream audience expects. Audience reactions can marginalize disabled participants (Leighton, 2009). To counter this, I thought about students' performance of *We Move Together* in dialogue with performance ethnography (see e.g., Conquergood, 2013; J. L. Jones, 2002). ATA students' embodied performances on the BAT stage brought the culture of theater education they and our teaching team had created in conversation with the culture of normative theater education at BAT. To bring the audience into students' creative process, I worked with collaborators to craft lobby displays, a program note, and a pre-show announcement explaining our creative process and our intentional efforts to disrupt hegemonic theatrical norms. With the addition of these supplemental materials, *We Move Together* translated students' and teachers' learning throughout the ATA residency into a "performance among the researcher, artifacts from fieldwork, and audiences" (J. L. Jones, 2002, p. 7). Additionally, in small group workshops with all BAT summer camp students who were in the audience, I discussed the theory animating the ATA residency and the process through which ATA students created *We Move Together*.

After summer camp was over, I invited our core teaching team to participate in 1:1 interviews over zoom to reflect about their experiences with the ATA residency. I was able to schedule these interviews with all but Heather, who had stepped away from her position with BAT at the end of the summer. I video recorded these interviews for analysis. For a timeline summarizing data generation activities, see Figure 8. For an expanded table containing all data generation activities, see Appendix C.

Figure 8

Timeline of Data Generation Activities



Data Analysis

I conducted preliminary analyses simultaneously with data generation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The same day as any data generation activity, I captured my evolving thoughts through reflexive memoing in a research journal (Bhattacharya, 2017). In each memo, I documented emerging themes, noted possible ways of shifting future data generation procedures, and reflected on my own role within the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To ground my reflections—essential for both ensuring ethical work and contributing to the rigor of the performance PaR research component (Nelson, 2013)—I used prompts offered by scholars engaged in emancipatory inquiry. Barton (2005) suggests that nondisabled scholars engaged in emancipatory research should ask themselves: “Who is my research for? What right have I to undertake this research? What responsibilities arise from the privileges I have as a result of my social position? Does my writing and speaking reproduce a system of domination, oppression or challenge it?” and “...who has benefited from my work?” (p. 325). Pearson and Dickens (2021) suggest asking: How are you redefining “who counts as a knowledge contributor,” How are you shifting your study and pedagogy to avoid co-opt[ing] and further marginaliz[ing] multiply marginalized disabled

communities,” and How are you “carv[ing] out ways of crippling your research so it is infused with self-love and community care?” (p. 92-3). I journaled my response to one or more of these questions at the end of most memos to hold myself accountable for challenging ableism in qualitative research.

After data generation, I input video and audio recordings of interviews, teaching team meetings, and debriefs into an automated transcription service. I cleaned the resulting transcripts before importing them—along with artifacts generated during story circles, the composite narrative I generated from story circle data (Appendix B), my research journal, and photo documentation of our team’s planning process and ATA students’ creative work—into Atlas.ti. Moving roughly chronologically through this data, I conducted a first cycle of inductive coding. I experimented with several kinds of codes. I leveraged versus coding to surface conflicts and tensions among participants (and between participants and the broader community; Saldaña, 2021). Following community-based co-design’s advice to lean into tensions (Ishimaru, 2020a), as I developed each versus code, I wondered: are these two elements necessarily in opposition? Or is there an opportunity here? If so, what opportunity? I used in vivo coding to “prioritize and honor [each] participant's voice” (p. 102), process coding to capture participants’ embodied actions, and descriptive coding—naming subjects addressed within sections of data—to facilitate connections across visual and verbal data forms (Saldaña, 2021). I tried value coding to capture the meanings participants were making of different experiences. During one research group meeting, I asked my colleagues to collaboratively code a segment of interview transcript, with each person applying only one kind of coding. Through this exercise, I learned that value coding generated codes that were too granular, making connections across participants and data forms difficult, but that versus, in vivo, process, and descriptive coding all surfaced interesting patterns across the data.

Throughout first cycle coding, I memoed about my coding process, connections I saw between different codes, and how codes might relate to my evolving research questions. As this phase continued, I periodically (and tentatively) grouped codes into small categories, arranged small categories into larger

themes, and examined these themes in relation to my research questions. During this intermediate phase, I worked inductively *and* deductively, both adding new codes as they emerged from the data and searching for evidence for existing codes, categories, and themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After coding transcripts, artifacts, and the composite narrative, I had 96 codes, tentatively grouped into categories and themes. Next, to explore my third research question, I decided to analyze the development of two student-created scenes from *We Move Together*. I selected these two scenes, one titled *Platform Maze* and one titled *The Train*, as both were created and performed entirely by students who had elected to participate in this study and each featured a focal student (i.e., Mark and Brian). Additionally, these scenes provided contrasting examples of the creative process: one student working mostly independently (Mark in *Platform Maze*) and a group of students working interdependently (Brian, Tyler, Bex, and Kevin in *The Train*). To analyze these scenes' development, I watched the video recordings of ATA rehearsals and the *We Move Together* performance. Focusing on these scenes, I created rich, interpretive content logs of these recordings (Miles et al., 2014) with thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of settings and participants. In these content logs, I particularly attended to students' and teachers' embodied interactions (Vossoughi et al., 2020). Beginning with the codes developed while analyzing other segments of data, but adding codes as needed, I coded these content logs.

Next, I formalized my tentative codes, categories, and themes into an initial codebook. I also added two deductive codes that had not emerged from the data, but, based on my theoretical framework, felt essential to capture: "the reasonable audience" (Sedgman, 2018) and "access frictions" (Calling Up Justice, 2023). I went back through the data, applying these codes, and occasionally collapsing codes together. I collapsed codes when individually, they captured only small sections of data, but together, they captured a larger set of data that reflected a unified theme. For example, I collapsed the versus code "accompanying vs. upstaging" (meaning supporting without stealing the spotlight) into the in vivo code "ensemble" (meaning performing together), as I decided the former reflected an

example of the latter. Additionally, I adjusted codes and categories based on disconfirming evidence (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For example, an initial category describing part of our collaborative teaching process (i.e., “enacting”) contained the subcodes “time” and “ownership.” However, I noticed that beneath every example of holding time flexibly or recognizing students’ ownership over space, tensions circulated about holding time rigidly or denying students’ ownership over space. Thus, this tentative category of “enacting” became “enacting through tensions.” After second cycle coding, I was left with 74 subcodes, grouped through tiered categories into five larger themes (i.e., unpacking systems of oppression, expectations of “high quality” theater, collaborative teaching process, reimagining “high quality” theater, and model of accompaniment; see Appendix D for my final codebook). These five themes evolved into my three findings chapters (i.e., unpacking systems of oppression and expectations of “high quality” theater became Chapter 4: Constructions of “Quality” in Theater Education, collaborative teaching process and reimagining “high quality” theater became Chapter 5: Rooting “Quality” in Disability Justice, and model of accompaniment became Chapter 6: Pedagogies of Accompaniment).

Throughout these cycles of coding—and my accompanying analytic memoing practice—I triangulated between multiple data sources (e.g., interview data from two interviews with each of six ATA teaching team members) generated through multiple methods (e.g., video-recorded interviews, video-recorded class sessions, artifacts from students’ creative process), looked for disconfirming evidence, and engaged in critical reflexivity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These practices lent trustworthiness to my findings.

In the next three chapters, I will share findings from this summer spent investigating and disrupting ableism and racism in theater education. In chapter four, I will explore how participants grappled with ableism and racism as they circulated in normative theater education to construct ideas of “quality” that framed good theater as the property of whiteness and ability. In chapter five, I will explore

how theater educators and disabled adults collaborated to reimagine theater education as rooted in principles of Disability Justice. Though I will attend to these two complementary processes (surfacing ideas of “quality” in normative theater education and transforming theater education towards Disability Justice) in separate chapters, these processes occurred simultaneously. As participants reflected on ideas of “quality” in normative theater education, they imagined how these ideas might shift, opening up new possibilities for themselves and their students. As they transformed their teaching practices, they further refined their critiques of “quality” norms in normative educational theater. Finally, in chapter six, through tracing the development of *Platform Maze* and *The Train*, I will share how our teaching team engaged pedagogies of accompaniment to validate, extend, and uplift the creative contributions of multiply marginalized disabled youth.

Chapter 4: Constructions of “Quality” in Normative Theater Education

In this chapter, I will explore how BAT teaching artists and Connections participants¹⁴ interrogated how injustice—specifically ableism and racism—circulated in their own experiences of normative theater education contexts, particularly through ideas about “quality.” In the first half of this chapter, beginning with how participants understood ableism and racism at this study’s outset, I will explore *how* participants and I worked to develop shared understandings of ableism and racism through reflecting on how we had been marginalized in theater education and been complicit in marginalizing others. I will consider the role of multimodal collaborative storytelling—particularly as embodied by Connections participants—in our shifting, developing understandings. In the second half of this chapter, I will consider *what* participants theorized, focusing on how participants articulated what it meant to be a “quality” student and artist, participate in a “quality” educational theater process, and perform in a “quality” youth theater production. I will then explore how these normative “quality” standards shaped theater educators’ pedagogy. Drawing on data from story circles alongside data from semi-structured interviews with teaching team members, teaching team conversations, and insights from my analytic memoing practice, I will surface how ableism and racism circulated through both these dimensions of “quality” and the pedagogies they encouraged. By the end of this chapter, I will have outlined the specific “quality” norms and expectations of normative theater education—steeped in whiteness and ableism, incommensurable with Disability Justice in theater education—that our ATA teaching team needed to transform if our residency at ATA were to sustain justice for our multiply marginalized disabled students.

¹⁴ In this chapter, I share data generated with participants who had prior experience in normative theater education contexts (i.e., BAT and Connections participants, excluding ATA students). Exploring data generated with *all* BAT and Connections participants, rather than just with the teaching team, affords an expansive view of how ableism and racism can shape experiences within normative theater education.

Theorizing Ableism and Racism in Theater Education

In this section, I will examine participants' evolving understandings of ableism and racism by 1) exploring how participants defined ableism and racism; 2) discussing how participants understood their relationship to these systems; and 3) considering the role that multimodal storytelling may have played in participants' developing understandings.

Defining Ableism and Racism

Particularly in our early conversations about ableism and racism, participants and I lacked shared definitions of these terms. To center marginalized perspectives (DisCrit tenet 4; Annamma et. al, 2013; Disability Justice principle 2; Sins Invalid, 2019), I encouraged BAT and Connections participants to turn to definitions from multiply marginalized community theorists (e.g., TL Lewis's definition of ableism). However, integrating these perspectives with our varying—often contradictory—prior understandings proved challenging. It sometimes felt as if participants and I were talking past one another, our assumptions about ableism and racism obstructing meaningful dialogue. In hindsight, I wondered if collaboratively defining these terms with participants, rather than leveraging existing definitions, might have better supported us in coming to shared understandings.

At the outset of this study, participants understood ableism and racism in a variety of ways. Most thought of ableism and racism as harmful beliefs and actions, fewer noted the systemic nature of ableism and racism, and even fewer thought about how these systems intersected. Over three months of conversations, design work, and teaching towards Disability Justice in theater education, many ATA teaching team members' ideas about ableism and racism shifted towards more systemic, intersectional views. However, some teaching team members still thought of ableism and racism as primarily existing on an individual level.

Throughout the study, participants who believed ableism and racism consisted of bad, ignorant actions perpetrated by bad, ignorant actors (e.g., racist things said by racist people) struggled to identify

how ableism and racism circulated in theater education. To them, theater education was full of “good” people (theater educators) and “naive” youth, incapable of ableism and racism. Consequently, ableism and racism were somebody else’s problem. While I expected this belief from white, nondisabled participants (for whom racism and ableism often circulate “invisibly;” Annamma et. al, 2013), I was surprised to find it in some participants who themselves had been marginalized by these systems. I had wrongly assumed these participants would understand their experiences in the context of oppressive systems, even though disabled theorists (e.g., Johnson & McRuer, 2014; Lorde, 1980) have demonstrated how ableism can deprive disabled people of the tools to contextualize their own lived experiences. For example, Emir, a 13-year-old queer, mixed-race, neurodivergent teaching artist intern (any pronouns), believed that ableism and racism existed only as intentional individual actions. She believed young children did not know about ableism and racism and consequently could not “be ableist” or “be racist.” For example, when asked how he had noticed ableism and racism in theater education, Emir replied, “I’m going to be real. I’m not seeing anything. I mean, I might have to ask some older kids. I’m working with little kids. I don’t think they know the concept of...” This statement evidenced two of Emir’s understandings: that ableism and racism existed only in individual actions and beliefs and that early elementary schoolers were “too young” to notice ableism and racism. When I followed up and asked if knowing about ableism and racism was necessary for ableism and racism to circulate, they said, “I don’t think, I’ve almost seen them all being friendly towards each other and all playing well. They seem happy and yay” (Emir, interview, 6/21/23). Again, Emir turned towards her individual conception of ableism and racism to answer my question. While scholars have demonstrated that even early elementary schoolers understand ableism and racism (e.g., Beneke, 2021a), to Emir, his “friendly” and “happy” students meant ableism and racism could not be present.

After discussing TL Lewis’s definition of ableism (2021), some teaching team members articulated more systemic understandings of oppression. For example, Hanna, a white, nondisabled

teaching artist defined ableism as dividing all people into different “societal buckets” based on judgments about their value:

I think ableism is assigning value to certain, I think there are certain things that could in theory be conceived as disabilities that societies describe them to be more normal things, and things like breaking your leg or whatever or... Or just, I don't know. I feel like amputees might be in a different societal bucket than some of the kids we were working with. And I think there are certain things that in theory people just have variation in the way that they exist and some things are cool and some things are as described as not cool. So it doesn't really, it's just all labels and constructed. So everyone sort of exists in the system of ableism. (Hanna, teaching team meeting, 6/30/23)

As illustrated, Hanna saw ableism as a system that included everyone, not just disabled people, and grew from a mismatch between the natural variation among human beings and society's rigid expectations about what kinds of variation were “normal.” More systemic understandings, like Hanna's, supported participants in seeing themselves – rather than other bad or ignorant individuals – as implicated in oppression. As I will discuss in later chapters, seeing systems – and their participation within systems – helped set the foundation for participants imagining collective change in the theater education context.

Drawing on the foundational theorizing of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and other Black feminist theorizing (Combahee River Collective, 1986; Lorde, 1984), both DisCrit and Disability Justice frameworks assert we must employ an intersectional lens to understand and disrupt injustice (Annamma et al., 2013; Sins Invalid, 2019). Consequently, I explored the extent to which teaching team members held ableism, racism, and other oppressions simultaneously when considering the impacts of theater education on different bodyminds. The team member who did so most confidently found himself at the intersection of multiple axes of oppression. Jason, a 17-year-old gay Black teaching artist,

expressed, "I'm Black and I'm also gay, just seeing my mannerisms and stuff. And that comes with a lot of blessings, but at the same time, a lot of challenges too with how people interact with me or choose to interact with me, whether I'm seen as the token Black guy or the token gay guy, or people want to show their prejudice towards me based on these identities I have" (Jason, interview, 7/17/23). In car ride conversations, Jason applied this intersectional lens to understanding BAT summer camp policies and procedures. For example, Jason articulated how ableism and racism circulated in one camp tradition: the crowning of "royalty." Every afternoon at BAT summer camp, staff selected several students as the "royalty" of the day. Staff introduced these students by sharing all they had accomplished that day, often praising them for complying with staff requests, making strong acting choices, or being nice to their fellow students. Staff then encouraged other students to compliment the day's royalty (most shared some variation of, "I've known you since [date]. You always [have a smile on your face/ seem happy], you're a great actor, and you're always nice to everyone you meet"). Staff crowned each student, intern, and staff member "royalty" once during camp. Jason critiqued how ableism and racism circulated through what staff and students identified as praiseworthy behaviors. For years, I had believed that because staff crowned everyone, "royalty" was an inclusive practice. I now recognize that as an intern and then staff member, I had participated in discussions about some (often disabled, non-white) students being "hard to crown" and others (often nondisabled, white) students being "students you could crown any day." I helped "catch" these "hard to crown" students "being good" or "being nice" (complying with staff members' requests to perform whiteness and ability). Unlike me, Jason—positioned at the intersection of ableism, racism, and cisheteropatriarchy (and formerly labeled a "hard to crown" student)—did not need years of study to recognize "royalty" as an example of intersectional oppressions in theater education. He understood this right away. I recognize tensions between how Jason and Emir, both students who experienced intersectional oppressions, understood these oppressions (Jason as systemic and intersectional, Emir as individual and discrete). I wondered how

Jason's age (he was several years older than Emir) or life experiences contributed to his confidence analyzing ableism and racism in theater education. Certainly, our teaching team benefited from Jason's wisdom, expertise, and willingness to share with us.

Relationships with Systems of Oppression

When asked to think about how ableism and racism circulated in theater education, even white, nondisabled teaching team members began by sharing stories about how they had been oppressed by ableism, racism, sexism, or other systems in theater education or elsewhere. For example, Heather's first impulse was to reflect on her experiences with sizeism and sexism as a plus-sized woman, saying, "And I think for me, one aspect has been being plus size, or not necessarily fitting, conforming to a size. And so that was definitely one thing where I experienced, in New York, I felt that there was preference and favoritism shown towards people who were thinner and presented thinner" (Heather, interview, 6/27/23). Similarly, Hanna thought about her experiences as a woman studying computer science, sharing how it's "like a system right. I think girls exist in a world it's, it's very intersectional and I am a CS major, but I'm also a girl and it's, it's a very... different experience doing engineering and as a girl in college than it was in high school. It's, it's just the constant shock of, 'Oh my God, we can do something.'" (Hanna, interview, 6/30/23). Rather than implicate themselves in the systems of ableism and racism that position disabled students of color as lacking, Hanna and Heather jumped to empathy, using their own experiences to try to understand how that kind of positioning must feel. Hanna and Heather leveraged empathy to talk about systems of oppression without confronting how they had also benefitted from—and enforced—white, nondisabled standards of performance in theater education. For example, both had participated in BAT's "royalty" ritual for years, and yet neither surfaced this ritual as an example of ableism and racism circulating through theater education. By identifying with the oppressed rather than the oppressor, participants avoided implicating themselves in systemic oppression.

I wondered how much this jump to empathy arose from the questions I asked in story circles, which focused on participants' experiences of belonging or struggling to belong in theater education. I recognized that I might have more directly asked participants to comment on how they had facilitated spaces of "belonging" or "nonbelonging." I chose my language based on my commitment to focus on systems rather than individuals, but I wondered if my phrasing instead gave participants—and myself—an easy way to avoid implicating ourselves. Recognizing this, I probed more directly in an interview with Heather. After she shared her experiences with sizeism as a theater student, I asked her to explicitly reflect on how ableism and racism showed up in her "role as a theater teacher." She responded by expressing her interest in working towards justice, sharing, "I wouldn't say I'm the most activist person. I just enjoy, if I feel like there's something that is unjust. I like working for justice in different spheres and stuff." I echoed her sentiments and then modeled implicating myself, sharing a specific example of how I'd used sticker charts to reward "good" (normative) behaviors at BAT summer camp. After my example, Heather began to articulate her own complicity, sharing that "if a kid has a big reaction or talks out of turn or isn't really focused, so many, I mean, that happens almost every class, and those are behaviors that we often chastise" (Heather, interview, 6/27/23). Drawing on DisCrit solidarity, I understood the emotional and behavioral policing Heather described as grounded in deficit conceptions of multiply marginalized students that obscure their strategic resistance to ableism and racism (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). Though Heather did not explicitly attribute chastising student behaviors to racism or ableism, I inferred from context that she was beginning to see how either or both oppressions circulated through this kind of classroom management. In using the word "we," Heather began to implicate herself in labeling students' emotional reactions as "too big" and enforcing a narrow standard of what it looks like to "be focused" in a theater classroom. However, the word "we" also afforded Heather a measure of distance; she stopped short of naming herself as a perpetrator of harm.

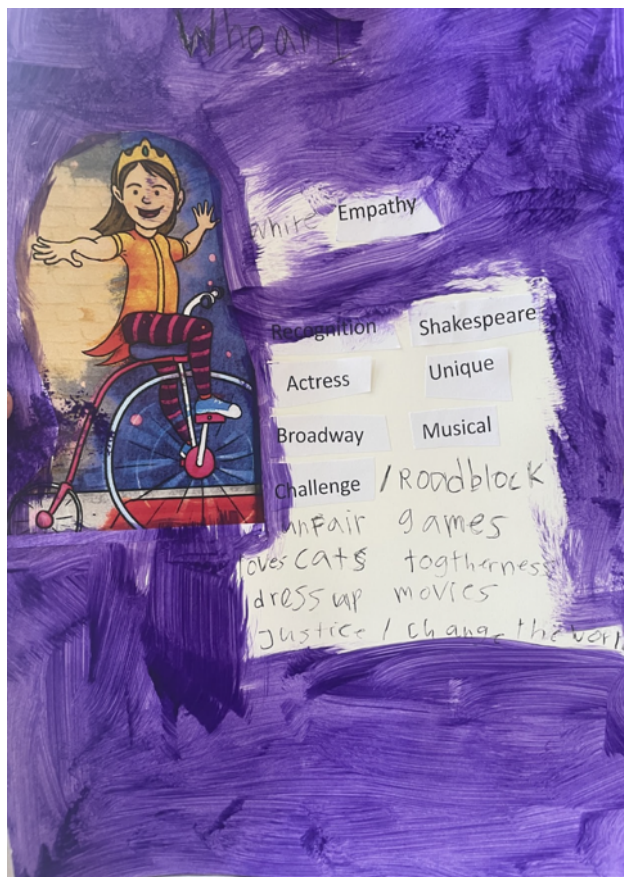
In this and other examples, participants began to name their complicity in how racism and ableism circulated in theater education, evidencing their evolving ideas about these systems of oppression. While not all participants—or even all ATA teaching team members—communicated shifts in their understandings of ableism and racism as explicitly as Heather, I believe engaging with these topics set the foundation for participants’ collective resistance to systems of oppression in theater education. For example, while Emir never articulated a systems-level understanding of ableism or racism, he did share that she had learned “how inaccessible theater can be sometimes, but how easy that can be to change” (Emir, interview, 8/13/23). They had learned to think about combatting ableism by changing the system of educational theater, rather than the students within it.

Multimodal Collaborative Storytelling

Finally, I consider the significance of one way participants grappled with ableism and racism in theater education: multimodal collaborative storytelling, particularly as embodied through both Connections story circles. As you may recall, to facilitate increased accessibility, I held two small story circles with groups of Connections participants, rather than one large story circle. Additionally, upon Rose’s suggestion, I brought collage materials for participants to use in these story circles, alongside other forms of art making and storytelling. By taking up a variety of artistic tools to name their own experiences and tell their own stories, disabled Connections participants built individual and collective agency toward transforming theater education. I understood this process as an example of what Disability Justice calls the “power in the act of naming bodymind experiences... witnessing another’s story and perhaps finding homecoming in them” (Kafai, 2021, p. 73). Though this happened multiple times, I will focus on one illustrative example: Rose’s self-portrait (see Figure 9), shared with her fellow Connections participants during her story circle.

Figure 9

Rose's Self Portrait



Rose, a white woman labeled with IDD from Connections, produced this image during a story circle by combining an image from *We Move Together*, words written by BAT staff and interns, her own words, and painting. The image is a self-portrait, evidenced by the words “Who am I?” lurking beneath a layer of purple paint at the top of the image. Rose began her creative process by sifting through photocopied pages from *We Move Together*. When she saw the image of the girl on the unicycle, she beamed with excitement and shared that the image reminded her of herself as a child (“finding homecoming” in another’s story; Kafai, 2021, pg. 73). From there, Rose sifted through words shared by BAT staff and interns. First, she found the word “empathy,” which she felt described herself. Comparing the image she had chosen to other images from *We Move Together*, Rose added the word “white” to

her evolving collage. Next, Rose selected words like “recognition,” “Shakespeare,” “actress,” “Broadway,” and “musical.” Though she did not say so explicitly, I inferred that she chose these words to claim belonging in the world of theater and theater education. However, she also selected words like “unique” and “challenge” that reminded her of how she had not always belonged in theater education. Inspired, she abandoned the printed words and began writing her own. In her own words, she explored how her individual challenges in theater education had been symptoms of inaccessibility (“roadblock”) and injustice (“unfair”). In narrating this portrait to the others in her story circle, Rose shared, “I have like challenges and roadblocks... sometimes I feel like it’s unfair kind of thing so like people are like advantaged. And I don’t have advantage.” At the same time, by celebrating her love of games and cats, her commitment to togetherness, and her passion for dressing up and watching movies, Rose depicted herself as joyful and whole (Disability Justice principle five: “recognizing wholeness;” Sins Invalid, 2019). Finally, she wrote, “justice/ change the world,” before filling the remaining white space in her image with her favorite color, purple. She explained, saying, “I love being all together kind of thing and like work together. And I love to dress up and watch movies and I want to do justice and I want to change the world... and like I want to make theater classes accessible to anyone.” Grinning, almost shouting, Rose continued, “Everyone. Anywhere. Anywhere!” Others in the story circle smiled and nodded in agreement. What had begun as an exploration of her own identity had evolved into a rallying cry for transforming theater education towards justice for all people, everywhere.

While I cannot say whether Rose would have shared similar ideas and stories within a more traditional focus group, I suspect that the multimodal, collaborative nature of our story circles supported Rose and others in examining their own stories, seeing themselves within systems, and identifying as change agents. First, Rose’s creative process began with recognizing her own story in the story of someone else. Had she not seen herself in the illustrations from *We Move Together*, I wonder what direction her art might have taken. And, though Rose did not acknowledge how racism circulated

in her experiences of theater education, seeing herself reflected in *We Move Together* encouraged her to recognize and name her whiteness. Second, physically cutting and pasting this image and others' words into her self-portrait enabled Rose to claim belonging in a system she recognized had often excluded her. Third, collage enabled Rose to hold complexity and celebrate herself in wholeness; she could be both recognized and challenged, an actress and an activist, just by positioning these words on the same page. Finally, Rose's artistic process challenged individual conceptions of agency by enabling Rose to build on others' words and images. Further, within our collaborative art space, Rose shared her thoughts with peers, potentially catalyzing further collective agency development.

Thus far in this chapter, I have explored *how*—across story circles, teaching team meetings, interviews, and informal conversations—participants negotiated understandings of ableism and racism, considered how they had been oppressed by these systems, and began to surface their complicity in oppressing others. Further, I have illustrated how the tools of multimodal collaborative storytelling may have particularly supported participants in telling their own stories, encountering their relationships with oppressive systems, and building individual and collective agency toward transforming theater education. Next, I turn from the *how* of this process to the *what*. What did participants identify as aspects of theater education most steeped in ableism and racism and most needing transformation?

Normative Understandings of “Quality” in Theater Education

As you may recall, in story circles, I asked participants to reflect on four questions: Who were they? When had they belonged in theater education or witnessed someone else belonging? When had they struggled to belong in theater education or witnessed someone else struggling to belong? The fourth question varied across story circles. While I asked BAT teaching artists how they had learned what it meant to be “normal” in theater education, I asked Connections participants to draw on their lived experiences to imagine how theater education might become more inclusive. Individually and collaboratively, through written and spoken words, drawings, and (in Connections story circles) collage,

participants shared their stories. Across these stories, I marveled at how every participant identified and recalled wrestling with (i.e., meeting, struggling to meet, or failing to meet) similar narrow “quality” standards. These standards dictated what it meant to be a “quality” student and artist, participate in or lead a “quality” rehearsal process, and perform in or direct a “quality” youth theater production. Often, participants’ stories of belonging emerged from times they remembered meeting or exceeding these standards. Their stories of struggle emerged from times when these standards felt unattainable. In ways that often remained invisible to participants, ableism and racism circulated to uphold these standards (Annamma et al., 2013)—rooted in the idea of “quality” art as the property of whiteness and ability (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016; Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011a)—constraining how students and educators could show up in theater education spaces, with particularly harmful consequences for those at the intersection of multiple axes of oppression.

Participants wrestled with their relationships to these “quality” norms. Tensions—between how participants had both *invested in* and *been harmed by* quality standards, between what they believed theater education *could be* and what they recognized it often *was*—circulated through their stories, artwork, and conversations. Though most participants recalled personally struggling to meet norms on at least one occasion, many had ultimately felt validated as “good” theater kids or “good” theater educators. For these participants, exploring how ableism and racism circulated through these seemingly “neutral” labels felt understandably destabilizing.

Most participants had experienced at least a few moments of belonging in theater education. Recalling these powerful moments, they remembered feeling embraced in their multiple identities, recognizing their roles in wider communities, and trusting others would help them and keep them safe. They dreamed of a world where all students might have similarly powerful experiences with theater education. This dream motivated participants to persevere in deconstructing these “quality” standards,

even when it felt uncomfortable. I tried to illustrate this dream—and its inherent tensions—within this excerpt of composite vignette:

We want everyone to belong in the theater. That's why we're here. We haven't always belonged, but when we have, it's been incredible, even life changing. Sometimes, it's been easy. We've belonged because of who we are. Something inside us— our race, our ability, our culture— has marked us without us even noticing. We've blended in. Sometimes, it's been something inside someone else— their kindness, their curiosity, their openness— that has helped us find our place. Sometimes, it's been a challenge. It's taken someone else, someone with the power and the time to change things, to notice us and get curious about what we need. To find creative ways to get us those things, especially when it means changing the rules or even changing the game. More access for us is more access for everyone. When we belong, we're part of a whole. We work towards a shared goal, but we're recognized and celebrated as individuals. We're in trusting relationships, grown over time. We know that others will support us, help us, and keep us safe. We know that when we express ourselves, we will be heard and understood. (Composite Vignette)

Many participants further expressed that theater education *should* provide a haven for students who might not thrive in traditional classrooms, whose bodyminds might fall outside the white, nondisabled norm. In an interview, Hanna shared:

... people who are dramatic. They're like, oh, you should be a theater kid. You should go try theater. People are very expressive and stuff. And in a way, that's taking kids that are a lot. Or I think, taking kids that are perceived to be very dramatic or over the top or perhaps need to get out energy, get out energy, all those things. And that's really what... theater spaces are made up of. (Hanna, interview, 6/30/23)

I noticed these phrases— “kids that are a lot,” “need to get out energy”— might code for students with intellectual disabilities or neurodivergences for whom sitting still is inaccessible. I also wondered about the racial implications of this language, given that teachers often label white children “high energy” and children of color “troublemakers” for displaying similar behaviors (Shalaby, 2017). Hanna’s statement evidenced a common belief among participants: that theater could provide a home for students who struggled in other areas of education.

Somewhat paradoxically, participants also surfaced norms and expectations around “quality”— co-constructed by ableism and racism—that positioned these same students as “lacking” within normative theater education contexts. In the following sections, I will explore the normative understandings of “quality” that BAT and Connections participants identified. I will explore participants’ expectations of 1) *who* counts as a “quality” theater student or theater artist; 2) *how* “quality” rehearsal processes should unfold; and 3) *what* counts as a “quality” youth theater production. Then, I will explore how these normative understandings shaped how theater educators felt they had to teach. I will begin each section with an excerpt from the composite vignette I created following story circles. These excerpts will foreground my complicity in reifying these norms as a theater student and theater educator, illustrate how system-wide norms circulated through individual actions and experiences (while avoiding the red herring of indicting individuals as “racist” or “ableist”), and surface tensions underlying participants’ varying experiences with these norms. Following each excerpt, I will enumerate the dimensions of “quality” they represent, substantiating these dimensions with examples from the data. Through analyzing these examples, I will reveal how—through co-constructing narrow definitions of artistic “quality”—ableism and racism circulate in normative theater education to protect the property interests of whiteness and ability.

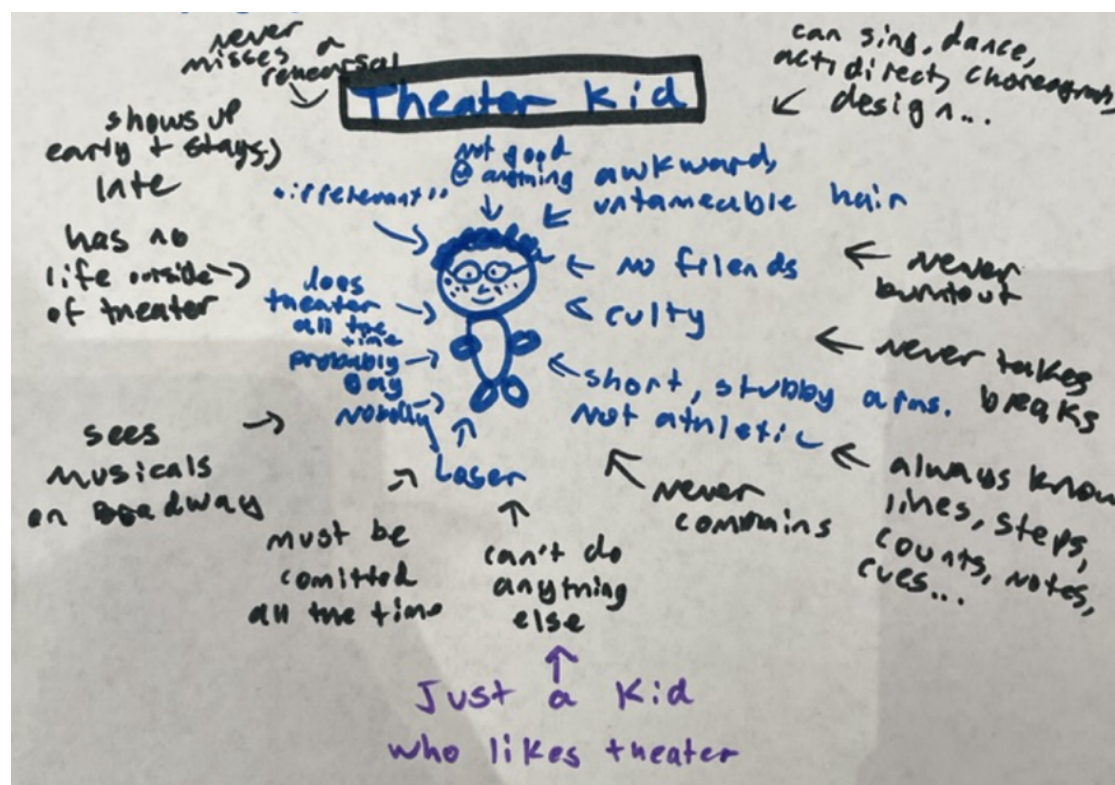
Student Artists

We've made ourselves into singers, dancers, and actors. We've willed our voices to sound and our bodies to look a certain way, move a certain way. We're hyper aware of the ways our bodies have refused to cooperate. Too tall, too loud, too big, too much. Too athletic. Not athletic enough... We're supposed to be confident and quick. We're supposed to be smart, to remember everything, our lines, steps, counts, notes, and cues. We're supposed to exude energy, smile big, be outgoing, but also sit quietly and pay attention. We're supposed to explore and be creative, but within boundaries. And we're supposed to know these boundaries without asking. We're supposed to check our own emotions at the door, but perform another's for an audience, with truth, openness, and vulnerability. (Composite Vignette)

As illustrated in this vignette, participants wrestled with what it meant to be a “good” or “normal” theater kid. They constructed an image rife with contradictions. A “good” theater kid spoke “articulately” with precise, unaccented English, remembered everything and did everything “right” the first time, was “expressive” (but never expressed anything “too personal”), had boundless energy (but could sit quietly and follow directions when asked), performed their commitment by showing up early and staying late, and was creative—but only within normative boundaries. I noticed how ableism and racism circulated through these expectations in ways that impacted everyone, but disproportionately harmed disabled students of color. Two nondisabled BAT interns, Isla (white) and Jenna (mixed-race), created this diagram (see Figure 10) of a normal “theater kid.” Isla and Jenna had both been “successful” in typical theater education contexts; Isla shared how privileged she felt to “blend in” in most theater spaces (artifact from story circle, 6/3/23). That these students—both arguably similar to this stereotypically “normal” theater kid—created this diagram illustrates just how pervasive and harmful these “quality” standards can be.

Figure 10

Diagram of a Normal "Theater Kid"



This diagram illustrates how stereotypes about theater kids from outside theater communities (inner circle, in blue) and “quality” expectations of theater kids from inside theater communities (outer circle, in black) constrain (inward-pointing arrows) who “a kid who likes theater” (bottom, purple) feels like they should be. Focusing on the outer ring of “quality” expectations, I notice ableism circulating through phrases like, “can sing, dance, act, direct, choreograph, design” and “never burnt out.” I also notice that “sing, dance,” and “act” are listed before other forms of participation. This reflects the wider trend of participants—even those who identified as costume designers, stage managers, music directors, and choreographers—narrowly identifying “quality” theater kids as aspiring performers. This assumption (that being a “good” theater kid meant being a performer) particularly limited possibilities for how multiply marginalized students could meaningfully engage in theater. In time-related phrases like “never takes breaks” and “show up early and stays late,” I notice expectations of urgency and

perfectionism, endemic characteristics of white supremacy culture (Okun, 2021). In “sees musicals on Broadway”—a notoriously expensive activity, especially for youth growing up in California—I see classism circulating alongside a belief in the white, western theatrical canon as the pinnacle of “good” theater. While less relevant to my research questions, I also notice the overwhelmingly negative stereotypes about theater kids (e.g., “not good @ anything,” “no friends,” “loser”) participants noticed circulating within the broader community. Especially for those kids who believe everyone outside the theater community sees them as a “loser,” I can imagine how important it might feel to be seen as “good” within the theater community. In the following sections, I will explore how participants wrestled with these and other expectations of “quality” theater kids. Through a DisCrit analysis, I will reveal how expectations—of students’ bodies and voices, minds, emotions, energy, commitment, and creativity—were neither neutral nor objective, but were instead rooted in understanding artistic “quality” as the property of whiteness and ability.

Student artists’ bodies: Skinny and beautiful, loud and articulate. To participants, being a “good” performer meant having a body and voice that conformed to white, western, nondisabled beauty standards. For example, those with nonconforming (e.g., plus-sized) bodies saw their bodies as obstacles to belonging in theater education. Eliza, a plus-sized, mixed-race, nondisabled teaching artist, dancer, and choreographer recalled performing in Avenue Q, an irreverently comedic musical in the style of Sesame Street, in which she manipulated a large puppet onstage. In a written reflection, she wondered, “when did I feel like I belonged? The show where I felt best & like I most belonged was Avenue Q... was it because the focus was on my puppet & not me? (Also @ my skinniest)” (Eliza, artifact from story circle, 6/6/23). Eliza attributed her sense of belonging in Avenue Q to her physical body feeling less visible, both because of the puppet she held and her size at the time. Because she worried her body transgressed audiences’ expectations (i.e., deviated from a mythical “neutral;” Levins Morales, 2013; Sandahl, 2005), Eliza preferred feeling invisible to feeling seen onstage. Ableism positioned her

body as less worthy based on her appearance (Lewis, 2022). However, Eliza recognized herself as largely white-passing. In her experiences in theater education, whiteness mitigated ableism's most harmful effects, enabling her to ultimately find her place as an educator and choreographer. Like Eliza, Grant, a mixed-race, nondisabled college-aged teaching artist, had grown up as a dancer. To my admittedly untrained eye, Grant's slim, athletic build reminded me of a stereotypical dancer's body. However, perhaps because he did not think he appeared as white as Eliza, Grant had not grown up feeling he looked like a "quality" dancer. He reflected:

I was raised and educated as a dancer, and with that came the uncontrollable expectations of what a dancer should be. Look like. Present as. I don't have the body of a stereotypical dance student, and that was something I had to carry with me every day through the years of that education. I'm half white, one quarter African American, one quarter Native American... I don't think I'm white passing, perhaps some other people would disagree. (Grant, artifact from story circle, 6/6/23)

Racism and ableism worked in tandem to uphold the "uncontrollable expectations" of students' physical bodies that Grant and other participants carried, like heavy weights, throughout their dance and theater education.

Participants expressed holding—and feeling constrained by—similarly rigid expectations of "good" theater students' voices. In a teaching team meeting, Heather reflected on expecting her students to speak loudly and clearly enough to be understood. She said, "I think the expectations we have, both as teachers and as audience. Are they loud enough? Can I understand all their lines?" (Heather, teaching team meeting 7/14/23). These questions might seem "objective" and value-neutral; part of being a theater artist is communicating effectively with an audience. However, racism, ableism, nationalism, and linguicism circulate through their implicit assumption that students should communicate in normative ways (i.e., through speaking "loud lines," using language their white,

nondisabled teacher can understand; Cahill & Hamel, 2022; Lyiscott, 2014; McAllister-Viel, 2021). By focusing on narrow indicators of communicative efficacy (e.g., volume, vocal “quality”), these questions also obscure the many creative ways actors can communicate. Within a supportive ensemble, actors can use microphones, open-captioning, translation services, ASL interpretation, communication partners, movement, and a variety of other aesthetic tools to tell a story, perhaps more richly and effectively than if told through a single, “quality” voice. However, when describing how “quality” theater students communicated, participants did not surface these tools; rather they focused only on how “loudly” and “articulately” students spoke. This suggests that rigid expectations of theater students’ bodies and voices not only harm those who are the furthest from whiteness and ability, but also limit students’ and teachers’ aesthetic possibilities in normative theater education contexts. From these expectations of “good” students’ outward appearances and forms of expression, I next turn to expectations of “good” students’ internal mental and emotional states.

Student artists’ minds: Confident, flexible, and quick. Participants noted that theater education required students to perform confidence; process, memorize, and regurgitate information quickly; and shift easily from one way of doing things to another. Participants illustrated the harmful nature of these expectations through their artwork and reflections. Grant wrote, “I have some social anxiety which can definitely be a personal challenge when participating in theatre games or theatre education—for instance, waiting to be put on the spot can get my heart rate up” (Grant, artifact from story circle, 6/6/23). In this reflection, rather than identifying the aspects of theater games that caused him anxiety as problems, Grant framed his social anxiety as a “personal challenge.” Because his social anxiety made Grant different from the typical “quality” theater student, Grant drew on medical model logics (Shakespeare, 2013) to label it a problem to fix. I wondered, too, how racism may have contributed to Grant’s experiences of anxiety in theater education, how racist structures (i.e., the primacy of white actors) might have been maintained by ableist logics (i.e., by positioning Grant’s mind as less worthy). I

also wondered if Grant might have felt pressure to represent others with his racial identities well. How might this pressure have fueled the social anxiety he then framed as an individual challenge? While working on her collage, Chloe gravitated towards one of Grant's phrases ("put on the spot"), which I had included in our collage materials. Chloe cut out this phrase and pasted it right next to where she had written BAT in large block letters. As she was gluing these words down, she mentioned that feeling put on the spot was a major "con" of her experience in educational theater. Grant and Chloe's reflections illustrate how students can interpret feelings of anxiety as evidence they do not belong in theater education. The expectation that theater artists perform confidence when asked to complete tasks with little to no preparation was a barrier for these theater artists.

Participants described how normative "good" theater students internalized and retained information quickly, regardless of how teachers presented it. I saw this theme most clearly in participants' reflections on memorizing lines, blocking (where and when to be onstage), and choreographed movements (e.g., recall the expectation in Figure 10 that the normative theater kid "always knows lines, steps, counts, notes," and "cues;" artifact from story circle 6/3/23). Della, a white, neurodivergent, college-aged teaching artist and costume designer, shared that she felt as if she did not belong when asked to learn music under time pressure. She wrote, "I often feel like I don't belong when we sing, I don't learn music quickly" (Della, artifact from story circle 6/6/23). Like other participants, Della attributed her feelings of exclusion to a personal failing (i.e., "I don't learn music quickly") rather than the inaccessibility of normative theater education (i.e., teachers introduce music too quickly). Similarly, many participants—especially disabled participants—presented forgetting a line as one of the worst things a theater student could do onstage. For example, Alexa, a mixed-race Connections participant labeled with intellectual and developmental disabilities, recalled, "I remember a time I didn't belong in theater was when I was 12. I was in Harry Potter, and I was Professor Snape, and I forgot my line." She took responsibility for what she saw as her failure, continuing, "I forgot to practice my script. I

forgot to practice with the recording of my voice. So I forgot what to say” (Alexa, conversation during story circle, 6/14/23). While I cannot personally attest to how much Alexa practiced, the way that Alexa remembered this as an instance of “not belonging” illustrates how strict expectations around memorization can reinforce systems of oppression by locating “problems” within individuals rather than systems. Now, actors sometimes forget their lines. I can almost guarantee that every theater educator in this study had forgotten a line at some point. For a white, nondisabled theater artist like me, forgetting a line might feel like a momentary mistake by an otherwise “quality” artist. However, for a disabled student of color like Alexa, forgetting a line might feel like evidence they will never belong.

Finally, participants described the normative theater student as flexible and adaptable, able to react quickly to anything thrown at them. For example, multiple participants shared stories about teachers requiring them to sit for hours on the sidelines before calling on them to participate in a scene or theater game with little to no preparation. In these interactions, participants learned “quality” theater students had to be flexible from their educators’ *inflexible* expectations. For example, Valerie, a college-aged neurodivergent teaching artist and music director, wrote that she struggled to belong in normative theater education spaces “that didn’t give ways to communicate, that had very set in stone ideas for how to do something” with instructors that “couldn’t be or wouldn’t be accommodating” (Valerie, artifact from story circle, 6/6/23). Educators demanded flexibility from theater students, while refusing to exercise it themselves. This phenomenon within normative theater education aligns with the broader pattern of framing deviations from white, nondisabled norms as failures of flexibility. The word “flexible” is rarely applied to disabled people of color, but often applied to normative bodyminds (McRuer, 2006). This obscures the flexibility multiply marginalized disabled people exercise to simply exist within nondisabled, neurotypical space and build community with other nonnormative bodyminds (Berne, 2015). As illustrated, through requiring students to “flexibly” comply with white, nondisabled

expectations, racism and ableism circulate in normative theater education to functionally exclude many young people from participation.

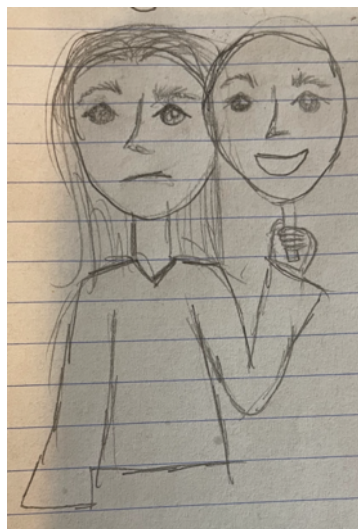
Student artists' emotions: "Honest" onstage, but stoic in the wings. Expectations of students' emotions functioned similarly. To participants, being a "good" theater student meant feeling and expressing the emotions of a character onstage, while leaving one's own emotions at the rehearsal room door. Educators praised "good" students for performing others' emotions in "truthful" as opposed to "campy" ways (Nina, artifact from story circle, 6/6/23). In other words, they expected their "best" students to experience the feelings of their characters in visible ways that communicated these feelings to an audience. Participants called this being "in character" (Heather, teaching team meeting, 7/14/23). However, contrary to what many of my own acting teachers believed, one cannot assess the authenticity of an actor's feelings by watching them (Sandahl, 2005b). Bodies communicate emotions in all sorts of culturally specific, neurologically influenced ways (e.g., not everyone cries when they feel sad). This "quality" indicator served as another way to police white, nondisabled norms in theater education.

Participants also frequently described normative "good" theater students as "expressive." For example, Zia, a nondisabled, Latina, BAT intern, remembered how "watching the two main characters among others in the high school *Heathers* production reminded [her] of the "normal" theater kid. It was when they were expressive and confident and could do all the expressive things" (Zia, artifact from story circle, 6/3/2023). These two main characters, portrayed by white, nondisabled high school students, bounced quickly from anger to joy to extreme depression, as they brought the darkly comic story of *Heathers* to life. Zia interpreted these emotional performances as evidence these actors were "normal theater kids," never wondering why these two actors felt so safe expressing their dark and dangerous emotions (i.e., how a theatrical setting, alongside their own whiteness and ability may have protected these actors from pathologization and criminalization). Notably, participants did not apply the word

“expressive” to individuals who expressed their own emotions, only the emotions of fictional characters. Grace, a white nondisabled college-aged teaching artist and stage manager, drew a self-portrait illustrating how this expectation felt to her self-described “shy” younger self (Figure 11).

Figure 11

Grace’s Self Portrait, Depicting How She Felt as a Shy Young Theater Student



In this drawing, Grace, as a young girl, gazes towards the viewer with sadness and discomfort. She holds up a “mask” of positive emotions, representing the kind of “expressiveness” required of her as a “good” theater student. I came to understand “expressive” as denoting a kind of compulsory emotional flexibility, like the mental flexibility expected of “good” theater students. It indicated a “good” actor’s capacity to both feel and “flexibly” embody someone else’s feelings, but only in narrow ways, legible to a normative audience.

Finally, participants recognized that being a “good” theater student meant hiding their own emotions. Della, a neurodivergent, white, college-aged teaching artist and costume designer, reflected on the discomfort and dysregulation caused by some of the costumes she was forced to wear and lights she was forced to stand under as a young performer. Della shared how rather than work with Della’s sensory needs, past theater educators made her feel like she was “being dramatic” (Della, story circle,

6/6/23). Hanna summarized this idea in a teaching team meeting, sharing, “I think theater requires a lot. It asks a lot of people, especially things about, you're supposed to just be able to have emotions on cue, but then people are sort of othered for expressing their emotions on a regular basis in different ways” (Hanna, teaching team meeting, 6/30/23). I interpreted Hanna’s statement as evidence of how whiteness circulates through normative theater education by labeling particular emotions “inappropriate” in particular contexts (Thandeka, 2018). As illustrated, ableism and racism circulated within requirements that good theater students perform their emotions, but only in narrow ways and during specific times. Next, I turn to similar demands made of theater students’ personalities.

Student artists’ personalities: Energetic and enthusiastic. Participants, especially those who identified as neurodivergent or “shy” like Grace, emphasized that normative “good” theater students embraced social interaction with boundless energy and enthusiasm. When participants struggled to embody this norm, they felt like confused, exhausted outsiders. For example, after hearing a story from Emi, an Asian, neurodivergent student, about her experiences, Jason wrote the following poem from her perspective:

They’re all having so much fun. High energy, jumping around, bouncing off the walls.

And yet...

Here I am.

Not reciprocating their energy.

Am I wrong for wanting to be chill?

Is my partner silently judging me?

Will the interns and staff be mad if I just stand off to the side? (Jason, artifact from story circle, 6/3/23)

After reading this poem, Emi told Jason that he had faithfully represented her thoughts and feelings. She felt judged for her “failure” to participate in the energetic ways that other, more “normal” theater kids

did. Moreover, Emi believed other neurodivergent students—who, like her, *wanted* to be at camp—might feel the same way.

Emi expanded on these ideas, sharing, “Because I’m normally a really big introvert and I need to conserve my energy when I’m around people. So being expected that 100% [energy] all the time is sometimes pretty draining. So in the past when I got back from camp, I would just go home and sleep right away.” When I asked if she could relate this experience of burnout to ableism and racism, Emi continued:

... everyone's best... looks different, everyone's focus shows up in different ways. And I think people are so used to the norm that they can't really acknowledge that other people work in different ways. And I obviously, I have a lot of different diagnoses, so I'm pretty good at appearing normal or masking for people. But obviously some people can't do that. So I can definitely see why people's normal appears in different ways, because if I didn't mask, I probably would do some of those things as well. (Emi, interview, 7/24/23)

For Emi, a natural introvert, “appearing normal” in normative theater education contexts was exhausting. Emi largely attributed the work of “appearing normal” to her “diagnoses,” but drawing on Chen and Yeh (2024), I recognize that, for neurodivergent Asian women, racism, ableism, and sexism collude to create pressure around performing goodness and normalcy, in ways compounded by the model minority myth and stereotypes about Asian American women’s docility. Drawing on McRuer (2006), I read Emi’s description of masking in theater spaces as an attempt to—constrained by systems of ableism and racism— perform a kind of “compulsory extroversion.” Like able-bodiedness, the *ideal* of extroversion (possessing and expending infinite energy for socializing) is easier for some people to perform than others, but crucially does not actually exist. Nobody can expend energy indefinitely, and energetic actions are interpreted differently on racialized bodies (e.g., Black and Brown students are often pathologized for extroverted behaviors). Through regulating students’ energy, ableism and racism

set students with nonnormative bodyminds up for repeated feelings of failure and non-belonging in theater education.

Student artists' commitment. Relatedly, participants articulated a vision of a “good” theater kid who demonstrated their unwavering commitment to and passion for theater by showing up early, staying late, and never complaining about what educators asked of them. Emma, a white nondisabled high-school aged theater teaching artist and aspiring director shared, “In one of the theater spaces I participated in growing up, the norm was very much dedicating everything to the show” (Emma, artifact from story circle, 6/3/23). Vera, a white, nondisabled teaching artist and music director and mother of two young children captured the harmful impact of these expectations in a poem. She wrote:

Would it be better
 If I smiled more?
 Could I alert you to the passion of my profession
 If it never made me weary.
 If I gave just a little more
 Wrung the rag just a little more
 Leached the ooze from my cactus
 Just a little more
 Would it be
 Enough (Vera, artifact from story circle, 6/6/23)

In this poem, Vera described herself as feeling like both a kitchen rag and a cactus, oozing droplets of water (representing passion and commitment) from her depleting supply. As a white woman, the pressure to perform commitment in a particular way felt as if it were literally draining the life from her.

Participants shared insights that pointed towards how this norm disproportionately harmed students with less class and ability privilege. For example, Isla, a high school-aged white teaching artist

with a history of mental health challenges, shared, “I live with a single parent, so I often find that my ability to participate is limited by my ability to get to rehearsals/change my schedule without a lot of planning.” Isla’s lack of reliable transportation prevented her from performing commitment in the same way as her better-resourced peers. I note that though Isla was white, due to the racial wealth divide (Baradaran, 2017), students of color might more often find themselves financially unable to comply with normative theater education’s demands on their time. Hanna reflected on experiencing this norm as someone with privilege:

... For example, if I do a whole day of theater and I'm really tired at the end, it's like I'm able to just be like, okay, I'm done. I'm done. And I can go home and I don't have to do anything. But if other people have different tolerances or those sorts of things, whatever, it's like, oh, they're just being dramatic or they're not cut out for the whole day. These sorts of things. And it's like, well no, I still have my time limits, but maybe my time limit aligns a little bit more with what the schedule is asking me of that day. (Hanna, interview, 6/30/23)

Hanna’s reflections on her ability to perform “commitment” evidence her burgeoning understanding of the social model of disability (Shakespeare, 2013) and ableist conceptions of productivity (Lewis, 2022). She understood how ableism circulated through the mismatch between normative theater’s expectations of “commitment” and natural variations in individuals’ bodyminds. Additionally, participants’ belief that others would only appreciate their passion and commitment if embodied through investing measurable, high quantities of time in theater education, reflected white supremacy culture’s (Okun, 2021) focus on “quantity over quality.”

Student artists’ ideas: Creative, but within limits. Finally, participants defined norms and expectations around “quality” theater students’ creativity. Some of these norms and expectations seemed contradictory. For example, in an interview, Emir wrestled with how “good” theater students

should express themselves creatively, but only within “appropriate” boundaries. I encouraged Emir to articulate these boundaries:

Emir: It's like you, you're given the role, but you can also put your own little spin on it or big spin on it. But yeah.

Me: How would you know if it was too big of a spin? If someone was like, I'm going to be a crab and the way I'm going to be a crab is by jumping up and down and making exploding noises running across stage.

Emir: Are you saying how would I correct that?

To Emir, this hypothetical student's choice was so obviously outside the boundaries of “normal” that it demanded correction. I continued:

Me: No, I'm saying how do you even know where the line is?

[...]

Emir: The line, we've actually... seen the line. Simon [a preschooler in the summer camp's production of *SpongeBob: The Musical*] wanted his butterfly fish [character] to have a narwhal horn. And I think that's the line. And so I'm like, “Simon, people would think it's so...” Yeah, I guess that's the line. If it's anything that the creature wouldn't do, wouldn't have. I mean, they've all seen crabs. I've never seen a crab jump. I don't think they can.

[...]

You should never put a limit on creativity. But then again, we don't want students just to completely, it's like if Heath Ledger had chosen to have Joker have wings and superpowers. He made acting choices that worked out great and the directors were happy with it. But I doubt they'd be happy with Wings Demon Joker. (Emir, interview, 6/20/23)

The summer before, when he was a theater student, Emir had written a monologue from the perspective of a mannequin filled with existential angst. His character had moaned that the clothes children had dressed him in were “mediocre at best” before teaming up with a hat (played by a fellow student) to overthrow the world’s toddlers. Clearly, Emir held an expansive understanding of appropriate creative choices. Still, he believed some choices “crossed a line.” And Emir believed that “good” theater students should be able to intuit which choices did so.

Through a DisCrit lens, expecting “good” theater students to intuitively sense the boundary between “creative” (praiseworthy) choices and those which “crossed a line”—a boundary which no participant concretely defined, which likely shifted depending on people and contexts—is a tool of ableism and white supremacy. Educators can wield this tool at their professional discretion to uplift the creative contributions of white, nondisabled students while simultaneously denigrating the contributions of their peers of color, who may or may not be labeled with disabilities. Simon, the child in Emir’s example of “crossing a line,” was a preschooler of color. Though Simon did not have a specific disability label, educators frequently discussed him as a troublemaker, a term imbued with ableism and racism (Shalaby, 2017). They spoke about Simon having “too much energy” and “too little control over his body.” It was no coincidence that Simon – one of Emir’s only nonwhite students – immediately sprang to Emir’s mind as an example of a student who “crossed the line.”

As illustrated in the sections above, participants’ reflections demonstrated how ableism and racism co-constructed an image of *who* counted as a “quality” theater student becoming a “quality” theater artist. Participants recognized this good-looking and sounding, confident, expressive, energetic, committed and appropriately creative theater artist as the person they (and their students) were supposed to be. Next, I turn to participants’ expectations around *how* quality rehearsal processes should unfold in normative theater education.

Rehearsal Processes

For us, it's all theater, all the time... If we're on time, we're late. We never take breaks, never miss a rehearsal, and never burn out. Our needs come second to the needs of the show. The show must go on! We're a director, a star, or an ensemble member. A BFA or BA. We understand what those titles mean and what they mean we're worth. When we're a director or star, our time matters. Our needs matter. When we're in the ensemble, it "isn't about us." We watch. We wait. Sometimes we feel like set dressing. When the directors and stars look and sound the same, we notice. (Composite Vignette)

Participants understood that “quality” rehearsal processes moved fast, pausing for nothing and no one. Fueled by this sense of urgency—which upholds ableism and white supremacy through reinforcing existing power hierarchies in the name of efficiency; normalizing quick, linear thinking; and prioritizing immediate, measurable results over the slower work of relationship-building (Gu, 2023; Okun, 2021)—the people in these processes disappeared, subsumed by the tasks demanded of them. Students became their roles, their value determined by their ability to produce small pieces of a collective product, under intense pressure. Most participants recognized norms of “quality” rehearsal processes had harmed them and their students but struggled to reconcile this fact with the kind of “quality” art they wanted to make. Educators framed dual objectives—cultivating a just, kind, equitable process and producing high “quality” theater—as inherently contradictory, evidencing an ingrained belief that painful processes yielded better art. Through engaging with participants’ artwork and reflections, I noticed that I, too, had operated under this belief as a theater educator. Once I recognized this, I noticed and questioned its underlying capitalist logic, incommensurable with a Disability Justice framework. In the following sections, I discuss how participants grappled with three interrelated characteristics of normative theater processes: 1) a sense of urgency, 2) a belief that “the show must go on,” and 3) rigid status hierarchies based on individuals’ roles.

Sense of urgency. Participants recognized that “quality” rehearsal processes moved quickly. In an interview, Emir expressed, “I think that theater is a very ‘blink and you’ll miss it’ type of thing” (Emir, interview, 8/13/23). When I asked him to clarify, he reflected on his experience performing in the *Mean Girls* ensemble:

Emir: ... you miss an audition. It's difficult to come back from. If you miss your callback...

Me: Was that true in the Mean Girls process?

Emir: I mean, I didn't miss anything, thank God, but definitely if I had missed a callback, I definitely wouldn't have gotten, definitely, it would've been different. I mean, I had a smaller role, but if somebody big, if Della¹⁵ missed a callback, she might've gotten, I don't know who else she applied for, but yeah.

Emir’s reflections illuminate how different students are subject to different levels of urgency, based on their role in a production. As someone cast in an ensemble role, Emir felt this role would likely not have changed had they missed a callback. On the other hand, had Della (who Emir called “somebody big” because she was playing a main character) missed a callback, she may not have received this role. Curious about the extent to which this sense of urgency carried into the *Mean Girls* rehearsal process, I asked Emir if it was a “big deal” if someone missed a rehearsal. He replied:

Emir: Big? It depends on the rehearsal, but yeah, generally. We would have to, I dunno, some people missed and we had to scramble on the group chats... to help them. We created a whole support system.

Me: Yeah, that's pretty cool.

Emir: ... it was just a big thing that we had to do ourselves, the campers, so it wasn't bad, but it was just something. (Emir, interview, 8/13/23)

¹⁵ Della played the main character in Mean Girls.

Emir's reflections reveal the urgency of a typical theater process, where someone missing a single day of rehearsal might send an ensemble "scrambling" to support them. Finally, Emir's reflections point to how youth ensembles can work together and leverage technology (e.g., group chats) to survive these fast-paced environments. However, as an observer of the *Mean Girls* process, I noticed signs of time-related stress in the *Mean Girls* ensemble (e.g., tearful high school students asking to take a break in the quiet room mere minutes into the camp day, students requesting a review of the previous day's choreography and being refused due to time constraints). Students worked together to survive this context, but I imagine they might have preferred one imbued with less urgency.

This sense of urgency directly hinders teachers' ability to create welcoming, inclusive, *educational* processes. When asked to reflect on how ableism and racism had shown up in her theater teaching, Heather shared the following memory:

... for example, when I announced the casting of the play that we were doing in play production this year, there was one student who burst out crying and had this very big reaction and got down on the ground and wouldn't get up. And in my head, I was feeling internally, I was feeling frustrated, and I didn't... like that. And my plan had been to get on the ground running, start blocking the show, announce casting, and let's go! And in that moment, I just had to take a step back... In my head, I was thinking, oh, the whole class got derailed and this is a huge problem, but when I reflect, it's like that student had an emotional reaction, and that's not a bad thing.

(Heather, interview, 6/27/23)

As Heather illustrated—and resisted—when urgency permeates education, students' natural emotional responses become "problems." Urgency asserts there is no time to attend to individuals' feelings or change systems in response, thereby maintaining white supremacy as the status quo (Okun, 2021). With negative implications for neurodivergent students, urgency also privileges those who process information quickly and dispassionately (Gu, 2023). Importantly, in these examples of educational

theater processes, neither Emir nor Heather mentioned learning as an objective. Urgency positions student learning as secondary to the goal of producing a high “quality” work of art, a hierarchy also reflected in the common theater phrase, “the show must go on.”

The show must go on. In a typical, urgent process, theater educators parrot a phrase we have heard all our lives: “the show must go on.” At best, this phrase might seem like a pithy way to teach perseverance and resiliency. Or it might seem neutral, an innocuous ode to centuries of theatrical tradition. Whatever educators’ intentions, students interpret this sentiment—often shared at the height of a high-stakes, urgent rehearsal process—as a sign that their needs do not matter. Emma, a white nondisabled high-school aged teaching artist, wrote of her time in educational theater, “In one of the theater spaces I participated in growing up, the norm was very much dedicating everything to the show. It was definitely much more of a priority to have a good show than to make sure the people involved were having their needs met.” Eliza similarly reflected on a time she felt she did not belong in theater. She wrote in bullet points that she was “not considered,” told to “deal w/ it,” and that the “star’s needs were weighted to be more important.” Participants’ reflections on this mentality seemed incommensurate with Disability Justice’s focus on sustainability. Rather than learning to “value the teachings of our bodies and experiences, and use them as a critical guide and reference point to help us move away from urgency and into a deep, slow, transformative, unstoppable wave of justice and liberation,” (Sins Invalid, 2019) theater students learned to ignore their needs and move forward, towards a production whose date loomed ever nearer.

Status hierarchies. As you can see from Eliza’s example above, participants further recalled how typical theater processes upheld rigid status hierarchies based on the roles individual students played. Students cast as “main characters” had all the privileges; educators attended to their contributions and respected their needs. Students cast in “ensemble” roles felt overlooked or disrespected. Interestingly, theater educators used the same word—“ensemble”—to indicate three distinct concepts: a sense of

community and togetherness, the full cast of a show, and the usually unnamed characters who appear only in group scenes and have few individual lines. While many theater educators espoused the belief that there were, “no small roles, only small actors” (i.e., any role could “steal the show” if performed well), participants reported feeling less cared for and respected when cast in ensemble roles. Zia, a nondisabled, Latina BAT intern, recalled how she felt playing an ensemble role in *Seussical, the Musical*. She wrote:

In playing young kangaroo I felt out of place onstage. I felt like my role was often forgotten or not respected. There was little attention to my character which reminded me of its “insignificance” and made me feel shame among other cast members. (Zia, artifact from story circle, 6/3/23)

Students like Zia interpreted casting decisions as indications of their worth. Notably, this example comes from a play Zia performed in at BAT. From my ten years teaching theater at both BAT and other institutions, I recognize BAT as a best-case scenario for students cast in ensemble roles. BAT directors give every child a named role with unique characteristics and feature each child prominently in at least one scene, even when this means adding lines to the script. For example, in *SpongeBob the Musical: Youth Edition*, the director wrote a pre-show speech that pre-K students, dressed as pirates and sea creatures, delivered to the audience. One of the children’s lines—“My name is Captain Puffy Pants, because I wear puffy pants!”—got bigger laughs from the audience than most of the show’s scripted dialogue. That a very young Zia, in an ensemble role *at BAT*, still felt “shame” at the “insignificance” of her role, suggests that dressing up ensemble roles with names and added dialogue may ultimately fail to disrupt the status hierarchy they represent.

When teaching artists reflected on their college theater experiences, they shared how status hierarchies became codified and embedded within individual students’ identities. This was especially true for schools that offered both Bachelor of Arts (BA) and Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) degrees in

theater. BA degrees are typically open to everyone and include more liberal arts classes while BFA degrees are more selective and consist more exclusively of pre-professional actor training. Grant, a mixed-race, nondisabled teaching artist and college student shared of his experiences:

I'm pursuing a BA in Theatre at USC, which also has BFA programs, and therefore many of the productions at the school feature BFAs in guaranteed lead roles, with BA students auditioning for ensemble. I knew this going in and booked one of the 6 ensemble roles [in a show] but felt like a human ornament for the entirety of the process. Being ensemble is perfectly fine, but oftentimes, I spent all 4 hours of rehearsal not contributing to the rehearsal process once because I wasn't given the opportunity. I think it comes down to feeling like my time as an artist wasn't valued (Grant, artifact from story circle, 6/6/23)

As an ensemble member, Grant felt disrespected and dehumanized – more like an “ornament” than a human being. The kind of disrespect, shame, and dehumanization that Zia and Grant surfaced emerged naturally from capitalist relations that position some people's labor as more valuable than others. Grant and Zia were both excited to contribute to these productions, but their ensemble roles obscured the potential value of their contributions from their directors. Disability Justice demands we embrace anti-capitalist politics, valuing one another as whole human beings and artists (Sins Invalid, 2019). In contrast, normative theater education rehearsal processes encourage students and educators to value each other based on their relative “importance” to “quality” artistic products.

In this section, I have described *how* teachers and students expected “quality” rehearsal processes to unfold. Next, I transition to *what* they expected the resulting artistic products to look like.

Youth Theater Productions

We've loved the rush of performing— loved the cheers from our friends and colleagues— and been terrified, terrified of letting each other down. We've loved and feared your “high” expectations... We love Shakespeare and have strong feelings about musical theater. (Composite Vignette)

Participants felt a tremendous amount of pressure to create “quality” productions, even in educational theater. Building on my discussion above, the need to create something “good” often took priority over attending to the process of teaching and learning. As whiteness and ableism co-constructed what counted as “quality,” this disproportionately harmed students positioned outside of the white, nondisabled norm. Three dimensions of “quality” productions – perfectionism grounded in white supremacy culture (Okun, 2021), rigid boundaries around what counts as “real art” (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018), and pressure to produce economic value within their underfunded contexts (McAvoy, 2020) – emerged in participants’ understandings of normative, quality theater education.

Perfectionism. Participants reported feeling as if audiences had clear expectations when they came to a show but struggled to put words to these expectations. To participants, the idea felt so self-explanatory—a “good” production—that it proved difficult to describe. When I asked Emir to define what “good” meant, he illustrated his ideas through a counterexample (my italics):

Audience enjoys it, it looks good... *There's nothing that the audience can make fun of*, which isn't—because artists have had their careers kind of messed up, or memed. Like Andrew Lloyd Weber, he was great, and then he made some weird ones, and now he's kind of a meme almost.
(Emir, interview, 8/13/23)

Emir perceived audiences as judging productions based on their “weirdness,” their adherence to a particular status quo. Productions that fell outside of this status quo—like Andrew Lloyd Weber’s recent film adaptation of *Cats*, front of mind for Emir—opened up their creators to ridicule. Though Emir might not have recognized this, ableism and racism co-constructed this status quo (Annamma et al., 2013), shaping what he expected typical audiences to appreciate as real, valid, artistic expression (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018b).

Emir’s reflection also revealed a larger pattern; beneath participants’ ideas of “goodness” and “perfection” was a deep sense of anxiety. Would audiences take their work seriously? Would audiences

understand their performances? Would the audience laugh at their jokes or laugh at their expense? In the following excerpt of a longer poem, Emma, a white non-disabled high school student, wrestled with how this anxiety impacted her in contradictory ways. She wrote:

There is no feeling like performing onstage

The rush of the lights and the applause

The dread of worrying about throwing up at any given moment

The friends cheering for you backstage

The director watching with expectation at the back of the house

There is nothing quite like theater (Emma, artifact from story circle, 6/3/23)

Others' expectations terrified Emma, but they also motivated her. Perhaps this was because Emma—a white, nondisabled woman—could usually meet these expectations. However, for students positioned outside the norm, these expectations induced only dread. Emi, a neurodivergent high-school intern of color, labeled this pressure to conform “perfectionism.” She reflected, “It [perfectionism] showed up a lot in the theater... And I was like, oh, I need to act a certain way. And I can't, even during games, I'd be a bit hesitant because of that sort of perfectionism coming in.” Perfectionism shaped how participants with marginalized identities felt they could freely express themselves and enjoy theater education.

Participants further described feeling compelled to keep working on shows to make them “better,” even past the point where students and teachers were learning anything new or enjoying the process. In a teaching team meeting, Heather shared:

... Sometimes, if we're trying to maybe follow traditional theater expectations, what we think a product is going to be, there is a sort of perfectionism and cross your T's dot your I's, you know... giving notes for an hour to make it better. And it is to make it better. But sometimes I feel like running things over and over again and saying “it has to be this, it has to be that” does make a

more polished product. But it also is not always enjoyable for everybody. (Heather, teaching team meeting, 7/14/23)

Heather recognized how her internalized sense of audiences' expectations might have impacted her students' enjoyment of rehearsal processes. She reflected on how these expectations made teaching feel "almost like being a drill sergeant," like "a weight was on [her], and that wasn't fun." Further, Heather recognized that some of these expectations – like the expectation that students memorize their lines quickly – were inequitable and ultimately detrimental to some students' learning. She shared that in her experience, "some kids memorize really fast, and some have a lot of trouble memorizing, and that's valid. Not everyone can memorize at the same pace or even at all" (Heather, teaching team meeting, 7/14/23). Heather recognized the variation in how quickly students memorized lines as "valid," but felt pressure from parents and audience members to present her show as a final, "polished" product, memorization included. This theme – perfectionism and its harmful impacts, especially on marginalized students – emerged across participants' reflections.

The canon. Participants also reflected their understanding that some kinds of productions – those in the Western theatrical canon – were regarded as better or more valid than others. After reading the composite vignette, Emir shared:

A possible thing, but: "we love Shakespeare and have strong opinions about musical theater."

It's just interesting because lots of ... people who force these on us, like the able, ableist people, but they often cite Shakespeare as the ultimate theater. And if you can't dance this way or sing this way to Hamlet or whatever, you're out. (Emir, teaching team meeting 6/30/23)

In this quote, Emir attributed Shakespeare's supremacy in educational theater to individuals' ableist beliefs and actions. While I take a more systemic view, I agree with Emir that ableism circulates in expectations that students should perform pieces from the Western theatrical canon. In an interview,

Emir elaborated on the impact of these expectations, reflecting on how he felt attending an audition for a Shakespeare play. She shared:

One [time] I felt I didn't [belong in theater education] was the first audition for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. That's just because everybody knew all these... technical terms. And that was my first theater thing since preschool... All this stuff I know now, but [then, it felt like] like a foreign language to me. (Emir, interview, 6/30/23)

In their audition for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Emir felt excluded by the “technical terms” others fluently used to talk about performing. These terms (e.g., cold read, callback, stage left, monologue) felt “like a foreign language,” distancing her from belonging.

Other participants shared the related expectation that theater students should attend and enjoy productions from the Western theatrical canon (e.g., the drawing of the “normal” theater kid who “sees musicals on Broadway,” Figure 9). Rose, a white, disabled, Connections participant, understood this expectation and used it to position herself as belonging in theater education. Recall how in her self-portrait (Figure 9), Rose included the words “Recognition, Shakespeare, Actress, Unique, Broadway,” and “Musical.” When I asked her to elaborate on why she included these specific words, Rose responded:

I feel like I'm recognized. In like, “Oh, you're a part of this.” Mm hm. And then Shakespeare, I really love Shakespeare. Like I love seeing it, and I love, maybe I can try doing Shakespeare like as a play sometime. I want to try it! Why not? Try it, and it's ok to try it! And then like, I'm an actress. I am unique. And I love Broadway and musicals. I like both, seeing both. (Rose, reflections shared during a story circle on 6/14/23)

Rose wanted me to recognize her as an actress. The way she moved back and forth between discussing her enthusiasm for the Western theatrical canon and her actress identity illustrates how she saw these

things as intertwined. She knew that a “quality” actress appreciated things like Shakespeare and Broadway musicals.

Economic value. Finally, participants felt pressured by knowing that people were paying to participate in and attend their productions. Emir captured this idea by sharing how he believed most people defined “quality” productions as ones that “made money... profits” (Emir, interview, 8/13/23). Directors understood this and wanted audiences to “feel like they got their money's worth” (Heather, teaching team meeting, 7/14/23). In a teaching team meeting, I shared with participants how this resonated with my past experiences directing at BAT. I had directed Summer 2022’s production of *Frozen*, the first indoor summer camp performance since the Covid-19 shutdown. I shared, “I did feel a ton of pressure as a director last year to be like, no, this has to be good because the theater is down financially, and so if this isn't a good play, people aren't going to come back” (me, teaching team meeting, 7/14/23). Adhering to the status quo of a “good” production—co-constructed by ableism and racism—felt particularly high-stakes under these economic conditions. Given that theater education programs are often financially strained (McAvoy, 2020), directors likely always feel this pressure to some extent.

Heather and I acknowledged that as directors, we had likely transferred this pressure we felt onto our students. Heather shared how she had responded to students who asked for direction during a particularly time-constrained rehearsal process. She said, “... there were kids sometimes like, “oh well I'm not on stage right now. What do I do?” And I didn't always have an answer for that. It's like I, “run lines? I don't know. Do something.”” I cut in, elaborating, “Do something productive.” Heather replied, “Yeah. Very. It's all about productivity.” This focus on productivity, an element of ableism (Lewis, 2022), is completely at odds with the anti-capitalist politic demanded by a Disability Justice framework (Sins Invalid, 2019), and created a hostile environment for disabled and otherwise marginalized students. To summarize, participants articulated how normative theater education practices taught students that

“quality” productions were those that “perfectly” adhered to the status quo, invested in the Western theatrical canon, and produced maximum economic value.

In the preceding sections, I have illustrated how the norms participants surfaced regarding “quality” student artists, “quality” rehearsal processes, and “quality” youth theater productions functioned to protect “good” art as the property of whiteness and ability. Now, I shift to exploring how these expectations constrained how theater educators felt compelled to teach, given that they wanted to deliver “high quality” theater education.

Pedagogy

Our training beats things out of us and throws us into things. Saying no isn't always an option.

When it is, it comes with consequences. And when we try something and fail, it's our own fault.

We don't get something. We're being dramatic. And the stakes are different depending on who we are. (Composite Vignette)

Investing in norms of “quality” student artists, processes, and productions incentivized particular pedagogies. Participants drew on their experiences as both theater teachers and theater students to uncover these pedagogical norms. Drawing on their experiences as theater teachers, participants shared how they felt compelled to rigidly control their students’ expressions and behaviors, “engage” every student at all times, and do everything—produce, design, and direct a “quality” production while teaching “quality” acting skills—completely on their own. In their memories of being students, some participants recalled being publicly criticized or used violent language to characterize their instructors’ pedagogy, and many participants recalled being coerced into games, activities, and scenes that made them feel uncomfortable. Together, these memories illuminated how norms of “quality” in theater education, co-constructed by ableism and racism, constrained the way theater educators felt like they had to teach.

Evaluation, control, and compliance. If “quality” students must perform creativity within boundaries, then teachers must police those boundaries. Using the logic of these “quality” norms, when theater educators work to produce “quality” actors who perform a “quality” show, they cannot tolerate chaos. However, good “quality” theater teachers do not want their students to *feel* creatively constrained, so they must keep these boundaries invisible or obscured. Emir phrased this idea bluntly, sharing (my italics), “... [theater teachers] give [the students] enough choices so they *feel like* they’re in control” (Emir, interview, 6/21/23). As Emir shared, theater teachers perform endowing their students with agency, while retaining control over most decisions. Teachers might even believe their own performances. They may not see how they are only delegating small decisions to students—rather than decisions with outcomes that might meaningfully transform students’ processes and productions—to retain control over “quality” outcomes.

Theater educators are also expected to reward “quality” creative choices and behaviors while ignoring or punishing choices and behaviors that fall outside desired norms. For example, a time-honored tradition at BAT summer camp was publicly rewarding students who made “good” acting choices or behaved “well” with a sticker or stickers for their group’s sticker chart at the end of each camp day. If all groups earned a certain number of stickers by a performance (and staff ensured they always did), the students received a reward. BAT teaching artists were also placed in groups, and consequently could both give and receive stickers. While driving together to ATA, Jason brought up a sticker that the camp director Sara had given me on the previous day. The sticker was for being “kind” and “flexible.” For context, Sara had made a scheduling error that would have given the cast of *We Move Together* less rehearsal time onstage. Uncomfortable and incensed, I had taken a breath rather than argued. My failure to immediately advocate for my students was deemed “kind,” “flexible,” and publicly “sticker-worthy,” as it allowed Sara and the rest of camp to feel good about moving forward with their “quality” production as planned. Jason brought up this moment in the car, as he thought it

was “funny.” The fact that I was given a sticker for not making the camp director feel too bad about prioritizing the predominantly white, nondisabled cast of one production over the predominantly BIPOC cast of another prompted a larger conversation. We wondered how the conversation might have been different had the casts been reversed. Would my failure to advocate on behalf of white, nondisabled students still have been read as “sticker-worthy?” Or might it have been deemed too passive? We discussed how behaviors generally regarded as “sticker-worthy” (e.g., memorizing lines quickly, staying quiet backstage, bouncing back quickly from an illness, pronouncing lines “clearly,” etc.) were implicated in ableism and racism. All educators are expected to police ideas and behavior in ways grounded in whiteness and ableism, and theater teachers are no exception. Ultimately, “quality” norms, steeped in ableism and racism, encourage theater teachers to separate “good” ideas from “bad” ones, impose control over creative environments, and ensure every student appears focused on producing good “quality” work.

Engaging everyone. The theater teachers in this study valued inclusion; as a result, they expected themselves—and all “quality” theater educators—to successfully engage all students in their classrooms. While this might seem positive, there were problems with this expectation. First, it can obscure how students learn and “engage” in different ways. Heather wrestled with this idea in an interview, sharing:

... sometimes there were students that I thought weren't engaged or weren't learning, or I'm like, maybe they're just not enjoying my class. And it was like, no, maybe they are, but maybe I need to find another way to reach them in a way that works for them... I want to try to reach every student as a theater teacher and, to the best of my ability, and that's going to look different for everybody. So I had to work on my own gauges of what "reaching them" means. What does it mean to be successful? To get through to somebody? (Heather, interview, 6/27/23)

Resisting how ableism and racism co-construct normalcy (DisCrit tenet one; Annamma et. al, 2013), Heather identified and dismantled the assumption that engagement looked the same for every student. Further, she recognized struggling students, not as evidence of these students' inherent lack of ability, but rather as evidence that her teaching might need to shift. However, ableism and racism still circulated through the pressure Heather placed on herself to "reach" or "get through" to every student. Yes, educators should make every attempt to meet their students' needs, and yes, all students can learn, but educators must also recognize and validate students' legitimate acts of dissent and refusal (Mengesha & Padmanabhan, 2019; Taylor, 2020). Heather's language points to how she may instead have internalized students' refusals, interpreting them as personal failings, indications that she needed to try harder to "get through." Fueled by narratives of white-ability saviorism (Siuty et al., 2024), theater educators often position ourselves as the benevolent bearers of "quality" theater; rather than taking "no" for an answer, we try harder to give the gift of theater, again. Conceptualizing theater this way dissuades educators from interrogating how ableism and racism might circulate within our classrooms, harming the very students we most hope to "reach."

One superstar teacher. Finally, teachers expected themselves to plan out blocking, teach acting, direct scenes, choreograph dances, teach harmonies, build sets, sew costumes, hunt through thrift stores for props, go to sleep, and wake up to do it all again. They expected themselves to do it all with no help or support, never getting tired or resentful. Again, fueled by narratives of white-ability saviorism (Siuty et al., 2024), they saw themselves as good people who loved their art and loved their kids. How could they complain? Heather brought up this idea, reflecting on a play she had directed previously. She said:

A lot of it was on me... it was on me to find props and on me to find costumes and on me to talk to [the lighting technician] about the lights that I wanted. And that's fine. But it was just a lot for

one person too. So I know for me, I didn't find that process enjoyable for myself. (Heather, teaching team meeting, 7/14/23)

Heather was “fine” with these responsibilities—they were what was expected of her as a theater educator—but at the same time, they rendered the process unenjoyable. The expectation that she would produce high “quality” work with no support often felt lonely and isolating. In an interview, Heather explained further, “... being alone in a classroom as a teacher, it can be super isolating... there's no kind of sounding board. It's just all in your head, and it's you going, “yeah, okay, so that didn't work, so I'm a terrible teacher, and everything sucks”” (Heather, interview, 6/27/23). The isolation and loneliness Heather reflected on are consequences of the rugged individualism advanced by white supremacy culture (Okun, 2021). Additionally, the assumption that all theater educators can and should do everything themselves reinforces the ableist myth of independence (Brown, 2012), disqualifying all but the most hyper-able-bodied (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018b) educators for the job of theater teacher.

Criticism, violence, and coercion. Participants often described their experiences in theater education—particularly at the “most professional” or “highest quality” levels—using critical and even violent language. For example, Heather shared, “I've had ambitious dance teachers and acting coaches. It's like “you flubbed that” “you messed that up.”” (Heather, teaching team meeting, 7/14/23). Through subjecting students to public criticism, Heather’s teachers used embarrassment and shame as tactics to encourage “quality” performances. Though Heather claimed she never used this tactic as a teacher, she did label it a practice of “ambitious” teachers, invested in producing “quality” artistic results. In addition, Nina, a nondisabled teaching artist of color, used violent language to characterize her education. She described feeling like “quality” standards had slipped when she moved from Los Angeles to San Francisco, writing (my italics), “it was a hard transition, felt like regressing from my education in many ways, watching people approach acting and productions in a way that was *beaten out of us* in my LA training” (Nina, artifact from story circle, 6/6/23). By using this language to characterize her actor

training, Nina painted a picture of acting instruction that violently demanded “the best” from its students.

Participants further recalled theater educators, in pursuit of “quality,” coercing them into doing things that made them feel uncomfortable or unsafe. Grace, a white, nondisabled, college-aged teaching artist (recall her self-portrait in Figure 11), remembered, “When I was younger, I was quite quiet and often felt talked over or forced to participate in activities I didn’t want to. I have grown out of this shyness, but still remember what it felt like” (Grace, artifact from story circle, 6/6/23). Grace’s story resonated with me. I was in college the first time I was told I could “opt out” of a game we played in a theater class. It felt revolutionary. As I grew older, I realized how this normalized coercion in theater pedagogy fuels rampant sexual harassment and abuse in educational theater and the theater industry, particularly against women and girls of color (Moor, 2023). By incentivizing coercive teaching, normative theater education’s “quality” norms perpetuate a cycle of violence.

Surfacing “Quality” Norms as a First Step

Participants grappled with ableism and racism as they circulated in theater education to position “quality” as the property of whiteness and ability. They developed understandings of ableism and racism and wrestled with their own implication in these systems, supported by the tools offered by multimodal storytelling. They articulated normative understandings of “quality” student artists, processes, and productions, and explored how educators attempted to create “quality” through pedagogies that harm students and teachers, but none more than multiply marginalized disabled youth of color. With these norms out in the open, our teaching team could think strategically about subverting them. As I will discuss in the following chapters, this work proved foundational to imagining and creating a different kind of theater education alongside our ATA students.

Chapter 5: Rooting “Quality” in Disability Justice, Reimagining Theater Education

In this chapter, I will shift focus from BAT teaching artists’ and Connections participants’ collective theorizing to the ATA teaching team’s process. First, I will dive into specifics about how, guided by Disability Justice theory (Sins Invalid, 2019) and the ongoing contributions of our multiply marginalized disabled students, the teaching team transformed the normative theater education curriculum towards Disability Justice. Then, I will highlight specific ways in which our team resisted normative conceptualizations of “quality” theater education, looking again at student-artists, processes, and productions. Throughout this analysis, I will focus on data generated through the ATA teaching team’s collaborative process (e.g., data from team meetings, team debriefing sessions following teaching experiences, and one on one interviews with teaching team members).

Our Design Process

I want to begin discussing our teaching team’s process by sharing a quote from Jason, who you may remember as a multiply marginalized member of our teaching team. I spoke with Jason over Zoom, over a month after *We Moved Together* performed. He had moved back into the dorms at his boarding school for his senior year of high school and was struggling with his school’s homophobic culture.

Recalling his experiences with our teaching team, Jason said:

I felt seen and heard working alongside you and Heather and Hanna... and having that privilege to ride in your car and talk about both All Together Academy and BAT. I'm not always heard at this school that I'm at... Anyways, just having that space. BAT has always been that space where I feel like I can express myself... I always look forward to having a break from a school environment if it means coming to BAT and... I feel like this has been the best summer that I've had at this organization, and I found myself, when I was moving into the dorms... being like, damn, I wish I could go back to BAT. I really don't want to go back to this cesspool. Like, oh, I miss that place so much. And I miss working with All Together Academy and doing lights for

Mean Girls. I really explored realms I didn't think that I would be exploring, even if I found out last minute. Again, all shade aside, but working with you. Yeah. I felt seen and heard, and I don't think I really would've gotten that, these type of experiences had I not worked with you or Heather or Hanna or Greg or Spencer or Grace. (Jason, interview, 9/6/23)

Reflecting on his summer, Jason shared that though he had always enjoyed summers at BAT and felt he could express himself there, something about this summer was special. He felt seen and heard in different ways. While I cannot not claim full responsibility for this shift, I think there was something special about how Jason and the rest of our team intentionally moved together (Sins Invalid, 2019) to create lesson plans and facilitate classes with ATA students. In this section, using the stages of solidarity-driven co-design as an organizing framework (Ishimaru et al., 2018), I will explore how, through rooting our ideas of “quality” in Disability Justice, the teaching team collaborated to reimagine the normative theater education curriculum. These interconnected stages of co-design—relationship building and theorizing, designing, enacting through tensions, and reflecting—broadly took place through iterative cycles. For example, our reflections following each class nearly always catalyzed refinements of theory in subsequent teaching team meetings, which in turn catalyzed new designs, enacted through new tensions in subsequent classes. However, sometimes the stages of this cycle blurred. For example, though we may have focused the most explicitly on relationship building in our teaching team meetings, we built relationships with one another throughout every stage of every iterative cycle.

Relationship Building and Theorizing

Our teaching team met for weekly design meetings on Fridays at 9:00 AM. We gathered in the small church nursery that BAT often used as a classroom or quiet cool-down space for summer campers. In these meetings, and in other moments we seized together (e.g., carpooling to and from ATA, setting up for classes, teaching, debriefing after classes), educators and I had to do more than just plan and implement curriculum. First, we needed to develop some shared understandings about who we were,

why we were engaging in this project, and how we wanted to work together. Guided by our framework for Disability Justice in theater education (see Figure 7), we continually defined and redefined how we wanted to be together in community. Particularly as our teaching team was not static— we lost and gained members over the summer— this process had to be open and ongoing. Similar to how educators surfaced norms of traditional theater education throughout the study and not just during story circles, our teaching team built community every time even a subset of us found ourselves in the same place. In these interactions, we reflected on our own identities, showed up as our whole selves, attended to our own and others’ differences and access needs, wrestled with questions about our own motivations and whose voices to center, and took each other's dreaming seriously.

Who were we? To design and teach this series of classes together, the teaching team had to understand who we were and where we came from. As all of us had been privileged by at least one system of oppression, this included reflecting on our own positionality and the power we held in relationship to multiply marginalized students. As a nondisabled white adult, professional educator, and researcher, I was particularly conscious of how I wielded power in the space. After creating a self-portrait alongside Connections participants (see Figure 12) where I named my salient identities (i.e., white, woman, nondisabled, scholar, sibling, wife, daughter, activist, artist, teacher), showed myself holding power (i.e., the red balloons, my relationship to the student raising their hand), and illustrated my desire to move away from urgency (i.e., the word “hurry, the flames beneath my feet, the word “stressful”) and towards sustainability (i.e., “we move slow” above my head), I reflected to participants:

I'm a woman. I'm nondisabled. I'm a scholar, so I do research. I'm white. I'm a sibling. I'm a wife. I'm a daughter. I'm an activist, and I'm an artist. But really I'm just me. It's easy for me to blend in sometimes, and at BAT I'm staff and I'm a teacher, and I feel like I have a lot of power, but I'm kind of like reluctant about the fact that I have a lot of power. It's like this balloon that I'm holding on to I'm like, I just want to give it to somebody else, like somebody else. I want to

empower other people, but I realize it's a huge responsibility. (me, Connections story circle, 6/15/23)

As much as I wanted to, I could not actually give away the balloon of my power. Instead, I had to continually name it, question how and why I exercised it, and accept holding it as an ongoing responsibility. Though sharing this image did not prompt immediate conversation amongst the group, I believe surfacing my own identities and relationship to power helped me begin to build trust with participants. Hanna, too, shared similar thoughts around seeing her privilege as a responsibility. She expressed how she felt obligated to create opportunities for other youth because of the opportunities she had had as a child. Hanna shared, "I think the biggest privilege for me being in the Bay Area among many is being next to Stanford because I think there are so many youth programs that I had access to. So that's why working with youth programs is very important to me" (Hanna, interview, 6/30/23). Hanna's privilege motivated her to extend similar privileges to others.

Figure 12

Self-Portrait of Maddie Zdeblick, Created During a Connections Story Circle



I wanted team members to feel empowered to show up in meetings and classes as their full selves, confident in the knowledge they brought to the group as individuals with unique identities and life experiences. To cultivate this feeling, I encouraged participants to share a bit about themselves and what brought them to the space in our first teaching team meeting. Chloe shared, “Why I'm here is because I have a disability and I wanted to be here... because I'm working on child development [at a local college]” (Chloe, teaching team meeting, 6/23/23). By following her statement with, “So we all have our different ways in, our different expertise,” I validated her unique perspective as a form of wisdom. Over the course of the summer, Emir shared how his Muslim identity influenced her perspective on storytelling and the role of art in creating intergenerational connections. Aadhya shared how, as the daughter of Indian immigrants growing up in the United States, she felt proud of her Indian culture, but also different from her Indian cousins because she embraced some aspects of American culture. And Jason shared the challenges and joys of navigating his identity as a queer Black student and performer. Teaching team members leveraged our personal identities and experiences to shape our collective work.

Inspired by *We Move Together*, the picture book we used as creative source material, we further embraced our differences as tools that helped us move collectively. On our first read through of this book, Emir mentioned, “Well I dunno I just like how it says “we” a lot. It feels like that's important.” Aadhya responded, “I like how we see kids on every single page with different backgrounds and they have different identities and parts of themselves that make them *them*.” Synthesizing these two ideas, I responded, “So it's like “we,” but everybody's really unique, right?” (Emir, Aadhya, Maddie, teaching team meeting, 6/23/23). This concept from *We Move Together* helped us lean into our differences, which strengthened our collective work. For example, Heather reflected on how her late diagnosis of ADHD had impacted her teaching – and how she hoped it would impact the team’s work together. She shared:

I'm pretty good at focusing when I do, but not everybody is great at focusing, and people focus in different ways... I'm also trying to take a step back from how I've traditionally done things and go, okay, how can I better support all the students in this class who all have different brains and ways of thinking... I kind of have taken the descriptors out. There's no good or bad student.

They're all students, they all want to learn. (Heather, interview, 6/27/23)

This perspective—which resonated with our wider conversations about norms of theater education—deeply informed our work. Emir, too, used her experiences as a neurodivergent theater student to advocate for particular pedagogical choices. They suggested moving away from theater games (like “You,” which he called “really stressful;” Emir, teaching team meeting, 6/23/23) that required eye contact and quick reaction times and towards games that offered more flexible forms of participation.

By surfacing our relationships to systems of oppression, bringing our whole selves to our collaborative space, and uplifting the knowledge of each individual team member, particularly those who had been marginalized in theater education, our teaching team began to move together through difference (Sins Invalid, 2019). Rather than positioning our differences as challenges to overcome, we interpreted team members’ unique perspectives as strengths that might inform our work.

Why were we here? As team members brought their full selves into our creative process, they also explored why this project mattered to them. I found Hanna’s perspective particularly interesting. After two years in college as a computer science major, Hanna returned to the Bay Area with an appreciation of theater as “more real” than technology. When I asked her to explain, she expanded:

I think that art and theater and music... those are the things that give people grounding and help people understand their own experiences. And I think computer science can be very impactful... but I think sometimes it... doesn't feel like I'm doing anything that'll really impact people... I think the ultimate mission should be to support things like art...I feel like this is more, it's just

more human... I think CS and engineering... represents this move toward fakeness and technology. (Hanna, interview, 6/30/23)

I was fascinated by these ideas, especially given how to some, theater might represent the ultimate in fakeness (“playing pretend”). When I pushed back, Hanna replied:

I mean okay, fair, fair! ...but it teaches, I think it teaches teamwork and it teaches people to... get in touch with their emotions and how to work with other people and contribute meaningfully... And it's like you could engage with computers where you want if you want, but you don't have to. But everybody lives and exists in the world and has to exist with other people and it just teaches empathy and community. (Hanna, interview, 6/30/23)

While other team members offered different perspectives, and everyone’s perspectives influenced our collective process, Hanna’s stuck with me. Yes, we were pretending, but our *pretending had real value*. We understood imagination as a serious business (Kelley & Monet, 2022). In the grand tradition of utopian performance and prefigurative politics (Dolan, 2001; Muñoz, 2009; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018b), we were pretending towards a better world.

How did we want to move together? To answer this question, our team grappled with two Disability Justice principles: leadership of the most impacted and collective access (Sins Invalid, 2019). Leadership of the most impacted states that, “we are not looking to academics and experts to tell us what’s what — we are lifting up, listening to, reading, following, and highlighting the perspectives of those who are most impacted by the systems we fight against” (Sins Invalid, 2019, p. 23). Though our group had some disabled and multiply marginalized teachers, we held overwhelmingly more racial and ability privilege than the students we aimed to serve. And, though I tried to distribute power amongst our team, I remained the de facto leader. As a white, nondisabled academic, I felt my perspective should be the least important in our space. However, leadership of the most impacted is not permission for those with dominant identities to do less work; in fact, I believe white, nondisabled people have an

added responsibility to change the systems that have disproportionately benefitted us. To attempt to decenter my own perspective without shirking my responsibility, I turned to the art and writing of disabled people of color (e.g., TL Lewis's definition of ableism, Sins Invalid's primer on Disability Justice, etc.). I offered *We Move Together* (a picture book reflecting Sins Invalid's perspectives on Disability Justice and featuring illustrations of disabled people of color) as inspirational source material. I tethered our group's design principles to the work of multiply marginalized artists (see Figure 7). And, most importantly, I encouraged our team to center the artistic impulses of our students.

To work towards collective access, every time we met as a group, we engaged in an access check-in. To normalize having access needs, those of us whose access needs were already met spoke this aloud. At our first meeting, we began sitting in a circle on the floor. Heather expressed needing a chair, we paused to get her one, and we all sat in chairs in our next meeting. When Emir expressed needing documents sent to him as PDFs as his sensory sensitivities made it difficult to carry paper outside, I made PDFs available. We embodied our relationships through an ongoing practice of access.

Designing

Next, the teaching team made decisions about what to teach in our classes at ATA. Though we began with (somewhat flexible) constraints— a set of design principles (see Figure 7), a schedule for meeting with the students, the expectation our students perform at a certain date, time, and location— we had the freedom to structure and restructure *how* we met with students. Working together, we discovered mediating processes that helped us bridge the gap between our design principles (what we wanted students to feel and learn) and our precise pedagogical choices (what we would do in class). I will attend to each of these processes in turn.

Thinking with materials. In our design meetings, we tinkered with materials, including potential props, costume pieces, and artwork from our students. This way of creating disrupted power imbalances between team members and encouraged us to think creatively about how we might work together, in

both our planning process and in the classroom. For example, I arrived at our first teaching team meeting with a box overflowing with finger lights, scarves, bubble wands, spray bottles, parachutes, Poly Spots (brightly colored, textured rubber circles), egg shakers, and other sensory materials. I opened the box and, without thinking, began describing each material and what I had used it for in the past. As I felt and talked my way through the materials, other team members began reaching forward and manipulating the objects themselves. I was describing how poly spots might be used in our classroom, when, with a snowy owl puppet on her hand, Chloe hooted, “Hello there friends!” Her interruption broke my concentration and prompted me to notice my behavior; I had moved from inviting team members’ creative ideas into the space to centering my own. By playing with materials, Chloe injected her voice into the space and shifted our conversation towards thinking about intentionally incorporating nonspeaking students’ ideas into our creative process. Thinking with materials helped us find new ways of relating to one another and our students.

Additionally, thinking with materials helped us respond creatively to students’ ideas. By bringing materials they had created into our design meetings—and responding to them creatively—we remained embedded in their creative process. Rather than evaluating students’ ideas as critics, we interpreted and extended them as artists, asking ourselves how we might best support their creative visions. For example, at one point in our process, we asked students to respond to a list of verbs by drawing and writing on shared pieces of paper. We poured over these papers in our next design meeting, wondering how we might incorporate these ideas into our shared performance. When our wonderings stalled, Hanna suggested we stack the papers into different categories. As we physically moved their papers around, team members jumped in to experiment with how students’ ideas might fit together:

Hanna: *(picking up the “imagine” paper and hovering it over the “adventure” paper)* Adventure stack, imagine? *(moving the “imagine” paper away from the “adventure” paper and setting it down)* Or maybe like tell stories stack, imagine?

Heather: (*picking up the “imagine paper” and moving to set it on top of the “tell stories” paper*)

Maybe imagine can go with that.

Hanna: (*lifting up the “tell stories” to position it on top of the “imagine” paper*). Yeah, yeah.

Maddie: Or tell stories.

[...]

Aadhya: (*moving the “adventure” paper closer to the “game” paper*). Adventure can go with...

(*moving the “adventure” paper next to the “travel” paper*). Adventure can go with travel actually. (Hanna, Heather, me, Aadhya, teaching team meeting, 7/7/23)

By physically moving materials around, we engaged creatively and collaboratively as artists, while keeping students’ ideas front and center.

Developing multimodal options. When planning classes, the teaching team worked to ensure students would have multiple options for how (and whether) to participate. This meant always having at least two ways for students to share their ideas (e.g., speaking and writing, speaking and drawing, drawing and moving), but preferably more. For example, during our first meeting, Heather suggested we end each class by asking students to share something they enjoyed about our time together. This would center students’ joy, give us valuable data about what in our process was working well, and give us ideas for what to bring back in subsequent sessions as we built towards a final production. I urged the team to think about how students might respond to this question in different ways. Heather suggested, “you can make a sound or even make up a word.” I suggested that students could point to materials or items on the schedule that they enjoyed. Hanna exclaimed, “Thumbometers!” She went on to explain that students could use a thumbs up, a thumb to the side, or a thumbs down to show how they were feeling. We ended up offering “thumbometers” as an option for the check-in we led at the beginning of each class and taking up Heathers’ and my suggestions as options for the check-out.

As we got deeper into the rehearsal process, we started offering more options for how students might engage. Crucially, we did not assume that every student wanted to be an actor in our production. In a recording from a class on July 12th, we offered students two different options for participation:

If you're feeling like sitting down and drawing is a better choice for you today, you can work on designing some projections that are going to be in the background of our scenes. If you feel like standing up and playing games and acting is going to be a better choice for you today, you can work on making some stage pictures with your body. (me, recording of class, 7/12/23)

By offering students multimodal means of engagement, we made our classes more accessible and increased the ways in which students might make real choices that influenced their production.

Perhaps because of our commitment to multimodal engagement, when we attempted to evaluate how each of our design principles (i.e., we are artists, we are storytellers, we move together) had shown up in our work with students, we struggled to separate their impact. For example, we choreographed a dance with high schoolers to an Imagine Dragons song, *Believer* (a favorite of multiple students). Before asking students to create their own dance moves, our team talked about the inherent creativity in developing and performing choreography; not only do different movements look different on different bodies, but unison movements can get boring quickly. We agreed that dancing becomes more beautiful when bodies move together in complementary, yet distinct ways. As we began developing choreography with students, our team facilitated students taking turns initiating movements. Some students modeled movements for others to mirror. Some explained their movements verbally and encouraged others to physically respond. Others did not follow their peers' movements or choose to model or explain their own movements, but instead moved through the space to their own rhythms, influenced by the words and feelings of the song. As our rehearsal process progressed, we built consensus around a sequence of movements based on the group's energy when performing them (e.g., as "jumping" elicited laughter and smiles from most students and many students "stomped" with

ferocious intention, both movements needed to be part of our dance). Our teaching team performed the resulting “set” movement sequence alongside the high school students, but in distinct ways (e.g., my jumps looked different from Heather’s jumps), both to physically accompany students (Mei-Singh, 2021) and model the kind of variety we hoped students would embrace within our choreographic structure. They did.

As illustrated through this example, there was no neat 1:1 relationship between students’ chosen forms of participation and our design principles; students’ diverse contributions animated all of our design principles and their relationships to one another. Heather expressed this when she said:

I mean the first thing when I, “we move together” [Design Principle 3], I thought of high school immediately. The dance and the movement that we've done. I feel like we've done a lot of dancing and movement together. But then, I also think in the song we're dancing to, there's quite a story. And I think that us moving to it is also, we're storytelling [Design Principle 2] through the movement as well. So I don't know, I was like, it [dancing with high school students] could be more than just one [design principle]. And then “we are artists” [Design Principle 1] because we're telling, I don't know, I really jumped to that for high school, but then I was like, but we're also doing that. (Heather, teaching team meeting, 7/21/23)

Having multimodal options for engagement made our process beautifully messy, enriching what we were able to create and how we were able to move together.

Leaning into possibilities for interdependence. Finally, the teaching team dreamed up ways for students to work together, exercising interdependent agency (Zdeblick, 2023). The group collage we developed on our first day in the classroom with students is a perfect example (See Figure 13). Inspired by “We are artists” [Design Principle 1], Emir suggested we begin by making a collaborative work of art, saying, “Maybe for we are artists, sort of a... thing that you could pass around, a paper and they could draw something on it and at the end have this one little everyone paper” (Emir, teaching team meeting,

6/23/23). Others on the team loved his ideas. When—for logistical reasons—I suggested that instead of passing a paper around, students could simultaneously write, draw, and collage on a single large piece of butcher paper, Aadhya returned to and extended Emir’s idea. She asked, “Will we have the same paper and give it to each group? They could get inspired by each other. So maybe we could do a whole big one paper. Cause if one group does something then we pass it on to the next group and they can be like, oh I also want that.” In an enthusiastic tone, Emir added, “Like one of those really, really big ones!” In this moment, Emir and Aadhya collaboratively scaffolded their future students’ interdependent agency.

Figure 13

Collaborative Collage Created by ATA Students During Our First Class on 6/28/23



While I will wait to describe specific elements of this collage and how they influenced our evolving production until the next chapter, I want to illustrate *how* ATA students created this. With each group of students (elementary, middle, and high school), our teaching team began by exploring the

book, *We Move Together*. With the elementary school students, we read the book aloud. Worried that middle and high school students might interpret a read-aloud as infantilizing, we instead distributed multiple copies of *We Move Together* to these students and encouraged them to work through the book at their own pace (alongside their aides and our teaching artists, who provided reading support as needed). We asked students to think about what stood out to them about the book and what felt important. Then, we gave students permission to depart from the book as source material and reflect on how they liked to move together. Students added their ideas (e.g., jumping, dancing, running, epic battle, tennis, super speed) to this collage. Then, we asked students to add any other words and pictures they felt needed to be part of our show. In this creative, material, multimodal process, students interdependently built on one another's ideas (e.g., underlining ideas other students had shared that felt important, drawing pictures that illustrated others' words).

Ultimately, these mediating practices—thinking with materials, developing multimodal options, and leaning into opportunities for interdependence—formed a bridge between our team's design commitments and the actual practices we engaged in the classroom. When we strayed, they helped us find a way back to our guiding principles. And, when students' contributions surprised us—as they often did—they helped us imagine pathways forward.

Enacting Through Tensions

When our team implemented our ideas in the classroom and on the BAT stage, tensions arose. Supported by principles of co-design (Ishimaru, 2020a), I worked with our team to imagine these tensions as opportunities for learning and change. In particular, we navigated tensions around our physical environments (and the kinds of movement they afforded and constrained), time and space (who felt like they owned spaces, who felt like guests, who had a right to occupy what spaces when, and where staff should prioritize spending their time), and access frictions (Calling Up Justice, 2023). I will consider each of these tensions—and the learning and change each provoked—in turn.

Physical environments. From the beginning of our process, we planned to have ATA students share their final performance on the BAT stage. The executive director of ATA imposed this design constraint; she felt that her students would get more excited about performing on a “real” stage, and that audiences would take their work more seriously in this setting. Though I was nervous about the logistics of this choice—students would have to adjust to a new space quickly, as we would have very little rehearsal time on the actual stage—I supported her decision. However, I did not fully appreciate the physical differences between ATA and a traditional stage (like BAT’s) until it became time to plan the transition from one space to another. On August 1st, after our last day of rehearsal at ATA, the team reflected on their worries surrounding the next day’s transition to BAT. Notice Hanna’s attention to the physical constraints of BAT:

My only concern is physical space, just because [the BAT stage is] small. It's small and yeah, [ATA] is great. You get to wander around and you want that to be enabled as much as possible. But that is severely limited by the fact that [at BAT,] we are next to a creek and a dangerous play structure and wood chips and all that. So I think it'll be fine, but I think that that's something we'll have to pay attention to. And that's kind of the only thing that makes me a little bit nervous. (Hanna, debrief, 8/1/23)

At ATA, Hanna had grown accustomed to how students could move freely throughout the space, without risk to themselves or others. Particularly in describing BAT’s standard play structure and wood chips as “dangerous,” Hanna’s words seem to reflect a lack of trust in kids, particularly disabled kids of color, that remains common within educational spaces. However, they also reflect the reality that theaters (with their perpetually under-construction sets and temporary electrical wiring) can be dangerous. And Hanna was right to worry about the creek, which was full of poison oak. An ATA student climbed down its banks on our performance day.

While everyone stayed safe with the help of ATA's nearly 1:1 staff to student ratio, transitioning to BAT was stressful for our teaching team and likely for ATA students. BAT's space did not afford students the freedom of movement they were accustomed to at ATA. After the performance, Emir reflected on how much he appreciated the way ATA's space allowed students to come and go (and its on-site obstacle course), saying, "I've done other play performances for younger people...[but] I've never done it in a space as cool as that. The kids could come and go. I thought that was a really cool learning environment... Honestly, I wish [my high school] had an American Ninja Warrior course." So much of the normative theater education model revolves around students sitting still in a controlled environment, listening and responding to the instructor. Bringing these expectations (and BAT's associated physical constraints) into tension with ATA's free and permissive expectations (and their associated open floor plan, vaulted ceilings, and accessible obstacle course) taught our team to value a more open and flexible learning environment.

Ownership over space and time. With students' physical transition from ATA to BAT came a transition in perceived—and in some senses real—spatial ownership. From the beginning of our design process, our teaching team tried to respect our role as guests in our students' space. Aadhya emphasized the importance of recognizing students' ownership over ATA, saying, "I think it should be a fun experience for them and we should work on adapting ourselves to their ways other than the other way around. I think that's important because we're coming into their space and definitely their space is their space" (Aadhya, interview, 6/23/23). This philosophy served us well in rehearsals, but its corollary—that ATA students should adapt themselves to BAT's ways when they came to BAT—felt wrong. BAT was a space that purported to be for everyone; we did not want ATA students to feel like guests on our campus. However, we knew they would be arriving in a space occupied by (the predominantly white, nondisabled) high school cast of *Mean Girls*. How could we negotiate sharing space, without positioning one group as owners and one group as guests?

This tension was exacerbated when, the week before ATA students were to arrive at BAT for their first and only dress rehearsal, BAT's camp director Sara realized she had not accounted for ATA students' presence in the *Mean Girls* rehearsal schedule. She panicked. In her perception of the situation, BAT's typical students were being asked to give up ownership over their space and generously share it with another group. Regardless of the facts that BAT was contractually obligated to both sets of students, and that the *Mean Girls* cast had had three full weeks of stage time when ATA students had had none, Sara felt the student performers in *We Move Together* had less of a right to the space. Stressed about how much *Mean Girls* had to accomplish before opening, Sara informed me "she was going to have to say no to our request" to rehearse *We Move Together* onstage as planned (memo, 7/19/23). In her language—"say no to our request"—Sara revealed how she understood BAT's relationship to ATA students. She perceived BAT as a benefactor, graciously allowing ATA students to use BAT's space when convenient. I left our meeting feeling frustrated and without a resolution. Several hours later, Sara sent me a message apologizing for reacting so quickly. She offered that it would take "creative gymnastics and intentionality on everyone's part" but she could "make it work" to give ATA students an hour of rehearsal time onstage. She closed, "I appreciate your patience with me as I have to relearn new ways of thinking about structure to make space for these exciting new frontiers" (Slack message, 7/19/23). Sara's panic—and subsequent apology—reflected a larger pattern of contested spatial ownership. BAT, like many more traditional theater spaces, wanted to create a community where everyone could belong. However, when faced with the urgency of a normative educational theater process, they operated under a scarcity mentality. Their first impulse was to guard the space and time that felt so limited for their typical students. But, by slowing down and taking extra time, leadership reframed the situation and got everyone what they needed.

In the aftermath of this episode, teaching team members noted communication between BAT leadership and the *Mean Girls* cast that reinforced the idea that BAT students had priority in the space.

For example, after hearing Sara explain the change in schedule to the *Mean Girls* cast, Jason remembered feeling as if she was apologizing to the *Mean Girls* cast for the existence of the ATA program. Consequently, anxiety about how the *Mean Girls* cast would welcome ATA students crept into our team meetings and debriefs. Chloe worried that the BAT high schoolers would feel uncomfortable with the freedom of movement ATA students were accustomed to at their school. She worried that the BAT high schoolers might feel “antsy... and [worried] that people will come in their space” (Chloe, teaching team meeting, 7/28/23). Hanna even noticed herself perpetuating the idea that the space belonged to the *Mean Girls* cast in the following quote (my italics):

I imagine that the people we are kicking, *we're not kicking 'em off stage, but I think the people that we will be taking the stage from* are probably going to be really stressed. And I think that historically has not been great with this group of people. And I think that everybody, not that anyone's hesitant to be assertive, but I think that it is well within everyone's right to be a little bit assertive about taking that space. (Hanna, debrief, 8/1/23)

In her struggle to say the words “the people we are kicking off stage,” Hanna revealed her worry the cast and team of *Mean Girls* would perceive our team and ATA students as interlopers. Jason interrupted these anxieties to say definitively, “they’ve had their time” (Jason, debrief, 8/1/23). He defended ATA students’ right to space and time at BAT.

The teaching team found our own time contested in the lead up to the performance. For example, Jason worried about whether he would be able to make all of the rehearsals at ATA, given that he had also been assigned the role of sound operator for *Mean Girls*. He said, “I don't know if [*Mean Girls* will] want me gone part of the time, but I think it'll work out for me to be there for ATA, do our rehearsal, and then work with them.” (Jason, teaching team meeting, 7/28/23). This illustrates how BAT staff left Jason to navigate two roles that expected him to be in two different places, often at the same time. Jason’s reflections also evidence his understanding that— even though this was never explicitly

said—he was expected to put *Mean Girls* first. As an additional example, Sara pulled Heather from one of our early teaching team meetings, as she was “needed in rehearsal.” I do not believe these examples evidence conscious decisions by the BAT staff to prioritize one (predominantly white, nondisabled) cast over another (predominantly BIPOC, disabled) cast. Instead, I think they illustrate how the urgent atmosphere of rehearsing a normatively high “quality” show makes it difficult to see anything outside of that goal as important. When “quality” is defined so narrowly, and held to such a high level of importance, it is difficult to attend to everyone’s needs and desires.

Ultimately, though BAT staff and our team wrestled with these tensions up until and following the performance of *We Move Together*, there was one group who was notably unconcerned: the high school cast of *Mean Girls*. In the morning before ATA students arrived for their dress rehearsal, I gathered the *Mean Girls* cast together in a circle. I described how our team had been working with ATA students to develop an original performance grounded in Disability Justice principles. Students listened with rapt attention, nodding in agreement when I mentioned the project’s motivation: ensuring that ATA’s disabled students of color could belong at BAT, not just in the audience, but onstage. When I thanked the *Mean Girls* cast for their flexibility in shifting their rehearsal schedule around, a student interrupted me, saying, “No, thank you for doing this!” Others snapped, nodded, and smiled in agreement. After this interaction, I wrote in my research journal, “The barrier to inclusion was not the high school students. It was really the staff and teaching artists who were stressed about the product of the final production and didn’t want to ‘give up their time or space’” (memo, 8/2/23). Our team worried these high schoolers would feel slighted by having to alter their rehearsal schedule and share “their” space, but they did not. This was a learning moment for our team and the BAT staff. Far from interpreting *We Move Together* as a threat to their space and time, the high schoolers appreciated *We Move Together* as an example of social justice and artistic integrity embodied onstage.

Access Frictions. When instructing at ATA and at BAT, our team encountered access frictions (Calling Up Justice, 2023), moments where our access needs seemed misaligned with those of ATA students. For example, after teaching our first classes at ATA, multiple members of our team (Emir, Aadhya, Chloe, Heather) shared how they had experienced “sensory overload” or “overwhelm” from being in a space with so much movement and sound. I wondered: did this reaction indicate that our team’s access needs had not been met? Or did it suggest the kind of productive discomfort typical to teaching in a new space with new norms that would ease over time? Either way, I knew not to frame our access needs as “competing,” which might suggest there would be winners and losers. Instead, I encouraged team members to take breaks when necessary and give themselves time to adapt to this new setting.

While most expressed feeling their “overwhelm” ease over time, Chloe continued to experience access frictions. In my final interview with Chloe, she shared how challenging it was for her to focus at ATA, particularly when one student (Bex) was using her preferred focus tool: loudly sifting through beads in a plastic tub. Chloe said, “Because the kids had disabilities, so that was when someone had to do something else, or just, like with the beads. That was hard because I got distracted and that was hard.” I clarified, “So there was some tension between their access needs and your access needs?” and Chloe replied, “Yeah” (Chloe, interview, 8/11/23). In this anecdote, Chloe brought up an example of unresolved access frictions that made it difficult for her to participate fully as a teacher at ATA. In hindsight, I wish I had checked-in with Chloe personally about how she was doing earlier in the process. We might have looked at this tension as a possibility for learning and change. For the show, Bex replaced her beads with multicolored pom poms that were silent but still visually engaging. Had we encouraged this substitution earlier, maybe ATA would have been more accessible for Chloe. Maybe Chloe could have taught with noise-cancelling headphones. Maybe Chloe and this student could have worked in separate groups. Likely, none of these changes would have fully resolved their access friction.

Perhaps none would have even reduced it. But, by engaging this friction directly, we might have discovered new opportunities for moving together.

Reflecting

Through reflection, the final element of the co-design cycle, our team evaluated which aspects of our teaching to continue and which aspects to shift and change. Like in design, several mediating processes helped us bring our classroom teaching back in conversation with our design commitments, empowering us to revise and adapt our teaching for the future. These included 1) reframing “challenges” with individual students as opportunities for better understanding their identities as artists and storytellers and responsively reshaping our teaching, 2) leaning into novel experiences as catalysts for students’ (and each other’s) learning, 3) recognizing students’ (and each other’s) respective contributions, and 4) evaluating our teaching in terms of the joy it sustained. These reflective processes supported us in assessing and adapting our teaching.

Reframing challenges. As we worked together, we encountered moments with ATA students that might have been labeled “challenging” in a normative theater education context. Rather than interpret these moments as signals that students were not interested in or capable of artistry and storytelling, we reframed them as opportunities to learn more about these students and adapt our teaching accordingly. After all, we were committed to seeing each student as both an artist and storyteller (recall Figure 7). For example, Mark (a 2nd grade ATA student who you will get to know in chapter six) came to our first rehearsal wielding a long stick with a red crayon attached to it on one end. He did not seem interested in our check-in or warm-up activities (a fact he later confirmed), and instead chose to stab himself with his makeshift sword and pantomime dying dramatically. After a while, he transitioned to encouraging other students and teachers to take turns stabbing themselves. When others expressed disinterest, Mark spent a few minutes poking others with his stick-crayon combo and then left the space.

Afterwards, Hanna reflected on Mark’s participation. Instead of focusing on the “challenges” his participation posed, Hanna imagined how Mark might ultimately get involved in our storytelling, saying, “Yeah, Mark would probably enjoy props.” (Hanna, debrief, 6/28/23). In a subsequent teaching team meeting, Heather reiterated and extended this idea, saying “Yeah, I feel like he also does well with like tactile things. So having stuff for him to even... maybe prop creation or making something where he has materials.” Hanna replied enthusiastically, “That’s a good idea. That’s a good idea” (Heather, Hanna, teaching team meeting, 7/7/23). Hanna and Heather focused on what they had learned from Mark’s “challenging behavior”—that he liked creating and playing with sword-like objects—and hypothesized that he might be more enthusiastic about designing and making props than playing theater games. As you will see in chapter six, this proved important to helping Mark figure out how he wanted to engage.

Learning from novel experiences. In their reflections, team members continually surfaced the value of trying something new, for their students and for themselves. For example, when asked what role theater education might play in Disability Justice, Aadhya reflected on how Disability Justice requires people to step outside their comfort zones and try new things. After all, the status quo is not Disability Justice. Aadhya believed theater education was the perfect place for students and teachers to broaden their understanding of the world and experiment with new ideas:

I feel like theater specifically just opens up people's minds a lot more because it's so creative and you can try new things without the fear of being judged because that's what theater's all about, making new choices. So I feel like that's a really safe space to start and get introduced to new things, and I just feel like that's a great way to get new experiences and stuff. (Aadhya, interview, 8/11/23)

Our teaching team also shared how much they learned from teaching in the novel environment of ATA. For instance, Jason recognized his initial hesitance at ATA as a step along the path to learning. In an interview after the students’ performance, he shared, “And then when I finally got to visit ATA, I became

more comfortable there. It's not that I was uncomfortable, it was just like a new environment, and I felt like being part of that environment was eye opening" (Jason, interview, 9/6/23). Aadhya echoed this sentiment, sharing of her experiences teaching at ATA:

I kind of stepped out of my comfort zone and it benefited them [ATA students] and it benefited me. It changed my perspective and it helped me understand how people with those types of disabilities learn and how they grow and how they react in certain situations. And I feel like it's really meaningful to see the world through the eyes of others, and that really helped me. This experience helped me do that. So overall, it was a really fun experience, and it helped me open my view and understanding. (Aadhya, interview, 8/11/23)

For Aadhya, Jason, and others on the ATA teaching team, temporary discomfort ("stepping outside" of one's "comfort zone") catalyzed welcome perspective shifts that yielded both fun and learning. Through theater education, ATA students and our team tried moving together in new ways, bringing us closer to Disability Justice in theater education.

Recognizing contributions. After one of our classes at ATA, Heather reflected, "we all bring our own unique strengths" (Heather, Day 6 Debrief). Though our teaching team worked together closely, we carefully recognized one another's unique strengths and contributions. None of us could create the art we wanted to make on our own. Evoking Disability Justice's principle of interdependence (Sins Invalid, 2019), we had to depend on one another's expertise, creativity, and support. For example, Hanna was the only member of our teaching team with technical theater experience (e.g., stage management, sound design). In addition, she played guitar and was studying computer science at a university. When ATA students wanted to code sound effects for our show using the program Scratch, Hanna knew exactly what they were talking about and how to support them. We could not have embraced and extended these students' contributions without Hanna, a fact which we repeated to Hanna often.

Similarly, we depended on Chloe to provide her perspective, as the only member of our team labeled with IDD. I impressed upon Chloe the importance of her perspective when inviting her to join the team. While evading explicit acknowledgement of Chloe’s disability, Aadhya later reflected on Chloe’s participation, saying, “it’s really important to have people who have had more experience or... who relate” (Aadhya, interview, 8/11/23). Further, our team appreciated Chloe for more than the identity she represented; we celebrated the joy Chloe brought to our team. Hanna reflected on this, saying:

Chloe just brought so much joy... I thought specifically the energy was better when they were there. I think because they just were the first one to participate in everything that we were doing... having people from a teaching team kind of model what those things look like and be excited about it and specifically model the enthusiasm that those activities can have, I think that makes a huge, huge difference... Chloe was awesome. Yeah, huge fan. (Hanna, interview, 8/16/23)

By surfacing the skills, perspective, and joy each team member contributed to our beautiful whole, we built a community that valued—as Disability Justice demands—how “all bodies are unique and essential” (Sins Invalid, 2019, p. 12).

Celebrating joy and designing for more. Kafai (2021) quotes Sammie Ablaza Wills saying, “Revolution is not a moment. It is a practice. It is a culture of making mistakes, of transforming harm, of celebrating joy” (p. 178). In our reflections, we always began and ended with the practice of celebrating students’ joy, interpreting it as an indicator of movement in the right direction. For example, Hanna and Heather had the following conversation after one of our last visits to ATA where we rehearsed a dance with the high school students:

I just remembered I wanted to have mentioned, Stella looked so happy when we were doing the dance every single time. Just the biggest smile on her face. We were doing the in and out thing [a dance move]. She was really excited about it and actually really happy. So.

Heather: She also smiled really huge right before the [section of the show where we moved fast and slow]...I feel like this is the first time I really saw her smile that big before, so that was really cool... Rob also did a huge smile at one point. It was when we finished the dance and they had their hands up and we were about to bow. He just had the biggest smile of enjoyment and pride on his face. So it was really cool. (Hanna, Heather, debrief, 8/1/23)

Our team used students' reflections on what they enjoyed in each class to design for even more joy in the future. For example, when elementary school students added pictures of Mario, Luigi, and their favorite Pokémon characters to our group collage—and pointed to their images or said their names during our check-out—we responded by incorporating these characters into the next class's physical and vocal warm-ups. Emir, our resident Mario expert, led us in pretending to eat different kinds of mushrooms that made us grow, shrink, and adopt special abilities. When they encouraged us to repeat "Itsumi Mario!" in an uncanny imitation of the character, students' volume increased, smiles bloomed, and giggling ensued. In our reflections, we recognized students' joy as an indicator of success and guide for our future teaching.

Our teaching team engaged these processes—relationship building and theorizing, designing, enacting through tensions, and reflecting—in an ongoing cycle, continually transforming our practice. This cycle of adaptation felt novel for members of our teaching team. For instance, when I asked Emir how this project compared to his past experiences in theater education, he replied, "It was better, honestly... the shape changing lessons and the adaptability... Knowing that not everything's going to be smooth... but being ready for that, being able to change with that, it was just really cool to see" (Emir, interview, 8/13/23). Assuming we would need to make changes and having a structure for creating and

implementing them made our process feel different to Emir. Our “shape changing” teaching became part of an ongoing practice of Disability Justice.

Reimagining “Quality” in Theater Education

I have illustrated how our teaching team deliberately assessed and shifted our teaching to transform our theater curriculum. As discussed in chapter 4, not every teaching team member shared the same structural, intersectional understandings of ableism and racism, but all committed to working towards theater education that worked better for multiply marginalized students. Because of our teaching team’s varying perspectives and my background as a scholar, I held myself responsible for continually encouraging our group to consider how racism and ableism circulated in our work together. Through this collaborative process, we also shifted how we thought about (and what we taught our students about) “quality.” We worked to position “quality” not as the property of whiteness and ability (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016; Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011a), but rather as rooted in Disability Justice (Sins Invalid, 2019).

A common debate in theater education—“process versus product”—became a focal point for transforming our understandings of “quality.” This debate remains pervasive. For example, a professional development session I once attended used the question, “Do you identify as a process-first or product-first teacher?” as an icebreaker, and all attendees had an immediate response. Beneath this debate lies the assumption that any attention to students’ joy and well-being in the rehearsal process will reduce the “quality” of the final product. Educators ask themselves, “Is this tradeoff worth it?” This debate arose multiple times in conversation with the teaching team, mostly when members referred to *We Move Together*—and sometimes BAT as a whole—as more process-oriented than product-focused. As our team asked, “How do we keep the process enjoyable while also wanting a great final product?” (Heather, teaching team meeting, 7/14/23), I wondered how this debate might change if we no longer framed “quality” art as the property of whiteness and ability. If we reconceptualized how we thought

about “quality” processes and products—if “quality” products were no longer defined as “perfect,” economically-successful instantiations of works written by white playwrights, directed by white directors, that were repressive of difference—might not a joyful, healthy process *support* students in creating a “quality” production? Together, we dreamed up “quality” processes, characterized by flexibility, accessibility, and ensemble. We reimagined “quality” products that sustained joy, helped students achieve their own goals, and celebrated variations in bodyminds. Within this new paradigm, the “process vs. product” debate evaporated. Instead, our reimagined “quality” processes supported our reimagined “quality” products.

We wondered how we might bring audiences—and our fellow BAT staff members and students—with us on our journey. After all, if we and our students had shifted what we meant by a “quality” product, but others still held more normative expectations, they might not appreciate our students’ work. How could we communicate to audiences that our students’ work was not inherently better or worse than a normative youth theater production, but rather had different “quality indicators?” I had worried about this since before starting this research project. In my early conversations with BAT’s interim executive director Cara, she had asked me with genuine concern whether including more students with disabilities in our programming would mean “lowering our artistic standards.” I became preoccupied with this idea: how could we communicate to our community that we were not moving the goalposts of success but rather changing the entire game? In Hanna’s words, “It’s not...the standards are usually up here and then we’re moving them. It’s just sort of like everything is its own different thing” (Hanna, interview, 8/16/23). Our team tried several different strategies. We developed supplementary written and visual materials including a director’s note for the program (see Appendix E) and a lobby display (see Figure 14), had extensive conversations with BAT staff and students, and collaborated on a pre-show speech, all in an attempt to bring the community into our process.

We worried most about how the cast of *Mean Girls*, a show that fit normative definitions of “quality,” would receive our performance. However, these high schoolers (who had already surprised us with how they welcomed ATA students to share the BAT stage) surprised us again. They loved *We Move Together*. Emir, the one member of our team who was also in the *Mean Girls* cast, summarized his friends’ reaction. He said (my italics), “It wasn't like you took *our stage*. It was like you used *the stage* and created a work of art. It's not like you took *our paintbrush*... it's like you took *a paintbrush* and painted the Mona Lisa” (Emir, interview, 8/13/23). The *Mean Girls* cast saw the BAT stage as a shared resource and *We Move Together* as an artistic triumph. Their raucous applause was genuine, and not in a “clap for the brave cripples, but don’t expect their art to be... good” sort of way (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018b, p. 94). In Hanna’s words (my italics), “It wasn't people coming up and being like... what a *cute* show. It was people being like, that was a *great* show” (Hanna, interview, 8/16/23). Their reactions felt genuine.

I wondered why our show garnered this response from the BAT high schoolers. Was it the supplementary materials we created? The conversations we had? I would like to think that all of our work contributed to their positive reaction, but Hanna had a simpler theory. As theater students, the cast of *Mean Girls* had encountered many different forms of theater over the years. They had seen experimental, avant garde work, with obviously different quality indicators than those they used for *Mean Girls*. Hanna explained:

... when people are exposed to more kinds of theater, they understand... the high schoolers, I think they probably understood. They probably knew what kind of show they were getting. And that show is students on stage coming up with really cool imaginative things and then acting on them in really fun imaginative ways. And that's what happened... they [the *Mean Girls* cast] know that the point of [*We Move Together*] is not necessarily the same point as [*Mean Girls*], and like, that's totally fine. (Hanna, interview, 8/16/23)

Though BAT high school students may not have previously seen a show created by mostly nonwhite, disabled actors, they had seen (and been part of) performances that disrupted the typical norms of “quality” theater. These subversive performances likely had much in common with disability arts (Schmidt, 2018), and may have primed these high schoolers to appreciate the ATA students’ work. Ultimately, at least this slice of our audience appreciated *We Move Together* as a “quality” production, even though it advanced a very different view of “quality” than that promoted by mainstream theater education.

Paralleling the norms shared in chapter five, I will share how we reimagined what it meant to be a “quality” student and artist, participate in a “quality” rehearsal process, and produce a “quality” youth theater production. Drawing on examples from our team meetings, classes at ATA, teaching team debriefs, and 1:1 interviews, I will illustrate how our curriculum became rooted in the assumptions that students were all “quality” students, artists, and storytellers, that a “quality” rehearsal process was flexible to individual and group needs, accessible to everyone, and felt like a family, and that the highest “quality” productions were joyous experiments that celebrated difference and gave students the opportunity to achieve their own goals.

Student Artists

We transformed how we understood “quality” theater students and artists in one simple, yet radical way. We rejected the normative, narrow conceptualization of this student, constrained by stereotypes and expectations (recall Figure 10). Instead, guided by our design principles (recall Figure 7), we assumed all our students (and all of us on the teaching team) were whole, “quality” artists and storytellers, no matter what. This assumption showed up in our team conversations about students’ ideas. Do we understand the meaning behind every piece of “great art” by a “great artist?” Absolutely not. As follows, we did not assume we had to understand our students’ work to validate it as great artistry and storytelling. Rather than assessing whether students’ ideas were “good” or “bad,” we

assumed they were as ingenious as their creators. This transformed our responses to their work. For example, in an episode I will explore further in chapter six, Mark drew out his idea for a game on paper. When we looked at this drawing in our next design meeting, Hanna offered, “I don't quite understand this game design, but I'm sure it's awesome” (Hanna, teaching team meeting, 7/7/23). This stance feels similar to “presuming competence” (Biklen & Burke, 2006). However, the idea of “competence” feels too narrow to capture what Hanna was doing. She presumed brilliance¹⁶ beyond her immediate comprehension.

Rehearsal Processes

To create space for our brilliant students to express their brilliant ideas, we developed a “quality” rehearsal process grounded in the values of flexibility, accessibility, and ensemble. When I mention flexibility, I do not mean that we asked our students to be flexible. Nor do I mean we assumed virtuosic flexibility from individual teaching artists; we wanted to disrupt the assumption that theater educators could do everything themselves with little to no support. Instead, recognizing that a high degree of flexibility was already required from our disabled students, just to participate in most mainstream structures (McRuer, 2006), our teaching team asked the traditional structures of theater rehearsal processes to flex and bend to accommodate our and our students’ needs. For example, typical theater education assumes, among other things, that students will perform onstage, remembering and repeating what they practiced in rehearsals. In contrast, we did not assume that students who began the show onstage would end the show onstage, or that those who began the show offstage would stay there. Instead, we invited each student to choose an onstage “home base,” which could be a colored dot on the floor, a chair, a block, or something else (e.g., Bex chose a beanbag). Having a “home base” allowed students to transform from performers to audience members and back again several times

¹⁶ I mention “brilliance,” not to evoke normative ideas of quality, but rather to follow in the footsteps of critical disability studies scholars (e.g., Clare, 2017) and Disability Justice activists (e.g., Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018a) and celebrate the creative ingenuity of those who have learned to navigate the world in nonconforming bodyminds.

throughout each rehearsal and performance, knowing there was always a place for them onstage. Additionally, we encouraged students to use materials (scripts, props, costumes), one another, and our teaching team for support moving through our production. The teaching team brought our scripts onstage to model how we all benefited from supports. Students and teachers moved back and forth between onstage and off, helping one another move the story in the direction we wanted it to go.

Additionally, we grounded our process in understanding that everyone has access needs. Like Disability Justice offers, we recognized that we can all work together to meet these ever-shifting needs in community, without shame (Lazard, 2019; Sins Invalid, 2019). This understanding was fundamental to our rehearsal process. For example, see this excerpt from notes I took while reviewing a rehearsal recording:

Brian arrives, and Hanna invites him to sit on a yellow dot between her and Jason. Bex's aide brings her beanbag, iPad, and beads over. Kevin comes over with his laptop, and Brian's aide pulls up a chair to sit behind him with an iPad. Bex joins. (session 8 recording memo)

In these four sentences, describing less than one minute of one rehearsal, we see two nonspeaking students join rehearsal, supported by Hanna, Jason, their respective aides, communication devices (iPads), and sensory regulation tools (the beanbag, the beads). These students join rehearsal not on the periphery but at the center, between Hanna and Jason, with their aides behind them. Additionally, we see Kevin, a neurodivergent student who had repeatedly declined opportunities to perform, bring over his laptop to share sound effects he had created for the show. By collaborating to meet one another's access needs, we strengthened the "quality" of our rehearsal process and our community.

Finally, we believed that "quality" processes were those that cultivated a sense of ensemble for all students and teachers. As previously mentioned, the word "ensemble" has many different definitions in a theater context. Here, I use it to mean a sense of community and togetherness, or as Chloe offered, to mean that "everyone is included... off and on [the stage]" (Chloe, interview, 8/11/23). For Hanna,

working together to meet each other's access needs was the key to cultivating a theatrical ensemble. She offered, "...even if you're not framing it as people's [access] needs and stuff, that's the whole point of all these ensemble things... It's like, what do other people need from me in these times and these spaces and how can I do that?" I could also tell we were working as an ensemble when we found ways to add to each other's scenes. For example, in a final dress rehearsal, Heather improvised dance movements that supplemented elementary schoolers' performances as Mario from Super Mario Brothers. She gently flapped her arms as these same students pretended to be migrating birds. Everyone, including teachers, middle schoolers, and elementary schoolers, learned elements of the high schoolers' dance and accompanied them onstage. Through these movements, teachers and students supported one another. And, in Emir's words, "everyone got the amount of stage time and lines that they wanted" (Emir, interview, 8/13/23), since we created the play together.

Youth Theater Productions

We and our audiences valued our final performance, not because it was a "perfect" reproduction of part of the Western theatrical canon, but because it was full of joy. It offered students the opportunity to set and achieve their own goals, and our students' different goals, ideas, and embodied performances added to its beauty. We (the ATA teaching team and ATA students) felt joy in creating something traditionally "imperfect," that simultaneously was exactly how students wanted it to be. And our joy was contagious. When I asked Jason why he believed the cast of *Mean Girls* enjoyed *We Move Together* so much, he expressed how liberating watching the show might have been. He said:

...I think that's why they loved [*We Move Together*] so much is that they finally got to have a break from this grueling ass show [*Mean Girls*], and were able to sit down and relax, even if their show was right after, because they knew that they had put the work in, and it was time for them to sit back in the audience and enjoy. So I think that is also what makes good theater is being

able to give the audience a break and being able to help the audience escape. (Jason, interview, 9/6/23)

As a member of the *Mean Girls* cast, Emir validated Jason's impressions. He continued, highlighting how he felt students in *We Move Together* confidently did their own thing, with an attitude of "Screw you if you don't like it." Emir experienced this as "really invigorating for [*The Mean Girls* cast], like really energizing... And like people talked about it for a while afterwards, they were like, 'oh my God,' that was so good" (Emir, interview, 8/13/23). Ultimately, students' joy upon making their own creative choices was both an indication we were on the right path, and a "quality" indicator.

Our team also expressed tensions with the idea that any production could be objectively high "quality." Instead, they preferred to think of each production (and each student within each production) as having goals. If individuals and groups achieved the goals they set, then that production was successful. Or in Hanna's words, "I think the objective good just comes from the goal that you've set at the beginning is achieved on stage" (Hanna, interview, 8/16/23), even when people have different goals. When I asked Jason what success might look like for *We Move Together*, he similarly spoke about students achieving their own goals. Jason said that success meant students "achieved something that they wanted to do. If they had a goal for themselves, that they achieved that... even if that goal was as simple as being on stage... Having fun... and achieving goals" (Jason, interview, 7/17/23). In Jason's words, joy and goal attainment intertwined to define our production's success. However, as we did not ask students about their goals at the beginning of our process, this was a challenging lens through which to assess our production's "quality." I am not convinced that every student came into the process with a goal, nor that having a goal is a necessary component of creating a "quality" production. I also know of at least one student, Mark, whose initial goal was to participate in theater as little as possible; however, he changed this goal as our process continued. Because of these considerations, I continue to struggle with goal achievement as a marker of "quality."

Finally, participants defined “quality” in *We Move Together* through identifying how the production celebrated both what brought students together and what made them unique. The production framed students’ differences not as threats to a kind of “perfection” it hoped to achieve, but as beautiful contributions to the world of the play. Perhaps the best example of this came from how one disabled student of color used a letter board to communicate. At one point in the show, this student played a customer at a bakery. After several other customers had ordered sweet treats, he used his letter board to, very clearly and deliberately, spell out “I _ W A N T _ A _ R E F U N D.” He wrote this line himself in an early rehearsal, and it quickly became many people’s favorite part of the show. Reacting to the final performance, Hanna shared:

I really, really liked [his] letter board...I think that probably was my favorite part of the whole show... A. He completely came up with it, which was cool. I think it's easy to watch, then be like, “oh, someone wrote a line that was like “haha refund,” and gave it to him to do.” And it was like, no, he fully just spelled out refund when we were doing the improv activity, which was so cool... [B.] it added to the timing. [It was] funny *because of the way that he communicated it* and I thought that was cool... It was so funny. I laughed every time, people came up to me after and said they enjoyed that too. (Hanna, interview, 8/16/23)

This student’s use of a letter board made the show more aesthetically interesting. And, as orienting to disability often does, waiting for each letter changed the audience’s relationship with time (Kafer, 2013b). It created a sense of suspense that, when the audience realized what he was spelling, resulted in a huge comic payoff. By valuing students’ differences as aesthetic possibilities, *We Move Together* opened up new opportunities for theatrical innovation. Aadhya summed up this idea, saying that by validating students’ differences and incorporating these differences into the show, we “open[ed] up a new side of theater almost” (Aadhya, interview, 8/11/23). Emir compared the way *We Move Together* incorporated difference to his experience in *Mean Girls*, saying, “The things that we did for *Mean Girls*

were a lot more boring than what [ATA students] did.” *We Move Together* was many things—beautiful, flexible, messy, creative, nonlinear—but never boring.

In this chapter, I have shared how our ATA teaching team engaged in a messy, reflexive, cyclical design process to collaboratively create and facilitate a theater residency at ATA. I have also surfaced some of the tensions, inherent in this process, that prompted growth and learning. Further, I have demonstrated how, through intentionally rooting our work in a design framework guided by principles of Disability Justice (Sins Invalid, 2019), our ATA teaching team shifted how we thought about “quality” students, rehearsal processes, and productions. And, I have described the variety of ways we attempted to bring the greater BAT community along with us on the journey. Next, I will turn to the kinds of pedagogies that these reimagined “quality” standards encouraged. Focusing on these pedagogies, I will illustrate how teachers and students accompanied one other through the process of creating and performing *We Move Together*.

Chapter 6: Pedagogies of Accompaniment

In this chapter, I will attend to how, as our teaching team transformed our expectations of “quality” students, processes, and productions, we found ourselves teaching in different ways, through pedagogies of accompaniment. To illustrate this, I will first introduce the world of *We Move Together*, the production that we co-created with ATA youth. I preface this opening vignette—as I prefaced the performance of *We Move Together*—by reiterating that this show was created entirely by ATA students. They did not start with a script, but rather with an idea – how can we “move and work and be together?” (me, performance recording, 8/3/23). For this organizing concept, we are indebted to Kelly Fritsch, Anne McGuire, and Eduardo Trejos, the author and illustrator team behind the picture book *We Move Together* (2021), and the Disability Justice arts activism of *Sins Invalid* (2019) that inspired it. Students started by creating a shared art piece on a big piece of butcher paper. This art piece spawned other smaller pieces of collaborative visual art. Many of these artifacts can be seen in Figure 14, a photo of a lobby display illustrating our process. Working within their classes (elementary, middle, and high school), students created a script, chose their own sets and costumes, and even sound-designed their play. They had only two all-grade-level rehearsals, their only two rehearsals on the BAT stage. As you read this opening vignette, I invite you to take care of yourself and your needs— move around, get up, go use the bathroom— just as youth and audiences modeled doing throughout the performance.

Figure 14

Lobby Display for We Move Together, Depicting Students' Initial Brainstorm (Center), Drawings Inspired by Action Verbs, and Photos from Rehearsals



The Play: We Move Together

It's noon on a late August afternoon in California, and it's hot. The words of Patty Berne and Aurora Levins Morales—just read by Jason and Chloe—linger in your mind as sweat drips down the back of your neck. “We Move Together with no body left behind. This is Disability Justice.” You sit in the semi-darkness of the theater, nearly buzzing with anticipation. The house is packed—full to bursting with young family members, teachers, and friends of the student performers alongside thirty high school actors, already in hair and makeup for the performance of Mean Girls happening later this afternoon. It's not quiet or still—a sea of bright orange programs clasped in sweaty palms (Figure 15) serve as makeshift fans, and audience members squirm in their seats. Some climb onto their chairs and swivel to face the back of the theater, where the doors are wide open and a crowd gathers, silhouetted by bright outdoor sunlight. These are—most of—the performers. There are almost thirty of them, and beyond a general air of anticipation, they seem to have little in common. Some are as young as seven, others as old as twenty-

two. Some move quietly and slowly, leaning on one another or gently swaying back and forth, while others talk animatedly to one another, bouncing up and down on their toes and flapping their arms. Some performers move even faster, running laps around the building and playground, accompanied by teachers and friends; you don't yet see these students. Some performers are empty handed, while others hold communication boards, iPads, fidgets, or other access tools. Heather holds a microphone over to one of the performers— a seven-year-old Black boy with long curly hair and an infectious smile. “We move fast,” he says, before sprinting towards the stage, head down and arms outstretched behind him.

Figure 15

The Cover of the We Move Together Program



The theme song from Naruto plays over the sound system, and suddenly performers are streaming through the door and onto the stage (Figure 16). Some alight on large painted cubes. Others relax into chairs. Still others find colored spots on the floor. You notice the projection behind them, a colorful illustration of children of many races and abilities (and one cat) sprinting, rolling, scooting, and

skipping forward with undeniable speed. The words “We move together” float over their heads, captioning the action. As the flurry of movement recedes and the Naruto soundtrack fades, another voice sounds from the back of the theater. It’s an educator, standing head-to-head with a young Asian student. She says, “We move...” and then she waits. Using a letter board, the student speaks the letters “S, L, O,” and “W” into the microphone. The projection shifts to one captioning these words. Gentle, languid music follows. Many of the remaining performers move into the space, some in slow sustained motion, as if dancing through honey, others with bursts of staccato movement punctuated by rest and stillness. One twelve-year-old white girl rushes forward and sinks into a beanbag, carried onstage by an educator. Not all performers sit— some stand, some lie down. One sprints around the front of the stage and into the sound booth. Heather is one of the last people onstage. Still holding the microphone, she stands stage left, alongside the elementary schoolers, careful not to upstage them.

Figure 16

Students Run Onstage Following the Statement, “We Move Fast!”



As movement and sounds fade, but do not cease, Chloe holds up a large, white poster from her position in the audience. The performers turn to her, and the projection shifts in accompaniment. Not in unison, but rather in a waterfall of cascading voices—some whispers, some shouts, some murmurs, and

others songs—you hear the words, “We move together!” The crowd roars, cheers, snaps, giggles, and glows with joy and appreciation. The space is charged with energy, alive with movement, and full of possibilities as the play continues.

Distilling a Framework for Pedagogies of Accompaniment

How did this happen? How did educators and their students come to move together in such different ways than they might have through normative theater education? Building on theorizations of accompaniment (Mei-Singh, 2021) and aesthetic allyship (Hadley, 2020), and drawing from data generated in this study, I offer pedagogies of accompaniment as a framework for solidarity-driven teaching and learning with multiply marginalized students in creative spaces. I refer to pedagogies, rather than pedagogy, because, like Paris and Alim (2017), my goal is not to provide a one-size-fits-all model of teaching, but rather to offer some guiding principles I believe might cut across many teaching practices. Nor do I propose that I or our team “discovered” these principles; for as long as there have been normative ways of teaching in arts education, there have been teachers resisting, building pathways towards joy and learning with multiply marginalized students. This framework is not for those teachers already engaged in disrupting hegemonic ideas of normalcy. Rather, it is for arts educators who may want to engage diverse populations of students in liberatory learning, but like many teachers at BAT, feel they lack the needed expertise.

I will illustrate pedagogies of accompaniment by first introducing three key pedagogic processes that emerged from the data (engaging with individuals as artists, bringing stories to life in interaction, and creating a vessel for collective creativity) and then demonstrating how teachers embodied these principles while working with students to develop two focal scenes, *Platform Maze* and *The Train*. I selected these scenes because both scenes feature multiply marginalized students and their ideas front and center. However, one scene (*Platform Maze*) illustrates how teachers embodied pedagogies of accompaniment while interacting with one individual student, while the other (*The Train*) demonstrates

the complexity and opportunity of engaging in pedagogies of accompaniment alongside a group of students who also supported one another. I am choosing this analytic approach to maintain focus on participants' embodiment— how students and teachers moved in relation to one another, both in moments of interaction and over long periods of time (Vossoughi et al., 2020). Given that performance is embodied actions (Diamond, 2015) and disability is embodied knowledge (Siebers, 2019), this analytic approach feels appropriate for elucidating how multiply marginalized disabled students and their educators experienced *We Move Together* and how these experiences may have differed from those typically afforded by normative theater education.

In the following sections, I will attend to these pedagogic processes by level of focus, from working one-on-one (engaging with students as artists), to working with small groups (bringing stories to life in interaction), and finally to creating an entire production (creating a vessel for collective creativity; see Figure 17 for a visual organizer). By consecutively attending to these levels of focus, I do not wish to conflate them with chronology. Indeed, all three processes were ongoing and happened simultaneously. Rather, I hope to break down what felt like a very messy and organic process into some of its constitutive parts.

Figure 17

Elements of Pedagogies of Accompaniment, Arranged by Level of Focus



Engaging with Individuals as Artists

Recall from our design framework (Figure 7) and my discussion of how we reimagined “quality” students how we assumed all students were artists, with beauty and stories to share. We also thought of ourselves as artists. The question then became: how could we use our artistry to discover, honor, and extend the artistry of each individual student?

We built relationships. As artists, we knew that nothing creative could happen without getting to know one another and establishing trust. In Aadhya’s words, “We came in with the goal of putting on a play, but to do that, you first need to learn who everybody is and what they feel comfortable doing, and then you can work on ideas and brainstorming.” (Aadhya, interview, 8/11/23). This kind of relationship building required our teaching team to show up in the classroom as our full authentic selves, in wholeness (Sins Invalid, 2019). We did not need to coerce students into compliance or do everything ourselves (as a normative framework for “quality” educational theater would demand). Aadhya continued, “I didn't have to force myself to be a certain way. I didn't have to force [ATA students] to be a certain way. I could just show that I could support them and I would be there for whatever they wanted to try.” (Aadhya, interview, 8/11/23). As Aadhya explained, we did not ask our students to perform extroversion, respect normative creative boundaries, or move their bodies in normative ways. Instead, we just... were.

As we got to know students better, we learned that students had different needs and wants associated with our production. We framed any way students chose to participate as valid artistic engagement. If a student wanted to participate in something, but encountered an access barrier, we practiced care, “moving together and being limited together” (Price, 2015, p. 279). Excluding even one student who wanted to participate was unacceptable. Working together as students, teaching artists, and ATA support staff, we adapted scenes to work with different styles of movement or different communication tools. Additionally, not every student approached the idea of creating a play with

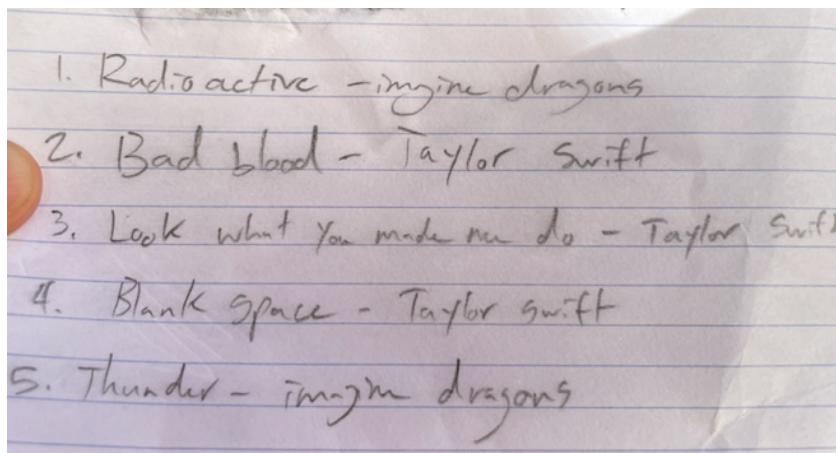
enthusiasm. We expected and respected these students' resistance and refusals, but worked to create opportunities for them to participate in ways they might enjoy. For example, two students balked at the idea of performing, but loved computers. Together, they developed all of the sound cues for the show (and, as I will later describe, one of these students chose to perform in *The Train* scene). Another student did not want to perform—or collaborate with any other students—but was passionate about music. With his 1:1 aide, he developed the preshow playlist (see Figure 18) that audiences listened to while getting settled in the theater. As this student made these choices outside of our theater classes, I have few insights about why this student selected these songs, or how he saw his choices relating to our play's theme. However, I believe the fact that he made these choices—and that we embraced them as necessary and meaningful contributions to our show—speaks to how we framed multiple modes of participation as valid artistic engagement. Hanna reflected on the value of having multiple opportunities to contribute in meaningful ways that arose organically from students' goals and interests:

"... it's fun to do the little side parts of it that aren't necessarily the storytelling because I think that that is fun and is a way to include everybody and everything... we had spaces for the other kids who didn't necessarily want to act on stage... to still be involved in a way that was actually meaningful" (Hanna, teaching team meeting, 7/21/23).

As Hanna described, we worked for more than token inclusion; we tried to give every student the opportunity to meaningfully transform what our play was becoming.

Figure 18

Preshow Playlist for We Move Together



Students and their ideas formed the core of our process. Aadhya expressed this idea in an interview, sharing that she saw her job as "... creating a space for kids to pursue what they want to try and to not hold them back and to help them learn and to help me learn what I can do to support them" (Aadhya, interview, 8/11/23). In other words, we held space for students to create what and how they wanted. Sometimes this meant offering support, guidance, and instruction, but more often, it meant getting out of their way. We imagined ways to move together "with a vision that [left] no bodymind behind" (Sins Invalid, 2019, p. 26).

Bringing Stories to Life in Interaction

Within trusting relationships, we worked together to realize the stories students wanted told. To accomplish this, we needed to welcome not only ATA students, but also others who knew them well, into our creative process. We had to embrace the crucial contributions of students' aides and teachers.

Hanna shared:

"... there's some kids where it was a little bit easier to figure out maybe ways to get them back engaged and some that were a little harder. And then you can rely on these people that kind of know them better [their teachers and aides] to not do it *for* you but work *with* you to... working

as a group of three and understanding I'm bringing the theater piece, this [teacher or aide is] bringing the, 'I know this human really well' piece and then how can you merge those to make it good for that other person?" (Hanna, interview, 8/16/23).

Welcoming others who knew students well into our collaborative process facilitated greater access for everyone. The more individuals committed to supporting students' creative ideas, the better.

Teaching team members supported students' ideas in several ways. First, through documenting students' ideas and championing them in conversations with other students and teachers, teaching team members served as students' memory partners and advocates. This role felt familiar to the members of our teaching team who were interns at BAT. Reflecting on her internship, Aadhya offered:

...my main thing was... to make sure that if they had an idea that it was represented, and if they necessarily didn't feel comfortable coming up to a staff member that I was there and I could pass their idea along. Or if they needed me for something, that I was always there to support them. And I felt like that's very similar to what we did at All Together Academy." (Aadhya interview, 8/11/23)

Taking on this role shifted our teaching; our goal was not to evaluate or control students' ideas, but rather to document and elevate them. We also continually extended opportunities to students, even those who initially turned opportunities down. Instead of teaching students that "quality" theater was a "blink and you'll miss it" type of thing" (Emir, interview, 8/13/23), we communicated that it was never too late to join in on the fun. Emir reflected on the importance of this change in stance, saying:

"Keep giving them the chance. That's a big thing. If you take away the opportunity because they weren't ready at a certain point, bad, no, don't do that. If they didn't feel ready at certain points, don't take away the opportunity. Give them the opportunity to do it again and again and again until they feel comfortable doing it." (Emir, interview, 8/13/23)

Continually extending opportunities is different than coercing students to participate. It means welcoming students' resistance and refusals without permanently closing any doors. "No" is always a valid option. "Yes" is too.

Finally, our teaching team worked to extend students' ideas through offering material supports (e.g., props, costumes, drawing implements, and other manipulatives) and extending their ideas with our own creativity. To illustrate this process, I want to share a story about a BAT staff member who was not on our teaching team, but nonetheless worked collaboratively with ATA students to help realize their artistic vision. Greg is a white, nondisabled set designer at BAT who puts a tremendous amount of artistry into his designs. In an early conversation, Greg suggested that ATA students might help paint two panels that could mount onto the *Mean Girls* set, transforming it for their show. Inspired by students' ideas, the illustrations from the book *We Move Together*, and his love for the artist Keith Haring, Greg created "paint by numbers" designs for these side panels (see Figure 19). However, when ATA high school students came to BAT to paint these panels, they did not paint inside the lines (see Figure 20). I worried, based on my knowledge of Greg's own "high quality" standards, that he would paint over students' work (he sometimes calls this "touching up"). I was surprised when Greg approached me, impressed with the creativity ATA students had brought to the panels. Rather than "perfect" their work, Greg embraced their ideas and added on with his own artistry. He sprayed water droplets over the side panels to make the colors blend even more, something he wouldn't have thought to do before seeing ATA students' work (see Figure 21). As the finishing touch, Greg outlined the central figures on each panel in black paint (see Figure 22). Several days later, ATA students walked into the theater for their dress rehearsal and regarded these final panels with gasps of awe and amazement. This story exemplifies how, through letting go of normative ideas about "quality" processes and productions, our team was able to embody a different kind of theater pedagogy, one grounded in seeing ourselves as accompanists, tasked with embracing and extending our student-artists' ideas.

Figure 19

Greg's Initial Design for the Side Panels ATA Students Might Paint

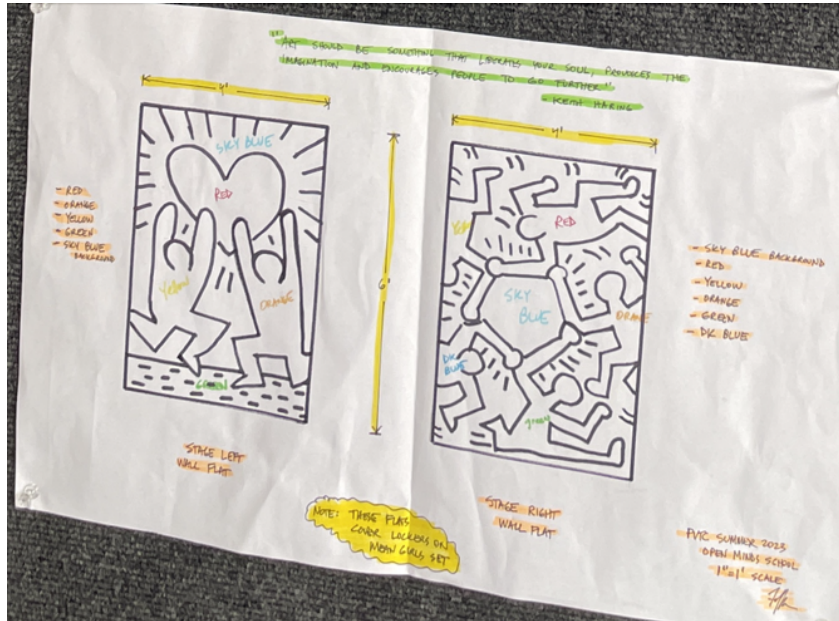


Figure 20

Rowan, a 10th Grade ATA Student, Painting One of the Side Panels



Figure 21

The Side Panels, that ATA Students Painted and Greg Flicked with Water, Drying in the Sun

**Figure 22**

The Side Panels, with the Addition of Greg's Black Outlines, Installed Onstage



Rather than attempting to control students' ideas, our teaching team listened to these ideas, offered material supports, and added on with our own artistry. Aadhya expressed this idea succinctly, saying "Well, I help them build on their ideas. If they drew something or if they talked to me about something, I would extend on that. I'd be like, so the theater saying "Yes, and..." (Aadhya, interview 8/11/23). "Yes, and...", a key principle of improvisational theater, asks artists to take inspiration from their scene partners and contribute their own ideas. As Tanner & McCloskey (2023) offer, embracing this principle can support educators in cultivating an improvisational ethos and resisting the controlling force of whiteness in education. Additionally, saying "yes, and..." means recognizing and building on one another's attempts to transform contexts, meanings, and relationships; in other words, it can be a way for educators and students to cultivate interdependent agency (Zdeblick, 2023). Together, these pedagogic practices—welcoming students' communities, serving as memory partners and advocates, keeping opportunities open, offering material supports, and extending students' ideas—helped our teaching team support ATA students in bringing their stories to life.

Creating a Vessel for Collective Creativity

However, it was not simply about bringing groups of students' ideas to life, but rather creating a framework within which every student's idea could shine, especially given how students rehearsed in grade-level classes but performed as a whole school. To create this vessel, our teaching team sometimes had to step back and make structural choices. However, whenever we made decisions, we brought them back to the students and asked for their feedback. For example, after I knitted students' individual ideas together into a first draft script, I shared it with students, saying, "This is your show, it's not my show. I'm just here to help you put it all together. So this is my first pass at this, and if this doesn't work for you, we'll rework it" (me, session 5 recording memo). However, sometimes even after reworking, it remained difficult to reconcile students' initial ideas (e.g., suspending actors from the ceiling, creating large automated moving set pieces, etc.) with our developing framework. Rather than unilaterally

rejecting these ideas as unfeasible, our team collaborated with students to problem-solve. We engaged in “cool conversation... about theater and the magic of theater and how part of that is that we come up with these really cool ideas and then we have to figure out real ways to execute them on stage and get our message across” (Hanna, interview, 8/16/23). By engaging in these conversations *with students*, we showed students that we saw them as fellow artists and collaborators and opened the door for innovative solutions our team could not have conceived of on our own.

Finally, our teaching team followed through. While I acknowledge there must have been ideas that slipped through the cracks, we committed to supporting students’ ideas from conception all the way to implementation. This mattered. In conversation with one of the teachers at ATA, I learned why one of the students who programmed sound effects for *We Move Together* seemed initially reluctant to engage. Before attending ATA, he had sound designed a show at his previous school. Without telling him, the director had overwritten his work. None of his sound effects made it into the final production, a fact he only realized when sitting in the audience. When it came to *We Move Together*, he may have wondered: why try, if none of his work would matter in the end? We earned our students’ trust by following through, making sure their ideas showed up in their final performance.

By engaging with students as artists, bringing their stories to life in interaction, and creating a vessel for collective creativity, our teaching team *accompanied* ATA students. We recognized, supported, elevated, and extended students’ creative contributions, without “upstaging” them. To extend this theatrical metaphor, ATA students had the spotlight, but our teaching team was also part of the show. We played the “ensemble” roles that helped ATA students shine as stars.

Focal Scenes

In the following sections, I will illustrate what these pedagogies of accompaniment looked like in the process of creating *We Move Together*. Rather than attempting to describe how we developed the whole production, I will limit my discussion to describing how students and teaching artists created two

focal scenes: *Scene 3: Platform Maze* and *Scene 5: The Train*. First, I will describe what these scenes looked, sounded, and felt like in performance, supplementing with photos of the performance and excerpts from the *We Move Together* script. Then, I will journey back to when students first planted the creative seeds of each scene in rehearsals. From there, I will trace the development of each scene, illustrating how our teaching team engaged with students as artists and collaborated with them to bring their stories to life within the larger vessel of *We Move Together*.

I will begin with *Platform Maze*, a scene that a student named Mark conceptualized. You might remember Mark as the multiply marginalized second-grade student who wielded a crayon taped to a stick in our first rehearsal, inspiring some on our team to wonder whether he might enjoy props design. This is the story of how Mark, accompanied by our teaching team, moved from despising every moment of our rehearsals to starring in his very own video game, in front of an awed audience of family, friends, and community members.

Scene 3: Platform Maze

An upbeat, old-fashioned arcade tune cuts through the excited murmuring of audience members and performers. A small child wearing a chef's hat darts out, grabbing a chair and clearing it from the center of the stage. At the same time, a teaching artist (you can tell she's a teaching artist because of her BAT shirt) passes a microphone to another child. He accepts it before crossing center, clutching a very small treasure chest under his arm (see Figure 23). A line drawing of a very complex black and white maze appears as a projection behind him. "Welcome to my game, Platform Maze," he says. As he speaks, you notice his words are open captioned on the same projection. Framed by a semicircle of actors – representing different races, disabilities, ages, and genders, moving in their own ways, and some peering over their shoulders to admire the projection – he continues. "The goal is to escape the maze. You are a dot. You must travel from underneath the spike catcher and get beyond the pit. The prize for victory is 5,000 bars of gold. Who wants to play?" Hands shoot up amongst the semicircle of actors and

around you in the audience. You hear hoots, hollers, and scattered applause before sudden dramatic underscoring drowns out these other noises. The child returns his microphone to the teaching artist and opens his treasure chest. He begins to pass out what look like video game controllers to his fellow actors. Instead of taking controllers, some actors cross centerstage. Rolling, ducking, jumping, and dodging across the multi-leveled stage, these actors bring Platform Maze to life. The underscoring fades, and all but one of these actors clear the stage. Abruptly, the “level up” sound from Super Mario Brothers plays. The remaining actor lifts his hands above his head and jumps up and down, crying “Yes! I did it!” Everyone – you, your fellow audience members, and the actors onstage – cheers. As the cheers die down, actors exclaim in a cascade of overlapping voices, “We game together!” The cheers continue. You wonder what this scene looked like on paper (see Figure 24) and how it came to be.

Figure 23

Mark Presents His Game to the Audience



Figure 24

Scene 3: Platform Maze, *an Excerpt from the We Move Together Script*

Platform Maze (We Game Together)

(Transition sound: a video game.)

Student: We navigate difficult challenges.

Mark: Welcome to my game, Platform Maze. The goal is to escape the maze. You are a dot. You must travel from underneath the spike catcher and get beyond the pit. The prize for victory is 5,000 bars of gold. If this existed on Earth, there would not be enough money to buy it.

As Mark explains his video game, students navigate an obstacle course onstage.

Students cross stage right, then hit a wall. Students jump over the wall. They continue, carefully slipping past a series of spikes. They climb a set of stairs and cross to the wall opposite. They leap across the spike catcher and quickly grab onto the wall. They climb around to the other side and jump onto a platform to the right, before leaping to another platform further right. From there, students leap and grab onto the walls above. Next, they jump again and cling to the platform directly above. They climb on top of the platform, leap to another platform, another platform, and the platform above. They jump to the doorway and run through the tunnel for the exit door. Finally, they take a second tunnel to the next section of the game. Super Mario music plays after the second tunnel as they power up.

All other students pull out game controllers and mime playing.

All: We game together.

In the Beginning

Mark, the creator and star of this scene, began rehearsals diametrically opposed to the idea of participating in a play. As Hanna described in an interview:

So Mark began the whole process really not only, not neutral, very not excited... very not neutral. Every day we went in and we started and we did our thumbometers and he had not one but two thumbs down every single day. And that was so sad, but he just didn't really want to be there. He would get toys and just hit people with toys and throw toys and run away. He just had, wanted nothing to do with it. (Hanna, interview, 8/16/23).

Mark “checked in” to our first rehearsal by holding his stick and crayon combination in one hand, forming a thumbs down with the other, and loudly declaring he felt “bad” (see Figure 25). Two days

later, I returned to ATA to follow up with Mark one on one. During our conversation, Mark shared his fear that theater would disrupt his sense of what was real and what was fake:

Me: So I'm really excited to make some theater with you this summer.

Mark: Not interested.

Me: You're not interested? Why not?

Mark: Well, what the main reason is that I'm used to thinking of movies as imaginary.

Me: So if you were in one, it wouldn't be imaginary.

Mark: Yeah. Which messes with what you believe. (Mark, interview, 6/29/23)

Had I not taken the time to engage with Mark one on one, I never would have guessed the reason behind his reluctance to participate: fear that theater's imaginative nature might disrupt his worldview.

This information helped our team think more strategically about how to work with Mark as an artist.

This was how *Platform Maze* began.

Figure 25

Mark "Checks in" as "Bad"



Engaging with Mark, the Artist and Storyteller

Within the normative paradigm of theater education, educators might have felt the need to control Mark's noncompliance or coerce him into engaging with the planned curriculum. Instead, our team clung to our belief that Mark was an artist and a storyteller; consequently, we respected his agency to decide whether and how he wanted to participate. Instead of trying to convince Mark to get involved, we tried to get to know him and help him get to know us. Over our time at ATA, Hanna built a particularly strong relationship with Mark, to the point that when I asked her in an interview what parts of this project were joyful, she responded, "Oh, so much of it was joyful. It was so joyful. I mean, obvious answer is I liked getting to work with Mark, my bestie" (Hanna, interview, 8/16/23). Hanna and Mark connected over a shared interest in computers; Hanna was majoring in Computer Science and Mark was passionate about computer games. In the notes I took while watching the recording of our second class, I noted the following interaction between Hanna and Mark:

Mark and James are the first to walk in. Hanna greets Mark with a big "Hi Mark!" She engages with what he's holding -- "Is that a wheel?" He says, "Simon Says." She reflects "Oh, I love that game. I built that game. That's so cool." He responds, "I'd play with my friends, but it's already out of battery." "Oh really, that's a bummer," says Hanna. (session 2 recording memo)

Now, Mark had stormed out of our first class, just a week earlier, after hitting his classmates and teachers with a stick. He had expressed a strong dislike for our class, grounded in his worries about theater disrupting his sense of reality, but none of that showed up in this brief interaction. Instead, in greeting Mark by name, connecting with him over a shared interest, and validating his feelings of disappointment at a toy running out of battery, Hanna began building a relationship with Mark, the artist and storyteller.

Hanna also reframed Mark's participation in our first class to the rest of the teaching team. In a debriefing session directly after class, inspired by Mark's interest in wielding his stick, she offered that

he might enjoy props design. In addition, Hanna defended Mark's use of "passing" in a game we played as a valid form of participation. In a teaching team meeting, Emir recalled, "Some of the kids didn't play like the more outgoing stuff. What was the name of the kid with the sword?" Hanna replied, "Mark?" Emir said, "Mark. Yeah. He did seem to get frustrated. He was like, I'll pass or pass the sound. He was like, I'll skip or something." Hanna replied, "That's so interesting. I saw the pass as being a good thing... cause I think pass is better than saying nothing or... Indicating nothing, like that to me, that still part—that felt like participation. I think pass is still participation." (Emir, Hanna, teaching team meeting, 6/30/23). Engaging with Mark as an artist and storyteller meant welcoming all of Mark's contributions to our space (including "passing") and validating them as legitimate forms of participation.

Bringing Platform Maze to Life

After Mark left our first class, each class of ATA students contributed to a large collage (recall Figure 13) of the ideas they knew needed to be part of our show. Our teaching team offered them markers, pencils, and sticky notes. Though we also provided scissors and photocopies of each page of the book, *We Move Together*, with the idea that students might cut up and collage them, students largely ignored these pages. The exception were students who, instead of drawing, spent class trying to put the pages in the correct order, and some others who used the back of these pages as scratch paper for drawing other ideas. As I briefly described in chapter five, students, ATA teachers and aides, and our teaching team collaborated to make this art piece. Students contributed ideas through multiple modalities. Some drew pictures themselves, while others dictated words they wanted written or pictures they wanted drawn to their peers or teachers. One student, Sawyer, ran in circles around the gym, bouncing from one polyspot to another, speaking his ideas out loud. I bounced around behind him, echoing his ideas back to him, and asking him if there were any ideas he wanted added to the collage. When he said "yes," I bounced over to the collage with him to add his two thoughts ("true stuff with historical facts" and "obstical course floor is lava"). Students and teachers practiced interdependence in

this creative collaboration, and the resulting product served as an initial blueprint for our show. It helped our team remember, advocate for, and extend all students' ideas.

When our team reconvened two days later, we centered our conversation on this collaborative art piece, wondering together what kind of a framework (vessel for collective creativity) would allow all these ideas to shine. Emir suggested we structure the play as a series of vignettes, created by different groups of students. He proposed we use the structure of the title, *We Move Together*, only replacing the word "move" with other verbs, to introduce various scenes (i.e., We ___ Together). Drawing inspiration from the collage in front of him, Emir said, "I already said this, but, a more abstract thing. We get the book and we have them, we move together and I'm like demonstrating. We dance together. I'm dancing. We play together or we game together. Mario, Pikachu..." (Emir, teaching team meeting, 6/30/23). Emir pulled these verbs (dance, play, and game) from the students' collage ("dance" is in large blue letters in the bottom right quadrant, "play" and "game" are attempts at synthesizing multiple words and drawings, including "minecraft" which is written twice). We seized upon Emir's idea and began generating a list of verbs (including dance, play, and game) that we might use to synthesize groups of ATA students' ideas. We printed these verbs on 8.5 x 11 sheets of paper and, during our second class at ATA, presented each class (elementary, middle, and high school) with a subset of verbs we felt reflected the ideas they had contributed to our collage. Using the same process through which we created the group collage, students and teachers supported one another in adding ideas to these sheets of paper.

Mark attended this second class for longer, adding his ideas to the sheet of paper labeled "game" (see Figure 26) though he still left before the end. Mark created most of the art on this page, except for the red and green drawing of Mario Odyssey in the upper right corner and the words "pants on the run." Mark even dictated the words "level up" and "quests" to one of his aides. This paper represents an early draft of *Platform Maze*, the game that became central to Mark's part of the show.

He made changes, yes (e.g., in this drawing, the game is played with an Xbox controller, while Mark was later adamant the game was only for the Switch), but all the components are there (the maze, the spikes, the pit, the words “level up,” etc.). By contributing to this piece of paper, Mark built on his classmates’ ideas, even though he had not participated in the earlier idea generation session. His early refusal did not exclude him from participation; the opportunity to contribute remained open.

Figure 26

Group Drawing Created by Elementary Students on 7/5/23



Note. An 8.5 by 11 sheet of paper labeled “game” on which Mark and other elementary students drew their ideas. Mark’s artwork (center) depicts a television and gaming console attached to a game controller. The screen shows a maze, next to a deep green pit.

During our next team meeting, we discussed how much more engaged Mark had seemed than the week before. Inspired by Hanna’s earlier thought that Mark might enjoy theatrical design (like props) more than acting, I suggested Mark spend the next class, our third together, designing an image we could project on the back wall of our stage. To avoid singling him out, and to give other students an option for how to contribute, I suggested we give every student a choice between spending our next class improvising scenes or designing projections. Only Mark and one other student selected the projection option, so our teaching team split up. Aadhya, Emir, Heather and I worked with the students

who wanted to improvise scenes, while Jason and Hanna worked with Mark and his fellow student on projections. Hanna recalled how Mark seized this opportunity to design not only a projection, but a video game that would become central to the plot of our show:

And then eventually, I think, we were talking about video games and stuff. Oh, you [Maddie] said you wanted to get projections. You were like, maybe if he wants to do a projection type thing... And he really, really took that and just one day was like, I'm going to design a video game and starts drawing this [see Figure 27]. And then we leave for a bit, we come back and we're looking at it, we're like, this is so good. And he's like, no, no, it's upside down. And then he flips it and walks us through the entire thing. What was so funny to me too was even before we started writing down what he was telling us in terms of instructions, week after week he remembered. He said the same thing, which I thought was really cool. He wasn't just making it up every time he had a vision, because that vision remained consistent the entire time. (Hanna, interview, 8/16/23).

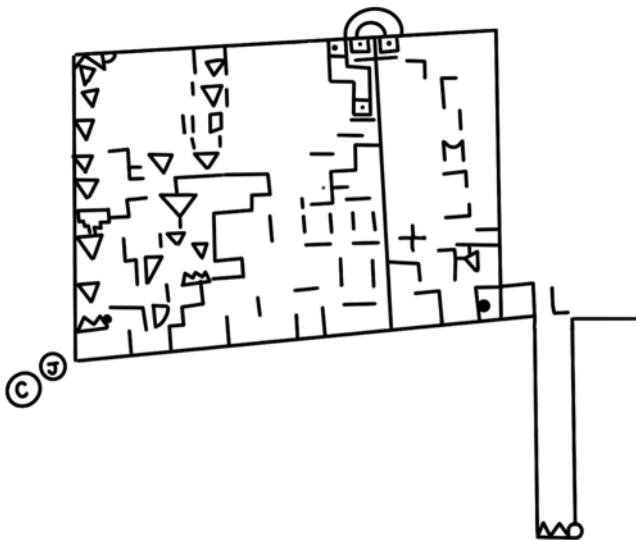
In this quote, Hanna positioned Mark as an artist. She praised his work as “good,” respected his authority over his work (i.e., if he said it was upside down, it was upside down), and noted his “consistent vision. His vision was consistent; for evidence of this, compare Figure 27 with Mark’s drawing on the “game” sheet (Figure 26). Later, we asked Mark whether he wanted this exact drawing exactly projected behind him during the *Platform Maze* scene, if he wanted us to use it as inspiration, or if he wanted something in the middle. He chose something in the middle. Hanna asked Jae, a BAT high school intern working in set design, to take Mark’s drawing and recreate it through a graphics program, straightening lines and sharpening angles, but otherwise making no changes. Mark gave his approval to the resulting image (see Figure 28). Hanna and Jae took Mark’s artistry seriously; they supported his vision through their own artistry, while keeping Mark’s ideas and agency at the center.

Figure 27

Mark's Initial Drawing of the Platform Maze, Created 7/12/23

**Figure 28**

Jae's Re-Creation of Mark's Platform Maze Design, Using a Graphics Program

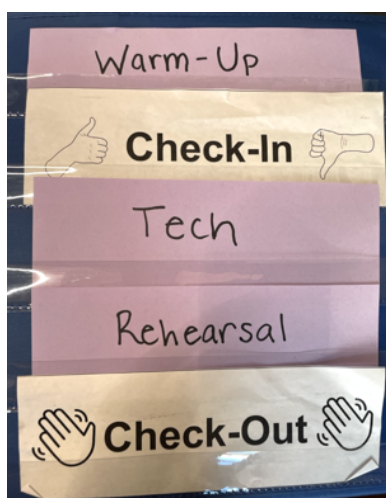


On July 19th, Mark could not wait for our class. He wandered over during his snack break, while we were still working with one of the other ATA classes. Hanna broke off from our group to connect

with Mark, but quickly returned to teaching. When the class finished, Hanna and the rest of our team began to reset the space for Mark’s class. When Hanna moved towards our visual schedule, she noticed something strange. A cackle from Mark told her all she needed to know—he had rearranged the schedule (see Figure 29 and Figure 30)! Some mischievous back and forth followed, with Hanna “fixing” the schedule, and Mark adjusting it right back. When Mark removed everything from the schedule except “play creation,” Hanna confirmed, “You just want to do play creation today?” When Mark replied yes, Hanna responded that it would be “mostly, like 90% play creation today.” “Deal,” said Mark, and they shook on it. This handshake evolved into an elaborate “secret” handshake, with both cackling every time Mark offered Hanna a high five, switched to a fist bump at the last possible moment, forcing their hands into the shape of an “awkward turkey” (field note, 7/19/23, see Figure 31). Even after viewing the recording of this interaction several times, I could not tell who initiated the “awkward turkey;” it seemed to arise organically through Mark and Hanna’s playful interactions. Secret handshake established, nothing could disrupt Hanna and Mark’s growing sense of trust and friendship.

Figure 29

A Photo of Our ATA Daily Schedule



Note. This schedule was made up of pieces of paper that could be changed out and rearranged depending on our plan for the day. This image shows the schedule for just one day of rehearsal at BAT.

Figure 30

Still of Mark and Hanna from 7/19/23 Class Recording at ATA



Note. Image depicts Mark laughing after Hanna discovered he had rearranged the visual schedule for class.

Figure 31

Mark and Hanna Create a Secret Handshake



Note. Image of “the awkward turkey” from X @n_ptrk, October 20, 2017.

Here was another moment in which Hanna might have framed Mark’s actions as “bad” or “disruptive” behavior. Instead, she validated Mark’s actions as a form of genuine engagement, laughed

at his joke, and took the opportunity to better understand Mark's point of view. Why had Mark used his agency to rearrange the schedule? What did he want us to do differently? Remembering this moment in our post-class debrief, Hanna said:

It also felt like Mark finally clicked today, that was really nice...He came over and he switched around the schedule and basically the only things that he left on it were play creation and checkout. And I was like, oh, are these the parts that you like? And he was like, yeah. And I was like, oh, so you enjoy play creation is just, the other stuff can be a little bit hard for you. And he was like, yeah. And no, it was so great. (Hanna, debrief, 7/19/23).

By framing their interaction as one in which Mark "clicked," Hanna again validated Mark's participation to our teaching team.

From that moment onward, Mark became deeply engaged in the process of creating *We Move Together*. When we brought in props for other scenes (e.g., a toy sword and dagger for a fight scene between the president and secretary of a fictional kingdom called Ile), he jumped to incorporate them into his own vision. He proposed set design ideas and suggested ways his classmates could get involved. Hanna recalled this shift in Mark's participation, saying:

So yeah, after that he started asking for, just making different proposals for ways people could be involved. He was like, we could make a, he's just unsolicited. He's like, we could make a set out of these blocks. And we could, he was like, what if we used that sword over there? And we made them jump over the spikes and they have to sharpen the sword. I was like, well, how do they do that? And he's like, well, of course they start out with the dagger, but they have to get the bigger sword. And I was like, okay. (Hanna, interview, 8/16/23).

The challenge went from finding opportunities for Mark to get involved to figuring out how to reconcile Mark's growing vision with the constraints of the framework we were building to support students' collective creativity. As much as we wanted to embrace all of Mark's ideas, there were some things that

were unfeasible given the stage on which we were performing (e.g., we could not suspend actors on ropes, and not just because Mark was worried about stretching out their bodies, but because we lacked the appropriate hardware), the time we had to create our show (e.g., six weeks was not long enough for Mark to actually code his game in Scratch), and our desire to balance students' creative contributions (e.g., *Platform Maze* could not take up $\frac{3}{4}$ of our rehearsal and performance time). Rather than shut down Mark's big ideas, Hanna used them to launch a discussion of "theater magic." Hanna explained how, in theater, the audience *wants to go with you on a journey*. Actors, designers, and directors do not try to fool audiences into believing what is onstage is actually real. Instead, they use the available tools (e.g., lighting, sound effects, etc.) to help activate the audience's imagination.

Recall how, at the outset of our process, Mark had worried that theater would "mess with" what he and his audience believed. Hanna's framework of "theater magic" helped Mark recognize theater did not present a threat to his reality. Our goal was not to fool anyone, but rather to invite ourselves and our audiences to enter a (clearly imaginary) world together. This framework also helped Mark adapt his big ideas to the constraints of our process and performance. For example, once Mark accepted that he would not have enough time to code his game in Scratch before the show, Hanna worked with him to imagine alternatives. During one class, we encouraged Mark to lay out polypots on the ground to represent platforms and walk his fellow students through the maze. As Mark laid out the dots, placing some on top of pieces of furniture, his classroom teacher reminded him to make sure the route was accessible to everyone in the class. Consulting the projection he had drawn, Mark adjusted his placement. By following Mark's directions—and adding their own improvised jumps, spins, and assorted "spy moves"—Mark's fellow students validated his artistry and extended it with their own.

Based on this exercise, and inspired by his classmates' contributions, Mark worked with Hanna to create a set of written stage directions to guide his classmates as they acted out playing *Platform Maze* in our production. To create another, even more physically accessible, way for Mark's peers to

participate in his scene, Hanna suggested Mark and she work together to make game controllers out of cardboard. Other classmates could then use these controllers to act out “playing” *Platform Maze*, alongside students who performed his written stage directions. Mark liked the idea in principle but rejected the use of cardboard as not three-dimensional enough. Instead, he suggested everyone use real Switch controllers. When our community came up short on actual Switch controllers, I suggested a compromise: fidgets that looked like actual Switch controllers. Below, I share the transcript of a text conversation in which Hanna and I discussed the merits of different options. In our conversation, Hanna centered Mark’s preference for realistic looking props and insistence that *Platform Maze* be played on a Switch instead of an Xbox. Additionally, time permitting, she encouraged me to ask Mark about his preferences:

Me: What are your thoughts on how Mark would feel about these (see Figure 32)? They also come in non-rainbow options, just not on [this site].

Hanna: I think those would be a great compromise! And yeah, I’d maybe go more for the non-rainbow ones – we might have to sell him on how realistic they look, but I don’t think it’ll be that hard. That’s such a cool and random product. It never would occur to me to make a pop toy look like a switch controller.

Me: They make fidgets out of everything!! There’s also these (see Figure 33)—they’re way cheaper, but they’re not switches.

Hanna: Oh, those are so sick. If you aren’t concerned about time, we could ask him which he’d prefer next week? Otherwise, I’d opt for the Switch, just to be safe.

Me: Great, I think we have time 😊. (text conversation, Maddie and Hanna, 7/21/23)

By centering Mark’s ideas and encouraging me to check-in with Mark directly, Hanna positioned Mark as an artist, the expert on his own ideas. When I presented these options to Mark, he chose the second one (I was wrong about them not being Switch controllers), but emphasized that gamers should each

have two controllers. Ultimately, the idea of “theater magic” helped Mark accept that a slightly less realistic version of his desired props would still help his audience imagine what he wanted them to imagine.

Figure 32

Switch Controller Option #1



Figure 33

Switch Controller Option #2



At the end of the process, Hanna reflected on Mark’s journey from not enjoying theater class to fully, joyfully participating. To her, the real victory was not that Mark participated, but that he *wanted to* participate (my italics):

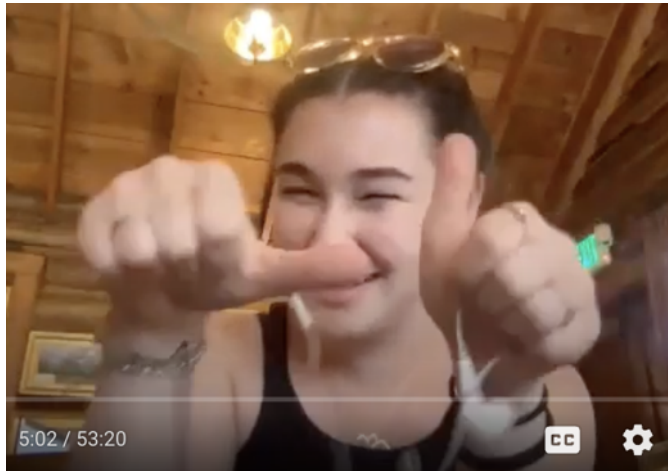
So yeah, he really had a vision in his head and it was kind of cool to see him bring it to life, but also *want to bring it to life*. And I think *the cool thing was the wanting to be there* and not just the passive participation. He just really went out of his way to care and add more, which was

cool. And we slowly moved him from a two thumbs down to a here to a here [one thumb down, one thumb to the side] to a here [one thumb to the side, one thumb up], which was cool. I don't know if we ever got here [two thumbs up], but we got here [one thumb to the side, one thumb up, see Figure 34]. (Hanna, interview, 8/16/23)

While I cannot say for certain why this transformation occurred, I believe it had a lot to do with how Hanna and the rest of our team engaged with Mark as an artist and storyteller and helped him bring his story, *Platform Maze*, to life. Where, within a normative theater education framework, Mark's behavior might have been labeled a problem (unfitting of a "quality" student artist creating a "quality" production through a "quality" process), our team interpreted it as a valid demonstration of Mark's artistry. We tried to build a relationship with him and gave him multiple opportunities to communicate his ideas. When, with the support of others in the room, he did share ideas—like his initial drawing of *Platform Maze* (see Figure 27)—we held onto them and used them to guide our process. Through saying "yes, and..." to Mark's ideas and providing material supports, we helped bring Mark's story to life. And, together with Mark, we figured out how his story might fit within the larger structure of *We Move Together*. Though we did not get everything right the first time (e.g., Mark had to remind me of the correct orientation of his *Platform Maze* projection multiple times, including during our final dress rehearsal), we followed through, making sure as many of Mark's ideas made it into our final production as possible. The story of *Platform Maze* is the story of how one multiply marginalized elementary schooler, when respected as an artist and storyteller and given the support to develop and realize his artistic vision, went from having no interest in theater to enthusiastically participating in a collaborative theater experience.

Figure 34

Hanna Illustrating How Mark Reached One Thumb Up and One to the Side by the End of Our Process



The next scene, *Scene 5: The Train*, is the story of how, accompanied by our teaching team, a mixed-race and mixed-ability group of four middle-schoolers worked together to create a scene that celebrated their various passions, ideas, and modes of communication. In it, two musicians—played by Tyler, a speaking, neurodivergent student of color, and Bex, a white, nonspeaking student with intellectual and developmental disabilities—ride together on a train. As both are running late, they ask someone they believe to be the train conductor (Brian, a mostly nonspeaking student of color with IDD) for directions. Finally, Kevin (a white, neurodivergent student) brings a surprising twist to the end of the scene. This scene developed along a similar trajectory to *Platform Maze*, but—as it combined four students’ artistic visions—required our teaching team to embody pedagogies of accompaniment in different ways.

Scene 5: The Train

“Sometimes, there are misunderstandings,” calls one actor, before a short, loud train whistle blares through the space. You can almost feel the train rushing past you, mere inches from your nose. The projection shifts to an image of the inside of an old-fashioned train car, as two actors step forward,

accompanied by two teachers who stand behind them, slightly off to the side. One of the actors wears a black velvet top hat with gold embroidery. The other wears a dark navy blazer with rolled-up sleeves. They position themselves next to another actor, who remains sitting upstage on her beanbag, sifting through multi-colored pom poms. She is clearly part of the scene. The students bounce up and down gently, as if riding a train, as one of the teachers offers the actor in the blazer a microphone. "Excuse me, are you the conductor?" he asks.

"Yes," the actor in the top hat whispers into the microphone.

"Oh good," the other replies (see Figure 35). "My friend Thomas—" he gestures to the actor behind him, sitting on the beanbag, "– and I are trying to make it to a gig tonight. We need to know the train schedule, and I can't get the website to load. Where should we get off to connect to Tontirb?"

"Shrug," whispers the teacher behind the conductor. He shrugs.

"You don't know?"

"Laugh," whispers the teacher. The conductor laughs.

"What kind of conductor are you?" asks the blazer-clad actor in desperation.

At that, the conductor pulls out a baton from his sweatshirt pocket. He begins to conduct with vigor, as if encouraging an orchestra to play. The music that rises from the speakers, however, is far from orchestral. It's Michael Jackson's Smooth Criminal. As the music swells, another actor sprints onstage from the audience. Another teacher, also in the audience, slides a fedora to him across the stage. He grabs it, puts it on, and begins a faithful rendition of Michael Jackson's choreography. Prompted by a teacher, the student in the beanbag cheers. Other actors watch with surprise and delight, and a cheer rises up from the audience around you (see Figure 36). When the music stops, the Michael Jackson impersonator poses to receive his applause.

"But from listening to each other, we find beauty, joy, and laughter," an upstage actor recites. A cascading chorus of voices calls, "Moving together can be an adventure!" More cheers and applause.

When the scene ends and others begin, the Michael Jackson impersonator doesn't leave the stage. He moves between different groups, finding good angles to watch and appreciate his fellow performers. During the group song and dance at the end of the show, he dances again, showcasing his own unique moves. Now that he's gotten a taste of performing, you think, they'll never get this actor offstage. You wonder how much of this was planned. How did the sounds, words, and actions of this highly imaginative scene (see Figure 37 to read the scene in script form) come to be?

Figure 35

Still from The Train Scene in We Move Together, Featuring Students Tyler, Brian, and Bex



Note. Tyler, playing a musician, holds the microphone and asks Brian, playing a conductor, for directions. Bex, playing Tyler's friend Thomas, sits on a beanbag behind and to the left of him.

Figure 36

Still from The Train Scene in We Move Together, Featuring Students Kevin, Tyler, and Bex



Note. Kevin, wearing a Fedora, performs his Michael Jackson dance moves as Tyler looks on with admiration. A teacher supports Bex in cheering for Kevin.

Figure 37

Scene 5: The Train, *an Excerpt from the We Move Together Script*

The Train (Moving Together Can Be an Adventure)

(Transition sound: a train. Set up a train car near Bex with Brian and Tyler. All students bounce as if they are riding on a train.)

Liam: Sometimes there are misunderstandings.

Tyler: Excuse me, are you the conductor?

Brian: Yes.

Tyler Oh good. My friend Thomas and I are trying to make it to a gig tonight. We need to know the train schedule, and I can't get the website to load. Where should we get off to connect to Tontirb?

Brian shrugs.

Tyler: You don't know?

Brian laughs.

Tyler: What kind of conductor are you?

Brian pulls out a conductor's baton and begins to conduct an invisible orchestra. The music swells. It's Michael Jackson's Smooth Criminal. Kevin dances.

Ben: But from listening to one another, we find beauty, joy, and laughter.

All: Moving together can be an adventure.

In the Beginning

On our first day with ATA's middle schoolers, we gathered in a circle. Some of us sat on the floor and others on couches. One student, Bex, sat on her beanbag, sifting through the colorful plastic beads that filled the tub on the floor in front of her. In a note taken while watching the recording of that class, I recalled some sensory details that contributed to the environment feeling open, relaxed, and flexible. I wrote, "Behind the couches, light streamed through the windows, illuminating the high-ceilinged room. Hammocks swayed beneath monkey bars. Shoes were very much optional" (session 1 recording memo).

The actors in *The Train*— Tyler, Bex, Brian, and Kevin — began their creative process in very different places. Based on an early visit to ATA, I knew Tyler as a rock musician who carried an acoustic guitar with him through most classes. Though he did not bring this guitar with him to our first class, I introduced him to the rest of the teaching team as a musician. When Hanna, also a guitar player, encouraged him to bring his guitar to future classes, he nodded with genuine interest. Bex, in contrast, expressed little interest in our process on this first day. She introduced herself using her iPad and shared that she was having an "ok" day. However, she ran outside after our warm-up, followed by an aide, and did not return to class that day. Brian seemed similarly distant. Though he giggled throughout our warm-up game and remained through the end of class, he did not contribute to our group collage. Instead, he flipped through a picture book and napped on one of the couches. Kevin did not attend our first class at all. When Kevin briefly appeared midway through our second class, Tyler asked him what he was going to do in our show. When Kevin did not respond, Tyler suggested to me that Kevin might dance because "he's good at that" (session 2 recording memo). After less than a minute sitting down next to another student, Kevin got up and left. Our teaching team interpreted all these actions—including leaving class or choosing not to attend—as valid forms of engagement that told us something about these students as artists and storytellers.

Engaging with the Artists and Storytellers

As we engaged with Tyler, Bex, Brian, and Kevin as individuals, they began to share more of themselves and became more visibly invested in our creative process. Hanna and Tyler built a relationship over their shared love for guitar. In an early interview, Hanna shared how excited she was to play music and learn from Tyler:

Hanna: I think people have cool ideas and I'm excited to learn from Tyler, from guitar. I would love to jam some songs with him. That'd be very fun. So actually I'm very excited about that. That's big. That's huge.

Me: Yeah. I wonder if, maybe not this next week, but once we get the structure going, if you wanted to bring your guitar to—

Hanna: Oh, I would be honored. I would love to. I would love to learn from him. Truly. I would be so excited. (Hanna, interview, 6/30/23)

Tyler brought a guitar to subsequent classes, even bringing an electric guitar from home so he could practice an AC/DC guitar solo (featured in a different scene).

We connected with Bex by valuing her sensory engagement as artistry. Bex contributed to our first several classes by sitting in her beanbag, carefully sifting through a bucket of colorful plastic beads. As an example of how we engaged with Bex as an artist, our teaching team spent several meetings wondering together how Bex's sifting could meaningfully transform our show. Chloe suggested that it sounded like rain and might provide an interesting sound effect. I agreed but worried that if Bex had her beads onstage, it might end up "raining" for the entire play, which might not support other students' artistic visions. In response, Hanna suggested that Bex seemed more interested in the visual of the colored objects dropping before her eyes than the sound. Inspired, I suggested giving Bex a large mixing bowl filled with colored pom poms that she could sift through during the elementary schoolers' bakery scene (and continue silently sifting through for the duration of the play). She performed this task onstage with complete focus during the show. Though Bex remained seated and silent during the train scene, she was part of it. In an early rehearsal, she communicated with her iPad that she wanted to play a boy named Thomas, and so she did.

Getting to know Brian, the artist and storyteller, required leaning into laughter. Brian's friend Liam, who could always make Brian laugh and affectionately referred to him as "Bri," offered, "When Bri laughs, he just laughs. And Bri laughs at a lot of stuff... Bri goes crazy when he laughs" (Liam, interview, 6/29/23). During our warm-up on the first day of class, I observed this in action. We were playing a game called "pass the sound and movement." In this game, each student made a sound or movement

that others could copy. Students then “passed” the sound around the circle, copying one another’s movements. Giggling, Brian jumped into this game, repeating his peers’ silliest sounds and movements multiple times. When it was his turn to choose a sound or movement, Brian paused and looked at his aide. His aide used his knowledge of Brian’s interests to offer a train whistle sound. In answer, Brian smiled broadly and sent a train whistle (“choo choo!”) around the circle. Two classes later, I asked each student to share one thing about the character they wanted to play in our show. Remembering Brian’s interest in trains, I offered that “it could be something that’s simple, like they’re really tall or they’re really strong or they run really fast, or it could be more complicated, like they’re a train engineer” (me, session 3 recording memo). Brian giggled—he knew I was talking about him. Brian’s sense of humor helped guide our teaching team towards the kinds of stories he might want to tell.

Finally, Kevin danced in and out of our first several classes, never pausing long enough to introduce himself. We got hints of Kevin’s artistry through his way of dancing through the space and through Tyler, who wrote “dance to smooth criminal” on one of our early brainstorming papers (see Figure 38). He explained that this suggestion was “for Kevin.” Looking over this paper at our teaching team meeting, I pointed to this phrase and said, “That was Kevin... He cruises through and then leaves and cruises through. And when he cruises through, he’s like doing Michael Jackson dance moves, and then he is gone.” Hanna presciently replied, “He and Jason will be pals” (teaching team meeting, 7/7/23). When Jason joined our team the following week, Kevin instantly recognized that Jason’s jacket looked like the jacket Michael Jackson had worn in the *Beat It* music video. At the end of the summer, Jason recalled this moment as the beginning of his and Kevin’s relationship:

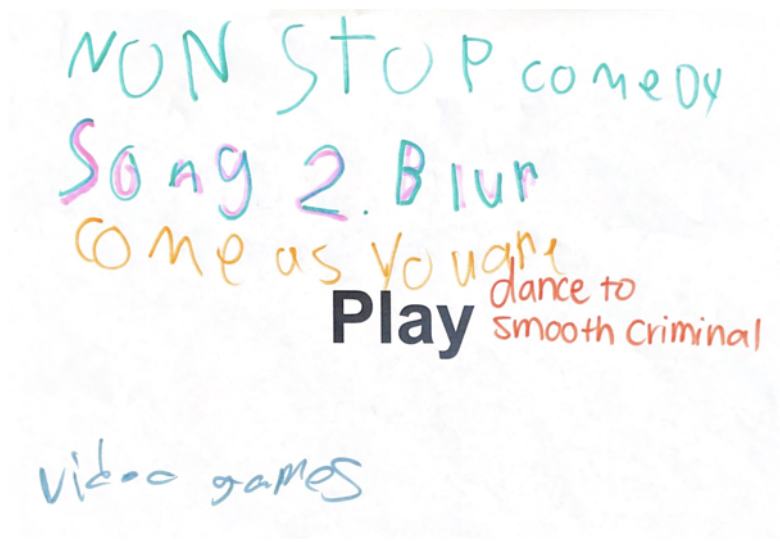
... [Kevin] opened the door immediately from the other side and was like, nice *Beat It* jacket. And I’m like, thank you... But no, I just, to know somebody at his age, I know he’s in middle school, but just to know that he shared a passion with me. That was great, and that he was just very

open to some stranger that he hadn't truly met, but he just wanted to make a little bit of conversation. That was good. (Jason, interview, 9/6/23)

In Jason's jacket, Kevin saw physical evidence of their shared interests, the foundation on which a relationship might grow. Through connecting with Kevin, Brian, Bex, and Tyler as artists and storytellers, our teaching team laid the groundwork for bringing *The Train* to life.

Figure 38

8.5 by 11 Brainstorming Paper Labeled with the Verb "Play"



Note. Tyler said he wrote “dance to smooth criminal” on this piece of paper “for Kevin.”

Bringing The Train to Life

Now, how did two musicians, a musical conductor, and a Michael Jackson impersonator end up on a train together in *We Move Together*? Unlike the beginnings of *Platform Maze*, and except for the word “dance,” little early evidence of *The Train* showed up on our collaborative day one collage (see Figure 13). Instead, the seeds of *The Train* emerged from embodied interactions with students that our teaching team noted and remembered (e.g., Brian’s train whistle sound and movement during our day one warm-up). On day four of class, with all actors but Kevin present in the space, the scene began to

take shape. It started when we asked students to come up with facts about their characters. Tyler offered that his character was a guitarist, while Brian offered that his character liked trains. I responded with a possible connection: guitarists might need to use trains to get from one gig to another. I asked Brian if his character might be able to ride the train with Tyler, offering "yes" and "no" as option choices. He chose yes. Heather joined us to help brainstorm character names (Brian chose "Chugga" and Tyler chose "Angus"). As we were talking, Bex and her aide rushed over to share that Bex wanted to be a boy named Thomas, named after her brother. I asked if Thomas liked trains and might like to ride on the train with us. Bex used her iPad to say "yes" before running back to the couch.

Then, Tyler embraced the role of facilitator, soliciting and expanding on his friend Brian's ideas. He asked, "Brian, do you ride on the train, or do you work on the train? Are you a porter... or just a guy riding the train?" Brian remained still and silent, considering. Inspired, Brian's aide created a two-by-two grid of options on Brian's iPad that someone might do on a train, including riding the train, being a ticket taker, and being a conductor. Brian definitively circled "conductor." A funny thought occurred to me. There are two kinds of conductors, the one who goes "all aboard" and the one who conducts an orchestra. When I mentioned this thought to Brian and Tyler, Brian's aide wrote both options on Brian's iPad (i.e., do you want to be a train conductor or orchestra conductor?). Brian circled "orchestra conductor." Brian's aide offered him another choice (my italics), "Do you want Tyler to *think* you're the train conductor or the orchestra conductor?" As Brian circled "train conductor," he laughed uproariously, all smiles and giggles. When our team remembered this moment in our next meeting, we marveled together at Brian's sense of humor and creative agency:

Heather: Very creative.

Hanna: That's so funny.

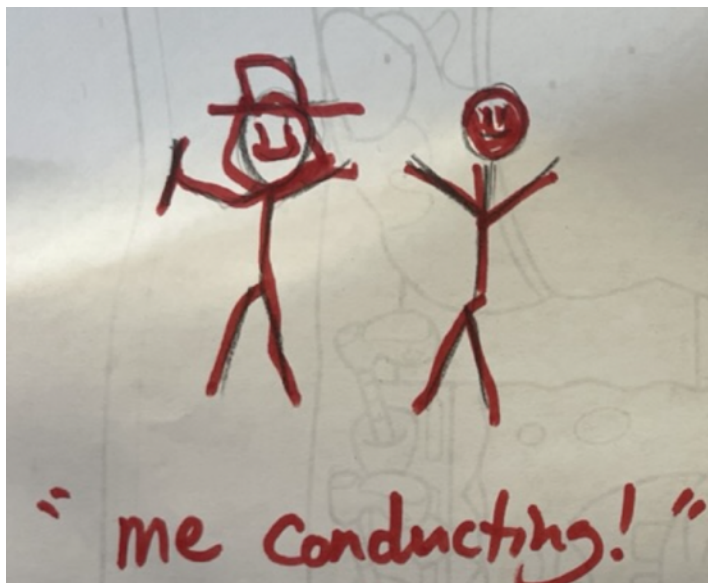
Me: And very clearly decided by him. He kept getting options on his board. (Heather, Hanna, and

me, teaching team meeting, 7/14/23)

Through centering Brian’s interest in trains, engaging Brian’s aide as a communication partner, and saying “yes, and…” offering options for extending Brian’s ideas, Tyler and our team held space for Brian to make creative decisions. These choices meaningfully shaped *The Train* as it evolved, leading to Brian’s feelings of pride in and ownership over the material. While he was waiting to go onstage for our final performance, Brian drew this picture of him conducting to illustrate a moment that brought him pride (Figure 39).

Figure 39

A Drawing Brian Created of Himself Conducting to Celebrate His Pride in the Final Performance



Our teaching team held onto the idea of Kevin dancing to “Smooth Criminal,” even as he continued to avoid our classes. On a whim, I inserted this moment into a first draft of *The Train* scene. I found an orchestral version of “Smooth Criminal” that, even if Kevin was never interested in joining, Brian could mime conducting. Coincidentally, the first time that Brian practiced his conducting movements to music was also Jason’s first day at ATA. Maybe it was Jason and his *Beat It* jacket, but when Kevin heard the orchestral version of “Smooth Criminal,” he came right over. In our debrief after class, Jason remembered:

Kevin, he came over when he heard “Smooth Criminal.” And then Kevin literally went on your [Maddie’s] phone, [which was playing the song, looked at the title of the song on the lock screen], and was like, “Smooth Criminal.” So matter of factly! (Johnny, debrief, 7/19/23)

Here is another instance of “behavior” (grabbing a teacher’s phone out of their hands) that in a more normative theater education context might have been labeled a problem, or even a reason for exclusion. Instead, in our context, Jason celebrated Kevin’s actions as evidence of his growing interest in participating. That same day, Kevin began working with another student to create sound effects for *We Move Together* using the coding program Scratch. We celebrated this involvement, too. No rule said Kevin had to perform onstage; sound design was an equally valid contribution. Among Kevin’s choices? Adding a screaming sound effect to a scene where the elementary schoolers pretended to be goats, referencing a popular YouTube video. Oh, and deciding that an orchestral version of “Smooth Criminal” would not do; it had to be the original.

As Kevin attended more classes to work on his sound design, he still showed no interest in dancing to “Smooth Criminal” onstage. We kept the original version of “Smooth Criminal” in the show, figuring that it was better to keep the opportunity open. Worst case, no one would dance while Brian mimed conducting the song. During our dress rehearsal at BAT, Kevin was in constant motion, exploring the stage, the audience, and the various backstage areas. Our first time rehearsing *The Train* onstage, there was no sign of Kevin. Just as the music ended, I spotted Kevin in the audience, holding a Fedora. I later learned that he had “borrowed” this Fedora from the cast of *Mean Girls*. I yelled to Jason who was running sound, “Oh, oh, do it again!” When Jason played “Smooth Criminal” again, a fedora-wearing Kevin took to the stage in an uncanny imitation of Michael Jackson. Several spins and a moonwalk later, he took off his hat and walked offstage, through the audience, and out the back doors of the theater. Everyone looked on in astonishment. The *Mean Girls* costume designer gave her blessing for him to

wear the Fedora in our show the following day. We had no way of knowing if Kevin intended to perform in the actual show until he stepped onstage, but I am glad we kept the option open.

“This can be normal”

I have outlined some of the ways our teaching team embodied pedagogies of accompaniment in their work with ATA students and explored what these pedagogies afforded by tracing the development of two focal scenes: *Platform Maze* and *The Train*. You might imagine this “new” way of teaching challenged our teaching team. In reality, multiple team members shared how “easy” and “normal” the process felt. Emir believed that more theaters would attempt this kind of work, if they only knew how “easy” it was. He said:

I've realized just like how inaccessible theater can be sometimes, but how easy that can be to change... you can make it more accessible and that's beautiful... People don't realize it's going to be this easy. It's the fact that people haven't tried. It's not like they're like, “oh, we don't want to try.” It's that they think that trying would be a super difficult process. They don't realize exactly how easy it can be (Emir, interview, 8/13/23).

As Emir shared, making theater more accessible to multiply marginalized students can be “easy;” it does not demand major changes to your teaching practice. Indeed, our team was surprised by how similar developing *We Move Together* felt to their prior theater teaching experiences. For example, Hanna reflected on her experiences teaching theater classes at ATA:

... I think what I learned about it is how not that big of a deal it is? ...I think that the learning thing was just getting to exist in this regular practice of nonchalance... it was no different than teaching theater at BAT to me. And obviously there are differences, but there wasn't a different feeling and there's no reason it has to feel different... it's like every accommodation we would make for students at ATA or accommodating for someone's disability, it's like, we make accommodations for people all the time... it's just what theater is and what education is... It was

just so normal and there's no reason it doesn't have to be normal... this can be normal if people treat it the right way. (Hanna, interview, 8/16/23)

After all our conversations about rooting theater pedagogies in Disability Justice, and all our experiences teaching at ATA, Hanna realized that nothing we did in the classroom was *that* extraordinary. Theater artists know how to say “yes, and.” Theater educators know how to build relationships with individual students and feature their strengths and ideas onstage. Embracing pedagogies of accompaniment did not mean changing everything we knew and did as theater artists and educators. Instead, it meant letting go of our learned beliefs about what “normal” theater education should look like and learning to exist, in Hanna’s words, in a “regular practice of nonchalance.” We used the skills we already had to meet students where they were, create opportunities for them to learn and grow, and support their individual and collective artistry. We leaned into the beautiful messiness of creating towards one another’s joy. Imagine the possibilities if this truly became “normal” in theater education.

Chapter 7: Discussion

“... this can be normal if people treat it the right way” (Hanna, interview, 8/16/23).

Hanna’s reflections on co-facilitating a theater rehearsal process with multiply marginalized disabled youth reveal something profound: theater education may *often* uphold whiteness and ability as property, but this is not inevitable. A new normal is within reach. Through collaborating with disabled youth of color and disabled adults to surface and shift our norms and expectations around “quality” theater, teaching artists can be part of making this “world to come” (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018b). In the preceding chapters, I explored how theater educators and disabled adults articulated how normative theater frames “quality” theater students, rehearsal processes, and youth theater productions in ways that constrain pedagogy and harm everyone, but especially disabled youth of color. I then described how, by foregrounding Disability Justice principles, one group of theater educators and disabled adults imagined and taught theater differently. Finally, I explored how multiply marginalized disabled students, theater educators, and disabled adults leveraged pedagogies of accompaniment to move together through this reimagined version of theater education.

In this chapter, I will first expand on these findings, exploring what they reveal about 1) how communities—in this case, communities of theater educators and students—can learn to see ableism and racism circulating through “quality” standards; 2) the promise of a reimagined version of theater education for multiply marginalized disabled youth; 3) the pedagogies of accompaniment educators might engage to center these students’ artistry and storytelling in their classrooms; and 4) the methodologies (perhaps also of accompaniment) that might support scholars wishing to center students’ artistry and storytelling through their research. Next, I will identify implications for theater education, pK-12 education more broadly, and future educational research. In this section, I will also discuss some tensions I navigated as a community-engaged scholar and explore how my experiences might inform future inquiry. I will conclude by encouraging others to interrogate how ableism and

racism circulate in their own contexts and collaborate with disabled communities of color to imagine and build more liberatory futures in the here and now.

Ableism and Racism, “Quality,” and Normative Theater Education

In my first research question, I asked: How do theater educators and disabled adults articulate the norms and expectations co-constructed by ableism and racism that circulate within normative theater education, particularly those concerning “quality” students, rehearsal processes, and youth theater productions? As teaching artists, interns from BAT and disabled volunteers from Connections constructed collaborative narratives around their own experiences in theater education, they revealed how narrow constructions of “quality” theater constrained how teaching artists taught and ultimately harmed theater students, particularly multiply marginalized disabled youth. These constructions emerged from the larger socio-political context of pK-12 schooling in the United States, which protects “quality” artistry as the property of whiteness and ability (Broderick & Leonardo, 2016; Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011a).

Theorizing Ableism and Racism Through Surfacing “Quality” Standards

This study demonstrated how, through collaboratively and critically examining implicit “quality” standards, a mixed-ability group of racially diverse youth, adults, and educators formed situated theories of how ableism and racism intersected within their context. Previous research has demonstrated that “quality” standards often seem “neutral” and “objective,” but in reality, often function to uphold existing power structures (Beneke & Love, 2022; Dahlberg et al., 2013; Moss et al., 2000). Grounded in DisCrit Tenet 1 (“ableism and racism co-construct “normalcy;” Annamma et. al., 2013), other research has interrogated constructions of “normalcy” to reveal how ableism and racism reinscribe one another within particular educational contexts (Beneke, 2021b; Beneke, Machado, et al., 2022; Fears, 2021; Yeh, 2023). By engaging participants in collaborative theorizing, this study aligns with

and extends previous work, demonstrating one promising way communities might learn to identify ableism and racism in their contexts.

Through theorizing ableism and racism with participants, challenges and opportunities arose. Participants came into this study with their own definitions of ableism and racism; most thought of ableism and racism as the “bad” or “ignorant” beliefs and actions of “bad” or “ignorant” individuals. Challenges identifying ableism and racism as intersecting systems of oppression made it hard for participants to recognize their complicity in these systems. Though some participants’ beliefs about ableism and racism shifted as the study progressed, others remained cemented. This aligns with previous research (e.g., Broderick & Lavani, 2017; King, 1991) which explored how preservice teachers struggled to develop the structural analyses of ableism and racism which might allow them to see themselves in these systems. This study extends this research by offering that empathizing (i.e., connecting one’s own experiences to the imagined experiences of marginalized or multiply marginalized people) may be a way for privileged individuals to evade our complicity in oppressive systems. For example, recall how Hanna and Heather found it easier to relate ableism to their own experiences with sizeism and sexism than to implicate themselves in normative theater education’s ableist practices. Like T.L. Lewis (2022), I recognize that “you do not have to be disabled to experience ableism.” However, based on my findings, I wonder about how an uncritical reading of this phrase might hinder critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) development in educators. Without directly interrogating this line with educators in relation to positionality, it might encourage empathy at the expense of reflexivity. Findings further suggest that multimodal collaborative storytelling can be a promising method for supporting mixed-ability, racially diverse communities in co-constructing situated theories of ableism and racism in ways that align with Disability Justice principles of interdependence and collective access (Sins Invalid, 2019), affording interdependent agency (Zdeblick, 2023). Multimodal collaborative storytelling helped participants like Rose see themselves in one another’s stories (Kafai, 2021), claim belonging in systems

which had oppressed them, and celebrate themselves in wholeness (Sins Invalid, 2019). Ultimately, this study offers one way—through interrogating what is framed as “good” and “normal”— communities can collaboratively surface how ableism and racism intersect in their own contexts.

Insights from Surfacing the “Quality” Standards of Normative Theater Education

This study contributes to the literature by offering a previously lacking intersectional analysis of how constructions of “quality” circulate in normative pK-12 theater education to protect theater as the property of whiteness and ability (Broderick & Lalvani, 2017; Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2018; Leonardo & Broderick, 2011b). In most ways, the “quality” constructions participants articulated aligned with previous research on ableism (e.g., McAllister-Viel, 2021; Sandahl, 2005a) and racism (e.g., Cahill & Hamel, 2022; Schroeder-Arce, 2017, 2023; Tanner & McCloskey, 2023) in theater and theater education contexts. However, through drawing on DisCrit (Annamma et al., 2013), this study fills a gap in the literature by documenting *how ableism and racism circulate interdependently* in normative theater education. Further, this study reveals several previously unexplored ways in which normative theater education excludes marginalized and multiply marginalized students (e.g., through requiring memorization, mandating extraversion, and encouraging creativity while labeling some students’ choices “too creative”). Findings also offer some telling examples of how ableism and racism circulate even through classroom management practices that seem “inclusive” (e.g., crowning everyone royalty of the day, giving stickers for “good” behavior). Ultimately, findings suggest that these “quality” standards harm everyone, even those who sometimes attain them (e.g., Figure 10, Isla and Jenna’s diagram of the “normal” theater kid), by incentivizing pedagogies that limit how students and teachers can show up as their whole selves (Sins Invalid, 2019).

Within the capitalist system of United States schooling (Erevelles, 2000), It should not be surprising that theater educators often expect themselves and their students to attain near-perfection through linear, efficient rehearsal processes that culminate in performances of the normative theatrical

canon, or that theater educators position a healthy process as antithetical to a “quality” production (e.g., the teaching team’s ongoing debate over “process vs. product”). Like all educators, theater teachers feel pressure to produce economic value (e.g., Heather’s desire for audiences to feel “they got their money’s worth”). However, the *Mean Girls* cast’s reactions to *We Move Together* suggest that this perceived pressure does not always indicate actual audience expectations. Rather, theater educators may be projecting their own internalized expectations—developed over years of learning from the systems they now reproduce—onto audiences, parents, and potential donors in ways that discourage them from engaging in more liberatory rehearsal processes and shows.

In these and other ways, narrow constructions of “quality” in theater education constrain pedagogy. If teachers want to train “quality” actors, lead “quality” rehearsal processes, and present “quality” productions to audiences, they must prune away the creative expressions, behaviors, and ultimately students who do not fit into this “one right way” of being (Okun, 2021). And, since educators have been trained that everyone belongs in theater education, that theater can miraculously transform underprivileged youth (Neelands, 2004), and that all theater is theater for social justice (Finneran & Freebody, 2015), when educators struggle to shape every student into the same narrow “quality” mold, they see themselves through the same deficit logics they have learned to apply to their students. They feel like failures. This study suggests an alternative. It is possible that not every student can succeed within *normative theater education*. However, it is also possible that every student can succeed within *theater education*, if its norms and expectations are expanded to welcome all students in wholeness (Sins Invalid, 2019). Like the theater educators in this study, through collaborative storytelling, other theater teachers might learn to see themselves as part of this system. In the process, they might recognize ways they themselves have not always belonged in normative theater education. Maybe they have buried or pruned off parts of themselves to fit specific norms or expectations. This study suggests

that it is not too late to shift the norms of theater education to welcome these educators in wholeness, too.

Reimagining Theater Education Through Disability Justice

Next, I asked: How can theater educators and disabled adults reimagine theater education by instead rooting ideas of “quality” in Disability Justice? In this study, drawing on community-based co-design methodology (Ishimaru et al., 2018), my teaching team and I did so through iterative cycles of building relationships, theorizing injustice, designing curriculum, facilitating curriculum, navigating tensions, and reflecting on what we had learned. In our reflections, we focused on moments that had felt particularly joyful, allowing these moments to inform our next design cycles. Just by working collaboratively and holding space for communal reflection, our process represented a radical departure from how I was used to creating and teaching theater curriculum (overwhelmed by urgency, on my own, as a typically isolated theater teacher; Bautista et al., 2021). However, I recognize ways in which, even in this collaborative process, I fell back on familiar practices and reproduced the system I knew. For example, though I never used this title myself, others on the teaching team referred to me as the “director” of *We Move Together*. As the person who scheduled our visits to ATA, facilitated our weekly meetings, and held the initial vision for how we might work together, I realized this title captured some truths of my role. Though, as I will later discuss, I suggest theater educators might want to position ourselves as accompanists rather than directors of creative processes, especially with multiply marginalized students, I did not do this fully. Still, through this process, our teaching team cultivated a very different kind of “quality” theater education than that which is often sustained through normative theater education (see Figure 2).

By making the radical claim that every student and teacher was both an artist and storyteller, we went beyond “presuming competence” (Biklen & Burke, 2006) and expected students and teachers would surprise one another with their brilliance, if and when they were ready. The teaching team did

not require or expect that every student would perform onstage—we respected refusals (Mengesha & Padmanabhan, 2019; Taylor, 2020)—but by developing strategies (e.g., giving every student an onstage home base), we left the option open. We also validated the artistry of students who chose to participate in other ways (e.g., choosing preshow music, painting the set). Neither our rehearsal process nor our final production resembled normative “perfection.” Returning to my earlier metaphor of theater education as a garden, unpredictable weather patterns (e.g., Mark’s initial reluctance, Kevin’s disinterest in rehearsing his Michael Jackson dance) forced us to stay flexible and adapt to students’ needs. Our interdependent ecosystem was no less beautiful than a normative youth theater production. It was beautiful in a different way. To the BAT administrator who asked me at the beginning of the process if including more students in theater would mean *lowering* our expectations, I can now confidently say no. Instead, findings suggest that including more students in theater can give educators the opportunity to *expand* our expectations, making room for a kind of beauty that challenges our limited imaginations.

Pedagogies of Accompaniment

Finally, I asked: How do multiply marginalized disabled students, theater educators, and disabled adults accompany one another through this reimagined version of theater education? From data generated with the ATA teaching team and students, I identified three complimentary, concurrent processes that teachers and students engaged in with one another: engaging with individuals as artists, bringing stories to life in interaction, and creating a vessel for collective creativity. Here, I return to Hadley’s (2020) call on scholars to probe the complexities of how nondisabled artists can ethically work alongside disabled artists as allies, extending and elevating their work. Hadley explored the complexities of allyship within arts contexts, considering its social, professional, and aesthetic dimensions. Attending to this last dimension, Hadley argued:

... the advice non-arts theories typically offer—remember your privilege, listen, accept the realities oppressed people describe, and allow oppressed colleagues and/or audiences to speak

for themselves—... is less serviceable when it comes to choices about story, symbolism, aesthetic style, who makes the choices, how non-disabled artists propose choices to disabled artists, and when directorial advice to actors – for instance – goes beyond the give-and-take common to arts collaboration and into problematic silencing of disabled collaborators. (p. 188)

Hadley continued, stressing the importance of attending to power dynamics within the different relationships disabled artists and nondisabled allies might occupy in arts spaces. By introducing pedagogies of accompaniment, I respond to Hadley's call by constructing a nuanced portrait of how disabled and nondisabled educators might support disabled students' aesthetic work in arts contexts.

However, I believe my contribution goes further. As a theater educator working with multiply marginalized students, I have long struggled to incorporate "allyship" into my teaching. To ally with my students—without problematically centering my own goals and perspectives—it feels as if my students should: 1) have a clearly defined political goal; 2) independently express that goal in language I can understand; and 3) tell me exactly how I can support them in achieving it. Only then might I know I am supporting them in the way they want to be supported. Within a theater education context, this presents several issues. First, students' goals are not always overtly political (e.g., when Brian chose to be an orchestra conductor rather than a train conductor, his apparent goal was comedy). Second, not every student comes into an artistic process with goals. Does this mean I cannot support them? Further, students might express their goals verbally, nonverbally, independently, or interdependently, and I cannot always understand them. Does this make their goals less valid or my allyship less required? Finally, especially if they are new to theater, students cannot always imagine or articulate how I might support them. As the more experienced theater artist, I might be able to think of theatrical possibilities students cannot yet imagine. But how can I tell if I have gone beyond offering theatrical possibilities to centering my goals and perspectives? Within the framework of "allyship," it sometimes feels safer not to try. My own artistry can feel like a liability. In this dissertation, by turning to the language of

“accompaniment” instead of “allyship” (Mei-Singh, 2021), I invite myself and my fellow arts educators to leverage our whole artistic selves towards supporting our students’ artistry.

The metaphor of accompaniment just *fits better* with the realities of supporting multiply marginalized students through arts education. Accompanying someone does not presuppose they have a social or political goal, or even a goal at all. Just sitting and breathing alongside someone else—providing company—counts. Within performing arts contexts, accompanists make art alongside others, using their skills, knowledge, and creativity to support these others’ work. Having an accompanist does not presuppose an artist will have or articulate a clear artistic vision. For example, you might imagine a foley artist accompanying an improviser or a pianist accompanying a jazz singer. Maybe the improviser has a clear idea about the story they want to tell, or maybe the improviser receives the foley artist’s sound effects and underscoring as welcome sources of inspiration. Maybe the jazz singer follows a written score, but maybe they deviate. Either way, their accompanist follows, lending their musicality towards making the jazz singer sound incredible. Ultimately, accompanists welcome direction from the artists they accompany but do not require it. They understand their work as aesthetic collaboration. This metaphor empowers me as an arts educator to imagine how my artistry might support that of my students. To use another theatrical metaphor, if I avoid “upstaging” my students or “stealing the spotlight,” I can treat my artistry as an asset rather than a liability.

Further, while productions usually have only one director who directs the project from beginning to end, they can have many accompanists, and their roles can be more fluid. For example, a pianist might begin a song accompanying a jazz singer but take a solo in the middle of the song, while the singer scats along in accompaniment. In this study, while I focused on instances in which teachers accompanied students, there were moments in which students accompanied one another, students accompanied teachers, and teachers accompanied one another. For example, when Tyler wrote “dance to *Smooth Criminal*” on his group’s brainstorming sheet “for Kevin,” he engaged with Kevin as an artist

by centering Kevin's passion for Michael Jackson and reframing Kevin's brief dances through class as valid artistic engagement. Tyler took the first step towards bringing Kevin's stories to life in interaction by extending him an opportunity to get involved and keeping that opportunity open. He ensured that Kevin had a place within our developing vessel for collective creativity by following up multiple times with our teaching team to ask if *Smooth Criminal* was going to play. Tyler accompanied Kevin. In turn, by collaboratively sound designing *We Move Together*, Kevin and another student accompanied everyone involved in the production. Working from a draft of our script, these two students found ways to amplify and extend others' artistic visions (e.g., by using their knowledge of a popular YouTube video to add a screaming sound effect to the elementary school goat scene, to their and our audiences' collective amusement). Evoking Disability Justice principles of interdependence, collective access, and collective liberation (Sins Invalid, 2019), pedagogies of accompaniment support classrooms in which everyone can both be cared for and care for others.

Methodologies of Accompaniment

In parallel to how theater educators in this study repositioned themselves from directors to accompanists, I wonder if scholars might similarly reframe our relationships with participants. Might there exist *methodologies of accompaniment* to support scholars in elevating and extending our participants' perspectives, while validating our own contributions to research? I am not the first to suggest a productive overlap between pedagogy and methodology (Wall, 2018), but I am interested in how scholars might more fully explore this relationship. Even though I did not explicitly set out to embody methodologies of accompaniment in this study, I see ways in which this framework captures how I worked alongside participants. For example, during BAT story circles, participants listened to one another's stories before elevating and extending them by creating art in response. After story circles, I leveraged my own artistry, engaging creatively with participants' artwork to develop a composite narrative. These were instances of accompaniment. Even in the less arts-infused moments of data

generation, I notice ways in which I leveraged accompaniment. In resonance with DisCrit solidarity, I resisted any expectation that I would “control” or “manage” participants’ contributions to this study (Annamma & Handy, 2019). For example, when Mark seemed more interested in playing a video game than participating in an interview, I sat with him and watched him play. Later, he approached me with an early drawing of *Platform Maze* and asked if he could explain it to me. I asked if I could take a picture of his drawing and record his explanation, and *that* became the interview. Rather than directing Mark’s participation in this study, I leveraged the tools I had as a scholar and researcher to listen to, amplify, and extend the stories Mark wanted to tell. I accompanied him.

Beyond the context of this study, what might embracing a framework for *methodologies of accompaniment* afford researchers, even those working outside of arts contexts? First, it might give us ways to value simply *being with* participants, without feeling like we always need to have an agenda or be “productive.” It might help us think creatively about using our knowledge and strengths to support the stories our participants want told. It might help us recognize how these stories might emerge in collaboration between participants, between ourselves and participants, or between scholars, and that the multi-voiced nature of these stories does not make them less valid. The metaphor of accompaniment might empower us. It might help us see that as long as we avoid casting ourselves as “the star of the show,” we can and should bring our whole selves to our work. Through methodologies of accompaniment, we might treat our subjectivities as assets rather than liabilities.

Implications for Theater (and other Arts) Educators

This study offers guidance for theater and other arts educators interested in working with multiply marginalized students, but unsure of how to do so ethically or well. First, findings suggest that educators can identify how ableism and racism might circulate through their teaching by sharing stories about how they learned what it meant to be a “quality” artist creating “quality” art. Stories can help educators recognize how narrow expectations of “quality” limit both educators and students and help

surface the underlying oppressions that co-construct these narrow expectations. Even educators who hold dominant identities can identify ways these expectations have harmed them, name the importance of shifting these expectations to better support their students, and articulate how these shifts may impact their teaching. Collaboration was a key part of this process. Findings suggest that collaboratively teaching and developing curriculum with a team of colleagues and disabled adults can support arts educators interested in working towards justice with multiply marginalized students. Further, with specific relevance to theater educators, findings suggest there may be transformative potential in repositioning theater educators as accompanists, rather than directors. When the educators in this study positioned themselves as accompanists (e.g., Hanna strategizing with Mark about how to best realize his artistic vision for *Platform Maze*, Chloe suggesting how Bex's bead sifting might make a beautiful rain sound effect) they created new possibilities for how students—particularly those who might be marginalized through normative theater pedagogies—could belong in theater. Though I remained the de facto “director” of *We Move Together*, I am curious about how my fellow theater educators and I might deliberately disrupt this positioning in future creative processes. For example, I wonder what might happen if teaching artists explicitly named students the “directors” of their own scenes, and then provided these students with mentorship and accompaniment. Making this shift might invite even more aesthetic and relational possibilities for theater educators and multiply marginalized students.

Hanna's suggestion that “this can be normal, if people treat it the right way” invites theater educators to recognize that there is nothing magical about the ingredients that go into this kind of work. Teaching artists already know and practice many of the sub-practices of pedagogies of accompaniment (e.g., they know how to say “yes, and...”, how to offer material supports, and engage in collaborative problem solving). But when these sub-practices come together within a reflective, supportive community, committed to continually wrestling with ideas about ableism and racism and centering

Disability Justice (Sins Invalid, 2019) in their pedagogy, the resulting rehearsal processes and productions can *feel* magical, indeed! I encourage theater educators who may be interested in creating art with multiply marginalized students to begin by critically examining how whiteness and ableism circulate through their contexts, perhaps through expectations about who and what count as “quality.” Educators can then begin the challenging work of shifting these underlying values, beliefs, and assumptions in collaboration with community. This work can be difficult and scary, especially if educators believe that parents, audiences, donors, and more experienced theater students might not understand such a shift. However, findings suggest there are ways for theater educators to bring their communities with them on this journey (e.g., preshow announcements, program notes, lobby displays). Further, findings suggest that students, parents, audiences, and donors might be less steeped in their ways than we educators are ourselves. If theater teaching artists can shift our understandings of “quality,” shaped by years embedded in normative theater education contexts, perhaps we should trust our communities can too.

I urge educators to avoid uncritically taking up pedagogies of accompaniment without simultaneously working to transform community values and expectations. Findings suggest that theater teaching artists already have many of the tools they need to work in community with multiply marginalized students. However, taking up these sub-practices without an ongoing commitment to transform the values, beliefs, and assumptions sustained by whiteness and ableism that underlie and uphold them will likely reproduce the same structures of normative theater education that police, discount, and exclude multiply marginalized disabled students’ creative contributions. For theater educators thinking about engaging pedagogies of accompaniment with multiply marginalized youth, I hope you will join me in considering the following questions:

1. Who am I? What systems of oppression have shaped the way I experienced theater education as a student? As an educator? How have I been complicit in reproducing these systems?

2. What roles do I often take on as a theater educator (e.g., director, designer, accompanist)? Why do I take on these roles? Are there any ways in which I could shift my role(s) to redistribute some measure of artistic ownership from me to my students? How can I leverage my artistry to support the artistry of others?
3. Who can I partner with in this work? Are there multiply marginalized folks already doing this work in my community whom I might accompany? Are there other educators or community members (especially folks who have been marginalized in normative theater education) who might want to form a collaborative teaching team?
4. How am I foregrounding Disability Justice activism, art, and theory in my collaborations with fellow teachers? In my work with students? Remember that this work is both a “promise and a practice” (Lazard, 2019). How am I practicing Disability Justice principles (Sins Invalid, 2019)?
5. How am I holding space and time for individual and collaborative reflection with students? With other educators? How am I surfacing joy in these reflections? How is what I am learning in these reflections meaningfully transforming my teaching practice?
6. How am I resisting applying the same deficit logics to myself as I have been taught to apply to my students? How am I thinking of myself as shaped by existing systems and capable of both reinscribing and transforming them?

Finally, I invite my fellow theater educators to join me in puzzling through the following question: Is there any value in constructions of quality in arts education? Is it worth expanding these constructions or would we do better to abandon them all together, perhaps turning to meaning-making (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Moss et al., 2000) as an alternative? Might asking ourselves how students are *making sense of their work in context* provide us with more useful information as educators than evaluating the extent to which they reached an abstract “quality” standard? How could we focus our (and our communities’) attention on trying to understand *how* (rather than *how well*) students and

educators are engaging with the arts? Even if this might be a worthy goal, I have personally found that the human impulse to evaluate is strong. Because of this, I have focused my energy on transforming, rather than eliminating, quality constructions through my research. However, I encourage my fellow arts educators to explore their own thoughts and join me in ongoing dialogue about this issue. Perhaps there are ways to work against “quality” constructions altogether towards more transformative possibilities.

Implications for pK-12 Educators

For all educators working with pK-12 students, this study suggests the transformative potential of *recognizing every individual as an artist and storyteller*. This stance goes beyond “presuming competence” (Biklen & Burke, 2006), beyond welcoming students’ cultural and heritage practices (Paris & Alim, 2014), and even beyond recognizing multiply marginalized students’ resistance as gifts (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). It is about recognizing wholeness (Sins Invalid, 2019). This stance encourages educators to critique the structures we work within by inviting us to ask: if everyone is an artist and storyteller, what is keeping us from seeing our students’ artistry, from hearing their stories? Further, it demands we value even our students who will never “succeed” within a capitalist framework. These students exist—even if educators had recognized and cultivated my disabled brother’s love of music, he would never have made a living as a DJ. He wants to listen to the same twenty-second guitar solo repeatedly, not field requests from a paying audience. However, this does not make him any less of an artist or storyteller, any less intrinsically whole or worthy of care. Further, *recognizing every individual as an artist and storyteller* removes the pressure of discovering students’ assets from educators and validates students’ agency to dissent, resist, and refuse. Artists and storytellers choose when to create, how to create, and with whom to share their creations. Finally, this stance invites us to ask: what is keeping us from showing up as artists and storytellers ourselves?

Implications for Future Research

For scholars interested in shifting the normative power dynamics of research and seeking more just, reciprocal relationships with participants, this study offers several important implications. First, particularly as research and schooling have historically oppressed disabled communities (Erevelles, 2000; Oliver, 1992), scholars must follow the legacy of the Disability Rights Movement ("nothing about us without us," Charlton, 1998), by attending to DisCrit tenet four (privilege "the voices of marginalized populations;" Annamma et. al, 2013) and Disability Justice principle two ("leadership of those most impacted;" Sins Invalid, 2019). We must find ways to design for educational justice *with* rather than *for* disabled people. Based on my findings, I suggest that key principles and methods of community-based co-design (Ishimaru et al., 2018) can support this kind of design work with mixed-ability groups of youth and adults from a variety of racial and cultural backgrounds. Further, Barton (2005) argued that scholars committed to emancipatory disability research needed to acknowledge whose voices had dominated this work (physically disabled people) and develop new ways of centering the perspectives of other, particularly nonspeaking, participants. Relatedly, Disability Justice activists have argued for decentering the stories of white, nondisabled men in disability activism (Berne, 2015). In response, this study illuminates how multimodal collaborative storytelling can support more accessible and inclusive research with participants for whom traditional interviews and focus groups might be inaccessible. By offering participants multiple ways to tell their stories (e.g., collage, drawing, movement, poetry), scholars can disrupt the hegemony of the written and spoken word (which is, perhaps not coincidentally, a characteristic of white supremacy culture; Okun, 2021). This study offers insights into how research might engage racially, physically, and neurodiverse groups of youth and adults in theorizing and creating towards educational spaces free of racial and disability injustice.

Navigating Complexities of Community-Engaged Research

Community-engaged qualitative research is messy, complicated, and rife with tensions; these inherent contradictions are often what makes it so generative and exciting. By surfacing and exploring some complexities I encountered during research, I hope to offer a window into my process that might aid future researchers in navigating their own work. These include tensions I encountered conducting research with partner organizations, choices I made about selecting participants and documenting data generation activities, and decisions I made about engaging participants in analysis.

Partnerships and Participants. While I believe the benefits of conducting research in partnership with community organizations (e.g., responding to community needs, engaging in reciprocal, accountable research) outweigh any potential costs, working with partners at BAT, ATA, and Connections was sometimes challenging. While I shared some of these challenges (e.g., the *We Move Together* team needing to share space, staff, and time with BAT) in findings, I want to surface some other tensions here. First, these three organizations had their own ways of working that did not always align with one another. For example, it was challenging to align BAT's summer camp schedule with ATA's year-round school schedule. ATA would have preferred to have BAT teaching artists visit their campus once a week for their entire summer session. However, when their summer session began in early June, BAT teaching artists were not yet on contract. As a result, ATA ended up holding an "elective" slot in their summer session schedule and filling this slot with other programming until our teaching team became available in late June. For another, BAT would have preferred not to send teaching artists to ATA during the final week of rehearsals for their other summer camp productions. Interns on the ATA teaching team worried about missing important BAT camp traditions. We compromised and chose to keep some members of the ATA teaching team on the BAT campus during those weeks. I was a key player in these and all logistical negotiations, which placed me in the challenging position of weighing organizational priorities while holding my own priority: writing my dissertation. I worried that my

preexisting relationships with BAT staff might have predisposed me to prioritizing BAT's needs over the needs of my two other partnering organizations; I tried to deliberately counter this by continually advocating for ATA's needs to BAT staff members. Also, my logistical duties occasionally forced me to step away from data generation. For example, I once cut an interview short to field a phone call from ATA staff who were struggling to find staff to cover some of their students' transportation to BAT. In retrospect, having a partner who could have handled some of these logistics while I focused on developing relationships with participants and facilitating data generation might have been helpful.

Next, while the leadership of these three community organizations agreed on many things, they did not always have the same priorities. Furthermore, the leadership of these organizations did not always express the same priorities as their members. This caused tensions. For example, though BAT's leadership expressed commitments to equity and inclusion, their actions revealed how their priority remained producing a summer season of traditionally high "quality" youth theater for audiences, students, parents, and donors. Their high school students' overwhelmingly positive reactions to *We Move Together* revealed tensions between this priority and BAT's students' wants and needs. Ultimately, this tension reflected some larger patterns I saw in the data, and I incorporated it into my findings. I see this as one of the realities of conducting research within community partnerships: not everyone is going to agree. However, instead of attempting to eliminate disagreement, I suggest scholars might try to surface these disagreements and incorporate them into our research. Like when navigating access frictions (Calling Up Justice, 2023) or engaging in solidarity-driven co-design (Ishimaru et al., 2018), scholars might reframe disagreements as opportunities for learning through differences.

Finally, when it came to recruiting participants from within community organizations—specifically from within ATA—challenges arose. First, when it came to recruiting ATA students, the layers of communication between me and students' families made it challenging to obtain informed consent. Though ATA's elementary, middle, and high school lead teachers expressed their enthusiasm for the

project and welcomed me into their classrooms to discuss participation with students, they asked to handle the research consent process with parents and families themselves. Perhaps because of variation in how they handled this communication—or another unknown reason—I received many consent forms from elementary and middle school families, but only one from a high school family. Because of this, I focused my analysis on one scene from elementary school students (“Platform Maze”) and a scene from middle school (“The Train”). I imagine there might have been interesting trends in high school students’ scenes, but with only one high school student participant, I could not analyze this data. Furthermore, had I been able to build relationships with students’ parents and families, it might have felt more appropriate to collect data about students’ racial and disability identities. Though I do not regret my approach—sharing photographs and descriptions of students rather than labels—collecting this information may have strengthened my claims about how this approach to theater education might particularly benefit multiply marginalized students. Finally, I wish I had included ATA’s teachers and aides as participants in this study and interviewed them about their experiences. I did not anticipate the importance of these relationships (between teachers, aides, and ATA students) to our collective creative process. I have similar regrets about not including the support staff who often accompanied Connections volunteers to BAT. Though I have no reason to believe that including these adults would have significantly altered the findings shared in this dissertation, I wonder about what else I might have learned had they been included. I invite future scholarship to consider the relationships between burgeoning disabled artists, their non-arts teachers, and their support staff and explore how these relationships might mediate what these disabled artists create.

Data Generation and Analysis. As is typical during qualitative research, several choices I made and events that happened during data generation and analysis limited the strength of my claims. First, I initially intended to video record all the conversations that happened between participants during story circles. However, during story circles, I realized that I did not have the appropriate equipment to capture

the many conversations happening simultaneously. In the end, I believe participants may have been more likely to share vulnerable memories with one another without the presence of recording equipment. Further, the lack of video recordings forced me to focus my story circle analysis more narrowly on the artwork participants created. In doing so, I resisted the urge to center participants' verbal explanations of their art and instead focused on the art itself. By doing so, I avoided the access issues that can arise when even scholars using creative, multimodal research methods prioritize participants' spoken explanations over other forms of expression (Sitter & Grittner, 2021). However, I recognize that analyzing the rich conversations that took place during story circles might have further strengthened my claims.

Additionally, interviews with ATA students—especially initial interviews—were less fruitful than I had initially hoped. Students seemed reluctant to share their thoughts with me, and consequently, interviews lasted only a few minutes (the moment a student expressed wanting to end an interview, it ended). I imagine this may have been because, unlike with BAT teaching artists and interns and Connections volunteers, I had not already established trusting relationships with ATA students. I did not know their preferred methods of communication. I had little idea what they might enjoy discussing. Had I been able to engage in deeper dialogue with these students, I might have been able to make stronger claims about ATA students' internal experiences with this theatrical process. As it was, my claims about students' experiences came from our teaching team's and my own observations of students' engagement. I do wish I had been able to interview ATA students after the performance, once we had built relationships, the performance was a day before students began a month-long break from school and less than a month before I returned home to Seattle. Consequently, these interviews proved impossible to schedule. However, since I ultimately focused more on teachers' understandings of "quality" and choices about pedagogy than students' experiences, I do not think this significantly limited findings. I was also unable to gather the ATA teaching team as a whole group following the final

performance of *We Move Together*. Though I gained substantial insights from 1:1 interviews with all team members except for Heather (she left her position at ATA just a week after *We Move Together* and we were unable to schedule an interview), I wonder what I would have learned from our team sharing space and debriefing one last time. However, ATA summer camp ended the day after *We Move Together*, and due to conflicting travel schedules, it was not possible to schedule even a remote gathering with everyone present. In my future research, recognizing how momentum often wanes after a performance, I will make sure to schedule these kinds of wrap-up conversations at each study's outset.

Finally, this study might have been strengthened by more intentionally engaging participants in collaborative analysis. I did conduct member checks of initial findings throughout data generation. For instance, I shared the composite monologue I developed from story circle data with the ATA teaching team for their feedback. Additionally, I brought up my analytic hunches at teaching team meetings for everyone to discuss (e.g., when we debated the merits of process vs. product-oriented theater education). However, because of both time constraints and my reluctance to overburden participants after our summer together concluded, I did not conduct any kind of true retrospective co-analysis or member checking. In future research, I will include an expectation of time for co-analysis and member checking in my initial outreach to participants, as I believe this kind of engagement might have strengthened my findings.

Conclusion

I've realized just like how inaccessible theater can be sometimes, but how easy that can be to change... you can make it more accessible and that's beautiful... People don't realize it's going to be this easy. It's the fact that people haven't tried. It's not like they're like, "oh, we don't want to try." It's that they think that trying would be a super difficult process. They don't realize exactly how easy it can be. (Emir, interview, 8/13/23)

I leave you with Emir's reflections on the transformative potential and imminent possibility of changing theater for the better. In this study, I demonstrated how small groups of educators can critically analyze how ableism and racism circulate in their own contexts and work alongside multiply marginalized students to activate alternatives. Through pedagogies and methodologies of accompaniment, educators, scholars, and multiply marginalized students can work together to "[imagine] and [build] the world we want to see now" (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018b, p. 149). This kind of change is urgently needed in our arts organizations and in our schools. I hope this study will inspire other scholars and educators to embrace the potential of slow, intentional, incremental change that begins within our communities and starts now. I urge others to cultivate small spaces of communal joy—like our 30-minute performance of *We Move Together*—however and whenever you can. Together, as Disability Justice artist-activists suggest, our small spaces can add up to "a deep, slow, transformative, unstoppable wave of justice and liberation" (Sins Invalid, 2019, p. 25). Thank you for accompanying me on this journey.

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Appendix A

BAT Story Circle Curriculum

Set up: Make sure everyone has a piece of paper and something to write or draw with nearby. Start a recording.

Hello, and thank you so much for participating in this story circle. I know that I've already spoken about this with each of you, but a reminder that your participation is voluntary and that taking care of your body and mind is the most important thing. If at any time you wish to take a break, get a drink of water, use the restroom... you don't need to ask for permission. Take care of you. This is a "training," but it's really a time for us to learn from one another. All of us have experience in theater education (as students, teachers, or both), and so all of us have wisdom to share. Our goal for today is to investigate how ableism and racism show up in theater education spaces so we might begin to think about our own role in disrupting these systems.

In this hour, we're going to:

- Check-in
- Play a game
- Draw and/ or journal
- Tell stories
- Draw and/or write in response to each other's stories

For my research, I am going to record this session and collect all of the art we make. It will be confidential and anonymized if shared beyond me and my advisors. If you previously elected not to participate in research, I will not include your recording or artwork in analysis. If you create anything during our session that you do not feel comfortable sharing, you do not have to give it to me when I collect.

After today, I will continue to work with what we've generated. My goal is to have a creative representation of our collective learning to share with you sometime after camp ends. At that point, I'll ask you for your feedback and revise accordingly. Let's get started!

Access Check-In (10 mins)

Introduce independence as a myth and offer the alternative ideal of interdependence (working together to meet our access needs). Offer that this is an ongoing process and that access needs shift and change. In person: Go around the circle and share any unmet access needs or say, "My access needs are currently being met."

Over zoom: Option to share in the chat.

Emotion Ball (5 mins)

As we play this game, think about what assumptions are being made about your body and mind. What assumptions might be made about the body of a student of color labeled with disabilities?

In person: Everyone stands up in actor neutral. Facilitator shows the group an invisible ball. This ball contains an emotion: happy! Facilitator acts out "being happy" and then passes the ball around the circle. Everyone acts out this emotion in turn. Facilitator transforms the ball into "being angry" and then passes this ball around the circle. Play proceeds using two more emotions suggested by the group.

Over zoom: Same, except set an order in the chat.

Open Reflection (5 mins)

Guide group towards: Actor neutral means nondisabled. Not all students express emotions in the same way. It is not safe for all students to express all emotions in the same way. The way we think about what capital A "Art" is can be exclusionary. This is why an intersectional analysis of ableism and racism in theater education is needed

Drawing/ journaling (10 mins)

In just a few minutes we're going to tell one another stories. To get our ideas flowing, write or draw your responses to the following prompts:

Who are you in relation to this conversation? What identities are you bringing with you?

A time you felt you or someone else belonged in theater education.

A time you felt you or someone else did not belong in theater education.

A time you learned what it meant to be "normal" in theater education.

Storytelling (10 mins)

In person: Pair up. Give your partner a "grand tour" of what you drew. Tell at least one story, while your partner takes notes. Really encourage stories of not belonging, OR if these were hard to remember...

Why might that be? Switch after 5 mins.

Over zoom: Same, but breakout rooms.

Drawing/ writing (10 mins)

In person: Either write a short (50 word/ three sentence) monologue or draw a picture about the story you heard from the perspective of the teller. After 8 mins, share your work with your partner. You may revise in response to any feedback.

Over zoom: Same, but remain in breakout rooms. Turn your camera off to write/ draw.

Closing (5 mins)

Reiterate where we're going from here. We're trying to imagine beyond what exists to a world where all bodies and minds are embraced within theater education. With that in mind, I invite you to turn over your paper and write one thing you're thinking about as you plan and teach camp this summer. Go around the circle and share one word you wrote with the group.

Collect all materials, stop recording.

Appendix B

Composite Narrative from Story Circles

We want everyone to belong in the theater. That's why we're here. We haven't always belonged, but when we have, it's been incredible, even life changing.

Sometimes, it's been easy. We've belonged because of who we are. Something inside us— our race, our ability, our culture— has marked us without us even noticing. We've blended in. Sometimes, it's been something inside someone else— their kindness, their curiosity, their openness— that has helped us find our place.

Sometimes, it's been a challenge. It's taken someone else, someone with the power and the time to change things, to notice us and get curious about what we need. To find creative ways to get us those things, especially when it means changing the rules or even changing the game. More access for us is more access for everyone.

When we belong, we're part of a whole. We work towards a shared goal, but we're recognized and celebrated as individuals. We're in trusting relationships, grown over time. We know that others will support us, help us, and keep us safe. We know that when we express ourselves, we will be heard and understood.

Even in these spaces, there've been tensions. We've felt totally at home in the bodies of characters who are nothing like us. We've loved the rush of performing— loved the cheers from our friends and colleagues— and been terrified, terrified of letting each other down.

We've loved and feared your "high" expectations.

We've made ourselves into singers, dancers, and actors. We've willed our voices to sound and our bodies to look a certain way, move a certain way. We're hyper aware of the ways our bodies have refused to cooperate. Too tall, too loud, too big, too much. Too athletic. Not athletic enough.

We're supposed to be confident and quick. We're supposed to be smart, to remember everything, our lines, steps, counts, notes, and cues. We're supposed to exude energy, smile big, be outgoing, but also sit quietly and pay attention. We're supposed to explore and be creative, but within boundaries. And we're supposed to know these boundaries without asking. We're supposed to check our own emotions at the door, but perform another's for an audience, with truth, openness, and vulnerability.

We love Shakespeare and have strong feelings about musical theater.

For us, it's all theater, all the time. We perform our passion and commitment, wondering if it will ever be enough. If we're on time, we're late. We never take breaks, never miss a rehearsal, and never burn out. Our needs come second to the needs of the show. The show must go on!

We're meant to pass if we can, conforming to the culture that surrounds us, or become known by our parts. We're the Black artist or the queer artist. The religious artist or the artist with anxiety. The roles we're given tell us who we are and who we're not.

We're a director, a star, or an ensemble member. A BFA or BA. We understand what those titles mean and what they mean we're worth. When we're a director or star, our time matters. Our needs matter. When we're in the ensemble, it "isn't about us." We watch. We wait. Sometimes we feel like set dressing. When the directors and stars look and sound the same, we notice.

Our training beats things out of us and throws us into things. Saying no isn't always an option. When it is, it comes with consequences. And when we try something and fail, it's our own fault. We don't get something. We're being dramatic. And the stakes are different depending on who we are.

This is where we begin.

Appendix C

Data Generation

Date	Activity	Location	Participants	Data Source(s)
6.3	BAT Intern Story Circle	BAT	BAT Interns	Artifacts (poetry, drawing, writing, etc.)
6.6	BAT Staff Story Circle	Remote	BAT Staff	Artifacts (poetry, drawing, writing, etc.)
6.14	Connections Story Circle 1	Connections	Ella, Alexa, Rose, Imogen	Artifacts (poetry, drawing, writing, etc.), video recording
6.15	Connections Story Circle 2	Connections	Chloe, George	Artifacts (poetry, drawing, writing, etc.), video recording
6.15	Interview	Connections	Chloe	Video recording
6.20	First day of BAT summer camp			
6.20	Interview	BAT	Emir	Video recording
6.23	Teaching team meeting 1	BAT	ATA teaching team	Video recording
6.23	Interview	BAT	Aadhya	Video recording
6.27	Class 1	ATA	ATA teaching team, students	Video recording, collaborative collage
6.27	Debrief 1	ATA	ATA teaching team	Audio recording
6.27	Interview	Remote	Heather	Video recording
6.29	Interview	ATA	Liam & Brian	Video recording
6.29	Interview	ATA	Mark	Video recording
6.30	Teaching team meeting 2	BAT	ATA teaching team	Video recording
6.30	Interview	BAT	Hanna	Video recording
7.5	Class 2	ATA	ATA teaching team, students	Video recording, group drawings
7.5	Debrief 2	ATA	ATA teaching team	Audio recording
7.6	Paint day	BAT	ATA high school students	Photographs, side panels of <i>We Move Together</i> set

7.7	Teaching team meeting 3	BAT	ATA teaching team	Video recording
7.11	Class 3	ATA	ATA teaching team, students	Video recording
7.11	Debrief 3	ATA	ATA teaching team	Audio recording
7.12	Class 4	ATA	ATA teaching team, students	Video recording
7.12	Debrief 4	ATA	ATA teaching team	Audio recording
7.13	<i>SpongeBob: The Musical Youth Edition</i> access preview			
7.14	Teaching team meeting 4	BAT	ATA teaching team	Video recording
7.18	Class 5	ATA	ATA teaching team, students	Video recording
7.18	Debrief 5	ATA	ATA teaching team	Audio recording
7.19	Class 6	ATA	ATA teaching team, students	Video recording
7.19	Debrief 6	ATA	ATA teaching team	Audio recording
7.20	Interview	ATA	Liam & Brian	Video recording
7.20	Interview	ATA	Mark	Video recording
7.21	Teaching team meeting 5	BAT	ATA teaching team	Video recording
7.25	Class 7	ATA	ATA teaching team, students	Video recording
7.25	Debrief 7	ATA	ATA teaching team	Audio recording
7.26	Class 8	ATA	ATA teaching team, students	Video recording
7.26	Debrief 8	ATA	ATA teaching team	Audio recording
7.27	<i>Into the Extraordinary</i> access preview			
7.28	Teaching team meeting 6	BAT	ATA teaching team	Video recording
8.1	Class 9	ATA	ATA teaching team, students	Video recording
8.1	Debrief 9	ATA	ATA teaching team	Audio recording
8.2	Dress rehearsal	BAT	ATA teaching team, students	Video recording

8.3	<i>We Move Together</i> show	ATA	ATA teaching team, students	Video recording, photographs
8.3	<i>Mean Girls</i> access preview			
8.11	Interview	Remote	Chloe	Video recording
8.11	Interview	Remote	Aadhya	Video recording
8.13	Interview	Remote	Emir	Video recording
8.16	Interview	Remote	Hanna	Video recording
9.6	Interview	Remote	Jason	Audio recording

Appendix D

Codebook for 2nd Cycle Deductive Coding

Educational Theater Norms

Code	Sub-Code	Sub-Code	Definition	Example
Unpacking systems of oppression	Systems of oppression	Ableism	inductive, in vivo. Direct mention of ableism or example of how ableism operates	"I think ableism is assigning value to certain, I think there are certain things that could in theory be conceived as disabilities that societies describe them to be more normal things, and things like breaking your leg or whatever or... Or just, I don't know. I feel like amputees might be in a different societal bucket than some of the kids we were working with. And I think there are certain things that in theory people just have variation in the way that they exist and some things are cool and some things are as described as not cool. So it doesn't really, it's just all labels and constructed. So everyone sort of exists in the system of ableism" (Hanna, teaching team meeting, 6/30/23).
		Racism	inductive, in vivo. Direct mention of racism or example of how racism operates	"I feel like I have been looked at differently because of my race. Not in a bad way, but I've just been like, people have assumed things about me sometimes or I don't know, expected me to be some way just because of my race" (Aadhya, interview, 6/23/23).
	Participant's lens	Individual lens	inductive, descriptive. Attributes oppression to individual beliefs, feelings, and behaviors	"Maddie: And so I'm curious if you are noticing or can notice any way that racism or ableism are either working together by themselves? Emir: Here? Maddie: Here. Emir: I have, I'm going to be real. I'm not seeing anything. I mean, I might have to ask some older kids. I'm working with little kids. I don't think they know the concept of... I don't think, I've almost seen them all being friendly towards each other and all playing well. They seem happy and yay" (Emir and Maddie, interview, 6/21/23).

Code	Sub-Code	Sub-Code	Definition	Example
		Systemic lens	inductive, descriptive. Attributes oppression to interpersonal interactions, institutions, and systems	"But for example, if I do a whole day of theater and I'm really tired at the end, it's like I'm able to just be like, okay, I'm done. I'm done. And I can go home and I don't have to do anything. But if other people have different tolerances or those sorts of things, whatever, it's like, oh, they're just being dramatic or they're not cut out for the whole day. These sorts of things. And it's like, well no, I still have my time limits, but maybe my time limit aligns a little bit more with what the schedule is asking me of that day" (Hanna, teaching team meeting, 6/30/23).
		Thinking intersectionally	inductive, descriptive. Direct mention of multiple systems of oppression working together or example of how intersecting systems can operate	"I was looking inside myself and looking at these two prominent identities I have that people could probably be able to tell immediately. I'm black and I'm also gay, just seeing my mannerisms and stuff. And that comes with a lot of blessings, but at the same time, a lot of challenges too with how people interact with me or choose to interact with me, whether I'm seen as the token black guy or the token gay guy, or people want to show their prejudice towards me based on these identities I have" (Jason, interview, 7/17/23).
	Identifying self with systems	Stories of experiencing marginalization	inductive, descriptive. When grappling with understanding systems of oppression, participant tells a story of how they themselves have been marginalized	"And I think for me, one aspect has been being plus size, or not necessarily fitting, conforming to a size. And so that was definitely one thing where I experienced, in New York, I felt that there was preference and favoritism shown towards people who were thinner and presented thinner. So that was just one thing that sprained to mind of how I felt that I didn't belong" (Heather, interview, 6/27/23).
		Evading implication	inductive, process. Strategically avoids implicating self in systems of oppression	" Heather is also reluctant to implicate herself– it's all about being better and not about holding herself accountable" (Maddie, memo, 6/27/23).
		Implicating self	inductive, process. Implicates self in systems of oppression	"But just things like that where if a kid has a big reaction or talks out of turn or isn't really focused, so many, I mean, that happens almost every class, and those are behaviors that we often chastise" (Heather, interview, 6/27/23).

Code	Sub-Code	Sub-Code	Definition	Example
Expectations of "High Quality Theater"	Artists	Mental	inductive, descriptive. Expectations that theater artists possess certain mental attributes (i.e., talent at memorization, confidence)	"Always knows lines, steps, counts, notes, cues" (Isla, artifact from story circle, 6/3/23).
		Creative	inductive, descriptive. Expectations that theater artists be creative, but only within boundaries constructed by whiteness and ability	"I feel like they get the skills they need to be creative, to feel creative, to pursue open-mindedness, I don't know. I don't really know. I can just say being creative, very open-minded. Saying yes to most ideas that aren't crazy" (Emir, interview, 6/21/23).
		Physical	inductive, descriptive. Expectations that theater artists possess certain physical attributes (i.e., physically fit, not overweight, graceful, no mobility aids)	"The show where I felt best & like I most belonged was Avenue Q... was it because the focus was on my puppet & not me? (Also @ my skinniest)" (Eliza, artifact from story circle, 6/6/23).
		Vocal	inductive, descriptive. Expectations that theater artists possess certain vocal attributes (i.e., "natural" voice, "clear" articulation, etc.)	"And then just, I think the expectations we have, both as teachers and as audience. Are they loud enough? Can I understand all their lines?" (Heather, teaching team meeting, 7/14/23).
		Emotional	inductive, descriptive. Expectations that theater artists possess certain emotional attributes (i.e., able to express others' emotions, able to hide their own)	"Watching the two main characters among others in the high school Heathers production reminded me of the "normal" theater kid. It was when they were expressive and confident and could do all the expressive things" (Zia, artifact from story circle, 6/3/23).

Code	Sub-Code	Sub-Code	Definition	Example
		Passing vs. Representing	inductive, versus. Expectations that theater artists will either embody "normalcy" or perform as one-dimensional representatives of marginalized groups.	"I long for the day where I'm known as... Not just "the gay guy" Not just "the Black guy" But just Jason" (Jason, artifact from story circle 6/3/23).
		Energetic	inductive, descriptive. Expectations that theater artists possess certain energetic attributes (i.e., outgoing, "high" energy)	"They're all having so much fun. High energy, jumping around, bouncing off the walls. And yet... Here I am. Not reciprocating their energy. Am I wrong for wanting to be chill? Is my partner silently judging me? [76] Will the interns and staff be mad if I just stand off to the side?" (Jason in response to Emi, artifact from story circle, 6/3/23).
		Commitment	inductive, descriptive. Expectations that theater artists perform commitment in a particular way (i.e., never taking breaks, never burning out)	"In one of the theater spaces I participated in growing up, the norm was very much dedicating everything to the show" (Emma, artifact from story circle, 6/3/23).
	Processes	Sense of urgency	inductive, descriptive. Moving quickly because of a real or perceived scarcity of time.	"I think that theater is a very "blink and you'll miss it" type of thing" (Emir, interview, 8/13/23).
		The show must go on	inductive, in vivo. Either directly mentions "the show must go on," or illustrates expectations about an individual's needs coming second to the needs of a show	"It was definitely much more of a priority to have a good show than to make sure the people involved were having their needs met" (Emma, artifact from story circle, 6/3/23).

Code	Sub-Code	Sub-Code	Definition	Example
		Status hierarchies	Inductive, descriptive. Value is placed on bodyminds based on their academic pedigrees and/or role in a production (including judgments about role "size")	"Within the past year, I acted in a production of Passage by Christopher Chen. I'm pursuing a B.A. in Theatre at USC, which also has B.F.A. programs, and therefore many of the productions at the school feature B.F.As in guaranteed lead roles, with B.A. students auditioning for ensemble. I knew this going in, and booked one of the 6 ensemble roles, but felt like a human ornament for the entirety of the process. Being ensemble is perfectly fine, but oftentimes, I spent all 4 hours of rehearsal not contributing to the rehearsal process once because I wasn't given the opportunity. I think it comes down to feeling like my time as an artist wasn't valued" (Grant, artifact from story circle, 6/6/23).
	Productions	Perfectionism	inductive, descriptive. Motivation to continually improve something towards an unattainable "high" (read: normative) standard.	"And I also think that sometimes, if we're trying to maybe follow traditional theater expectations, what we think a product is going to be, there is a sort of perfectionism and cross your T's dot your I's, you know, even just in this tech process, with SpongeBob, giving notes for an hour to make it better. And it is to make it better. But sometimes I feel like running things over and over again and saying it has to be this, it has to be that does make a more polished product. But it also is not always enjoyable for everybody. And I do see kids here sometimes are zoning out during the notes portion" (Heather, teaching team meeting, 7/14/23).
		Economic value	inductive, descriptive. Expectations that good art is successful within a capitalist framework	"Yeah. Yeah. So I think a lot of people are profits. Profits, audience enjoyment. Audience enjoys it, it looks good. That's what matters" (Emir, interview, 8/13/23).

Code	Sub-Code	Sub-Code	Definition	Example
		The "reasonable" audience	deductive, descriptive. Expectations of audience behavior that reflect a white, nondisabled standard.	"Maddie: I really, okay, so my feedback for next year is that if we ever do an Access Preview that has an awesome sensory thing, like bubbles, we have to turn it on after the show and let people go up on stage. Heather: Yeah. Chloe: Bubbles. Maddie: Because it's, it's too fun" (Maddie, Heather, Chloe, teaching team meeting, 7/14/23).
		Stereotypes	inductive, descriptive. Describes a characterization based on a racial, gender, or other identity stereotype. This includes the common practice of typecasting.	"With race, I see a lot of the more traditional portrayal of black people is that they have to use all this slang or they seem hood or whatever. And I feel like that's not every black person. That's not me really" (Jason, interview, 7/7/23).
		The canon	inductive, descriptive. Positioning some (white, nondisabled) well-known art pieces as more legitimate and valuable than others	"Like people who force these on us like the able, ableist people, but they often cite Shakespeare as the ultimate theater. And if you can't dance this way or sing this way to Hamlet or whatever, you're out" (Emir, teaching team meeting, 6/30/23).
	Pedagogy	Violence	Inductive, descriptive. Theater pedagogy is described using violent language and metaphors.	"When I moved from LA → SF it was a hard transition, felt like regressing from my education in many ways, watching people approach acting and productions in a way that was beaten out of us in my LA training" (Nina, artifact from story circle, 6/6/23).
		Coercion	Inductive, descriptive. Theater pedagogy is described as non-consensual.	"When I was younger, I was quite quiet and often felt talked over or forced to participate in activities I didn't want to. I have grown out of this shyness, but still remember what it felt like" (Grace, artifact from story circle, 6/6/23).

Code	Sub-Code	Sub-Code	Definition	Example
		Evaluation, control & compliance	inductive, descriptive. Expectations that theater educators exercise control over their students' movements, expressions, and aesthetic choices, and that their students comply	"You should never put a limit on creativity. But then again, we don't want students just to completely, it's like if Heath Ledger had chosen to have joker have wings and superpowers. He made acting choices that worked out great and the directors were happy with it. But I doubt they'd be happy with Wings Demon Joker" (Emir, interview, 6/21/23).
		One superstar teacher	Inductive, descriptive. Expectations that theater educators do everything themselves	"And being a teacher, I think being alone in a classroom as a teacher, it can be super isolating, like you're saying, and very, there's no kind of sounding board. It's just all in your head and it's you going, yeah, okay, so that didn't work, so I'm a terrible teacher, and everything sucks" (Heather, interview, 6/27/23).
		Engaging everyone	inductive, descriptive. Expectations that theater educators "get through" to everyone and ensure that everyone is always having fun	"But I, I want to try to reach every student as a theater teacher and, to the best of my ability, and that's going to look different for everybody. So I had to work on my own gauges of what "reaching them" means. What does it mean to be successful? To get through to somebody?" (Heather, interview, 6/27/23).

Expanding Educational Theater Norms

Code	Sub-Code	Sub-Code	Definition	Example
Collaborative Teaching Process	Relationship Building and Theorizing	Centering wisdom of multiply marginalized disabled folks	inductive, process. Drawing on text and images created by multiply marginalized disabled people to guide the process	"All the art that's on here is made by disabled people of color. Just to make it not just words that we're saying, but we're actually drawing from the wisdom of these communities" (Maddie, teaching team meeting, 6/23/23).
		Reflecting on power/ privilege	inductive, process. Individual in a powered/ privileged position reflects on their positionality in relationship to others	"I am positioned to be able to do theater in the way presented as normal" (Emma, artifact from intern story circle, 6/3/23).

Code	Sub-Code	Sub-Code	Definition	Example
		Sharing whole selves	inductive, process. Sharing things that are not explicitly relevant to the design process to build community	"I can talk about it. So a few days ago, I was actually dating someone that actually wasn't really nice to me and actually harassed me for not being really good to me. And so I just ended it, but it was really hard. And so I don't know how to deal with it. I don't how to do this. I want extra support..." (Chloe, teaching team meeting, 7/14/23).
		Explicitly attending to difference	inductive, process. Explicitly mentioning differences between individuals involved in co-design, students, and others (i.e., identities, roles, needs, strengths)	"Emir: Well I dunno I just like how it says "we" a lot. It feels like that's important. Aadhya: I like how we see kids and every single page with different backgrounds and they have different identities and parts of themselves that make them them. Maddie: So it's like "we," but everybody's really unique, right?" (Emir, Aadhya, Maddie, teaching team meeting, 6/23/23)
		Articulating why	inductive, process. Articulating a personal or a group "why" motivating this co-design process	"It's, I think especially working with kids, that's how a part of what I feel like with art, I think art with kids is so impactful. I think having, everything that I talk about kind of ties together, so I'm kind of just spewing. But with, growing up next to Stanford, I think the biggest privilege for me being in the Bay Area among many is being next to Stanford because I think there are so many youth programs that I had access to. So that's why working with youth programs is very important to me" (Hanna, interview, 6/30/23).
		Imagining otherwise	inductive, process. Dreaming up new worlds beyond the one that currently exists	"That's why when I write, I try to change up the things. Or if it's a woman, they have to pander to the man or always their goal is to marry the prince or marry, excuse me, or marry the king. Or it's always a love interest that they're after. And they happen to face, excuse me, like an obstacle along the way. But it's not always about romance or it's not always about, it doesn't always have to be the template" (Jason, interview, 7/17/23).
		Bringing in lived experiences	inductive, process. Bringing examples from one's own personal experiences to the process of relationship building and theorizing	"Emir: I'd just like to say maybe avoid games like you. Heather: Ok. Emir: Yeah. That's difficult for me" (Emir & Heather, teaching team meeting, 6/23/23).

Code	Sub-Code	Sub-Code	Definition	Example
	Designing	Thinking with materials	inductive, process. Using materials (books, images, paper, writing) to design for disability justice in theater education	"Do we want to spend some time exploring the materials that we have and see if they inspire us? If there's anything we want to add? [unintelligible] I think they're intended for raves, but I use them for theater. Same with the finger lights, to be honest" (Maddie, teaching team meeting, 6/23/23).
		Centering choice	inductive, process. Designing with the goal to afford students' the means to agentically transform process, product, and materials	"Introducing our schedule, I offer two options. "If you're feeling like sitting down and drawing is a better choice for you today, you can work on designing some projections that are going to be in the background of our scenes. If you feel like standing up and playing games and acting is going to be a better choice for you today, you can work on making some stage pictures with your body" (recording memo, 7/12/23).
		Centering fun	inductive, process. Designing with the goal of promoting excitement, fun, and joy	" And I'm super excited for the play. I think that's going to be so fun. I think so many people are going to enjoy it. I think they're going to enjoy it too because they're getting to tell their story of how they see the world and how they interact with others and the environment that they're in" (Aadhya, interview, 6/23/23).
		Centering multimodal participation	inductive, process. Designing with the goal to afford students access to multiple modalities through which they can engage (i.e., written, verbal, kinesthetic), and/or validating different modes of engagement as contributing to knowledge production.	"I mean the first thing when I, we move together, I thought of high school immediately. The dance and the movement that we've done. I feel like we've done a lot of dancing and movement together. But then, I also think in the song we're dancing to, there's quite a story. And I think that us moving to it is also we're storytelling through the movement as well. So I don't know, I was like, it could be more than just one and then we are artists because we're telling, I don't know, I really jumped to that for high school, but then I was like, but we're also doing that. So that's just where I started. And then I felt like middle and elementary were more on the storytelling, and then elementary also had the movement" (Heather, teaching team meeting, 7/21/23).
		Centering interdependence	inductive, process. Designing with the goal to afford students' interdependence (i.e., building on one another's' ideas, supporting one another as communication partners)	"Maybe for we are artists, sort of a [unintelligible] thing that you could pass around, a paper and they could draw something on it and at the end have this one little everyone paper" (Emir, teaching team meeting, 6/23/23).

Code	Sub-Code	Sub-Code	Definition	Example
	Enacting Through Tensions	Movement	inductive, descriptive. Direct or implied tension between how much students need to move and how much a given space (including its norms and expectations) affords and constrains students' movement	"My only concern is physical space, just because it's small. It's small and yeah, this place is great. You get to wander around and you want that to be enabled as much as possible. But that is severely limited by the fact that we are next to a creek and a dangerous play structure and wood chips and all that. So I think it'll be fine, but I think that that's something we'll have to pay attention to. And that's kind of the only thing that makes me a little bit nervous" (Hanna, debrief, 8/1/23).
		Ownership	inductive, descriptive. Direct or implied tension between who feels ownership over a space and its materials, who is a newcomer, and/or who is a guest (includes the different rules and expectations of these roles)	"And I think it should be a fun experience for them and we should work to adapting ourselves to their ways other than the other way around. I think that's important because we're coming into their space and definitely their space is their space" (Aadhya, interview, 6/23/23).
		Space allocation	inductive, descriptive. Tensions between the teaching team and the greater BAT, ATA, Connections staff about use of physical spaces	"And my last little nervous thing, which I think goes about saying, I imagine that the people we are kicking, we're not kicking 'em off stage, but I think the people that we will be taking the stage from are probably going to be really stressed. And I think that historically has not been great with this group of people. And I think that everybody, not that anyone's hesitant to be assertive, but I think that it is well within everyone's right to be a little bit assertive about taking that space" (Hanna, debrief, 8/1/23).
		Time	inductive, in vivo. Tensions between the teaching team and the greater BAT, ATA, Connections staff about allocation of time	"Hanna: And I'm just, everyone's really nice, and I say this as someone who is so easy, so easily walked all over. I think that it is good to go in with that, the knowledge that it's Maddie: Our time. Hanna: Yeah. It's All Together's time. And I don't want the cast to be stressed, but Heather: I think I'm more anxious about, Jason: [unintelligible] Heather: Sorry, what? Jason: They've had their time" (Hanna, Maddie, Heather, Jason, debrief 8/1/23).

Code	Sub-Code	Sub-Code	Definition	Example
		Staffing	inductive, in vivo. Tensions between the teaching team and the greater BAT, ATA, Connections staff about allocation of staff	"I'm also thinking about how, like the schedule sounds great. I'm just thinking about how I might be on run crew, so I don't know if they'll want me gone part of the time, but I think it'll work out for me to be there for All Together, do our rehearsal, and then work with them. But yeah, I was just thinking about that" (Jason, teaching team meeting, 7/28/23).
		Access Friction	deductive, descriptive. Tensions between one person's access needs and another's	"Chloe: Because the kids had disabilities, so that was when someone had to do something else, or just, like with the beads. That was hard because I got distracted and that was hard. Maddie: So there was some tension between their access needs and your access needs? Chloe: Yeah" (Chloe and Maddie, interview, 8/11/23).
	Reflecting	Celebrating	inductive, process. Celebrating moments of joy in reflection	"Hanna: I thought in high school, I just remembered I wanted to have mentioned, Ashley looked so happy when we were doing the dance every single time. Just the biggest smile on her face. We were doing the in and out thing. She was really excited about it and actually really happy. So. Heather: She also smiled really huge right before the fast slow. We were trying to go on either fast or slow. I feel like this is the first time I really saw her smile that big before, so that was really cool. Yeah, I agree. Troy also did a huge smile at one point. It was when we finished the dance and they had their hands up and we were about to bow. He just had the biggest smile of enjoyment and pride on his face. So it was really cool" (Hanna, Heather, debrief, 8/1/23).
		Reframing challenges	inductive, process. Seeing challenges as catalysts for creative problem solving	"Hanna: Yeah. Mark would probably enjoy props, say props. Yeah. ^ this is a reference to how Mark brought in a red crayon attached to a stick at the beginning of class and was into stabbing himself with it and dying dramatically." (Hanna, my commentary, Debrief 6-28). "Heather: Yeah, I feel like he also does well with like tactile things. So having stuff for him to even maybe prop creation or making something where he has materials. Hanna: That's a good idea. That's a good idea" (Heather, Hanna, teaching team meeting, 7/7/23).

Code	Sub-Code	Sub-Code	Definition	Example
		Recognizing contributions	inductive, descriptive. Identifying and recognizing what individuals contributed to a team effort and/or sharing feelings of admiration or pride in their actions.	"I loved when the game wasn't really being passed around person to person. You just said, why don't we just all do the sound and movement at the same time? That was, I hadn't even thought of that in that moment. And I love that you just threw that out because I was feeling a little bit, I'm not sure if this is going to work for everybody. So that was a great, "Yes, and" problem solving. Yeah" (Heather, debrief, 6/28/23).
		Novel experiences	inductive, descriptive. Reflections on learning from trying something new that might have been uncomfortable at first.	"So my impressions of the experience, I guess it was a really new experience for me. Something that I wasn't entirely confident in being at first. I mean, it sounded very interesting and it sounded fun, but I was kind of unsure of my capability to engage in a group of people, a group of neurodivergent people or people with disabilities. And at first it was kind of overwhelming, but everybody was really, really sweet and they seemed really engaged in what we were doing, and that's the first step to getting something done is if everybody's engaged" (Aadhya, interview, 8/11/23).
Reimagining "High Quality Theater"	Product vs. process		inductive, versus. Direct or implied contrast between investing in the process of creating art and investing in the final product's artistic quality	"It's so funny to hear people talk about BAT as a product oriented thing. Cause this has always been my place of process first, which is, like especially coming. I think this is a very product first area. I grew up in a very product first culture. And I think that this was always my like, oh no, it's all about the process" (Hanna, teaching team meeting, 7/14/23).
	Moving the goalposts vs. changing the game		inductive, versus. Direct or implied contrast between lowering expectations and expanding them.	"I totally do have a response to that though actually, because remember you were talking before about how you don't like the idea of the goalposts being moved in this way that's like the expectation for the ATA show is "lesser" and just the expectations for what makes it good being less than. And I think that's what I like about this idea of framing it, is just having different goals for this show. Because I don't know, to me it's not on this, I'm a very visual person. It's not on this bar of the standards are usually up here and then we're moving them. It's just sort of like everything is its own different thing" (Hanna, interview, 8/16/23).

Code	Sub-Code	Sub-Code	Definition	Example
	Genuine admiration vs. pleasant surprise		inductive, versus. Direct or implied contrast between genuine appreciation for someone's aesthetic contributions and patronizing appreciation for what they did *despite* their identities (i.e., "that was actually good")	"Yeah. It was genuine impressiveness instead of, they weren't even, it wasn't even being pleasantly surprised. It was like being straight up. Wow. Impressive" (Emir, interview, 8/13/23).
	Cultivating community buy-in		inductive, process. Taking actions to help community members outside of a creative process understand its underlying principles, meanings, and methods, so they can better assess quality	"And I just think when people are exposed to more kinds of theater, they understand. That's like what the high schoolers, I think they probably understood. They probably knew what kind of show they were getting. And that show is students on stage coming up with really cool imaginative things and then acting on them in really fun imaginative ways. And that's what happened. And that makes it good theater because we hit the benchmarks. And I think the high schoolers are aware of that, and they know that the point of the story is not necessarily the same point as their story, and like, that's totally fine" (Hanna, interview, 8/16/23).
	Artists		inductive, descriptive. Teacher talk, writing, or reflection evidences a view of all students (or an individual student) as an artist, storyteller, or both.	"I don't quite understand this game design, but I'm sure it's awesome" (Hanna, teaching team meeting, 7/7/23).
	Processes	Flexibility	inductive, descriptive. Describes a flexible approach to curriculum, space, movement, modes of participation, etc.	"Heather: How do we feel about students sitting in the audience if they get tired of sitting on stage or want to, Maddie: I'm fine with that. Heather: I think, I feel like that's a good, because that way they can watch what's happening" (Heather, debrief, 8/1/23).
		Accessibility	Inductive, descriptive. Accessibility is a central consideration within theater education.	"Dylan P arrives, and Hanna invites him to sit on a yellow dot between her and Jason. Kate's aide brings her beanbag, iPad, and beads over. Miles comes over with his laptop, and Dylan P's aide pulls up a chair to sit behind him with an iPad. Kate joins" (Maddie, session 8 recording memo).

Code	Sub-Code	Sub-Code	Definition	Example
		Ensemble	inductive, in vivo. Comes from the theatrical concept of ensemble. Individuals work together (doing different things) within equitable reciprocal relationships towards a shared goal.	"Rose: I feel like I have recognition in theater, like, yeah that. Maddie: What does that mean? Having recognition in theater? Rose: As in like, I feel like I'm recognized. In like, "Oh, you're a part of this."" (Rose and Maddie, Connections story circle 1).
	Productions	Joy	Inductive, descriptive. Joy (for the creative team OR both the creative team and the audience) is offered as a marker of a high quality production.	"But I think that's why they loved our show so much is that they finally got to have a break from this grueling ass show, and were able to sit down and relax, even if their show was right after, because they knew that they had put the work in, and it was time for them to sit back in the audience and enjoy. So I think that is also what makes good theater is being able to give the audience a break and being able to help the audience escape" (Jason, interview, 9/6/23).
		Achieving goals	Inductive, descriptive. Achieving individual or ensemble goals is offered as a marker of a high quality production.	"Maddie: if you could dream a beautiful dream of what this show is for those students, what would you want them to walk away with having or feeling? Or what would you want the experience to be like for them? Jason: That they achieved something that they wanted to do. If they had a goal for themselves, that they achieved that too. So even if that goal was as simple as being on stage and making it to the end of the show that they did it, and knowing that they have people in their corner. And that BAT is always an open space for them to be there and to have fun, that's successful for me. Having fun... and achieving goals. Yeah" (Maddie and Jason, interview, 7/17/23).

Code	Sub-Code	Sub-Code	Definition	Example
		Difference as value add	Inductive, descriptive. Differences between people (including disabilities and needed accommodations) are framed as a creative asset (it either makes the process/ product better or more fun) rather than a challenge.	"Oh, one of my favorite things I didn't mention. I really, really liked Max's letter board. I thought that was one of the coolest parts of the show. I think that probably was my favorite part of the whole show. And you mentioned this during the process too, so it's not new, but I thought what was so cool about that too is that A, he completely came up with it, which was cool. I think it's easy to watch then be like, oh, someone wrote a line that was like haha refund and gave it to him to do. And it was like, no, he fully just spelled out refund when we were doing the improv activity, which was so cool. But you mentioned that it added to the timing. I thought it's, it's funny because of the way that he communicated it and I thought that was cool. It's a way to incorporate that very organically into the show, and make the message stronger. And yeah, it was also just really funny. It was hilarious. It was so funny. I laughed every time, people came up to me after and said they enjoyed that too. I thought it was so funny" (Hanna, interview, 8/16/23).

Pedagogies of Accompaniment

Code	Sub-Code	Definition	Example
Engaging with individuals as artists	Building relationships	inductive, descriptive. The value and practice of putting relationships first and finding joy/ meaning in relationships	" I didn't have to force myself to be a certain way. I didn't have to force them to be a certain way. I could just show that I could support them and I would be there for whatever they wanted to try." (Aadhya, interview, 8/11/23). "We came in with the goal of putting on a play, but to do that, you first need to learn who everybody is and what they feel comfortable doing, and then you can work on ideas and brainstorming." (Aadhya, interview, 8/11/23).

Code	Sub-Code	Definition	Example
	Reframing engagement	inductive, process. Thinking about engagement in more expansive ways than those afforded by white nondisabled norms of theater education	"I, it's fun to do the little side parts of it that aren't necessarily the storytelling because I think that that is fun and is way to include everybody and everything. And Emilia was saying that too. She seemed to be really excited about the fact that we were, we had spaces for the other kids who didn't necessarily want to act on stage kind of thing to still be involved in a way that was actually meaningful, which is cool. And still falls under everything" (Hanna, teaching team meeting, 7/21/23).
	Students' ideas at the core	inductive, descriptive. The practice of centering a student's ideas, interests, and perspectives in designing and teaching curriculum	"So yeah, just creating a space for kids to pursue what they want to try and to not hold them back and to help them learn and to help me learn what I can do to support them" (Aadhya, interview, 8/11/23).
Bringing stories to life in interaction	Welcoming students' communities	inductive, descriptive. The practice of including a given student's trusted teachers, caregivers, and friends to better support them	"I think for people that had support, I thought that was helpful as well, because I think there's some kids where it was a little bit easier to figure out maybe ways to get them back engaged and some that were a little harder. And then you can rely on these people that kind of know them better to not do it for you but work with you to. It is just like if you know a kid, you know what gets them engaged. And that's a really helpful thing. And I don't think I'd ever really worked with people with support before. That was actually a good thing as well as working, not with a person in between because that's definitely not what it is, but working as a group of three and understanding I'm bringing the theater piece, this supports bringing the, I know this human really well piece and then how can you merge those to make it good for that other person?" (Hanna, interview 8/16/23).
	Memory/advocacy partners	inductive, descriptive. Helping capture, remember, and advocate for students' creative contributions	"I felt like my main thing was not only to just take them to their classes and to make sure that they were understanding what they were doing. It was to make sure that if they had an idea that it was represented, and if they necessarily didn't feel comfortable coming up to a staff member that I was there and I could pass their idea along. Or if they needed me for something, that I was always there to support them. And I felt like that's very similar to what we did at All Together School." (Aadhya, interview, 8/11/23).

Code	Sub-Code	Definition	Example
	Extending opportunities	inductive, process. Using what is known about a student to offer them opportunities for engagement	"Keep giving them the chance. That's a big thing. If you take away the opportunity because they weren't ready at a certain point, bad, no, don't do that. If they didn't feel ready at certain points, don't take away the opportunity. Give them the opportunity to do it again and again and again until they feel comfortable doing it." (Emir, interview, 8/13/23).
	Offering material supports	inductive, process. Bringing in physical materials to support a student's storytelling (i.e., paper, pens, scarves, props, costumes, sound effects, etc.)	"Next step-- we arrange dots as if they are platforms in a video game. Lisa asks Mark to show us how the dots should be arranged. Mark says he needs his map. He remembers there was a picture. While I'm pulling up the photo, Heather says, "We're awaiting Mark's artistic vision. From his map" (Maddie, session 4 recording memo).
	"Yes and..."	inductive, in vivo. Saying "yes" to and extending one another's creative contributions	"Well, I help them build on their ideas. If they drew something or if they talked to me about something, I would extend on that. I'd be like, so the theater saying "Yes, and" I would engage in that and make sure that they felt free to talk about their ideas and they didn't feel like they would be shut down and then act on them" (Aadhya, interview, 8/11/23).
Creating a vessel for collective creativity	Creativity within structure	inductive, descriptive. Making choices about structure and/or organization of an artistic process or product that support students in presenting their art/ telling their story and creates the conditions for students' ideas to live alongside one another.	"This is your show, it's not my show. I'm just here to help you put it all together. So this is my first pass at this, and if this doesn't work for you, we'll rework it" (Maddie, session 5 recording memo).

Code	Sub-Code	Definition	Example
	Collaborative problem solving	inductive, descriptive. Working with students and/or fellow educators to help them realize their creative visions within constraints (both logistical and aesthetic)	"I mean, I mentioned this before, but Mark really wanted to use the swords, and I think he has a very big vision for his part. And I was trying to walk this line of honoring that and also being realistic about what we can do, just time and space wise. And he seemed fine by the end. He seemed like a little disappointed at first because I think he just sees so clearly what he wants, and that's just not super doable at the moment. But I think he kind of finally came around to it at the end. But that was a little bit of a challenge because the other ones, they all know exactly what we've been kind of staging what they're seeing, it feels, and it hasn't been, there hasn't really been a mismatch like that on the other scenes. And he's just like, it's all in his head" (Hanna, teaching team meeting, 7/28/23).
	Following through	inductive, descriptive. Examples and nonexamples of students' ideas remaining central within some sort of shared artistic piece	"Eloisa comes over to touch base with me and lets me know she's going to send me the sound effects for the show. I say, "I just want to make sure that all their work makes its way into the show. This is the moment where she tells me about how Robert once sound designed for a show at his old school— he did all the work and they didn't include any of it" (session 8 recording memo).
Normalizing		Inductive, process. Communicating that new or different ways of working grounded in access and flexibility can and should be "normal"	"I think if I was here and I was younger and people came on, it's like, oh, the right thing to do is to make everyone feel very included. I think it all comes from these very positive places. But I think the older I get, the more I'm like, no, it's just doing theater. It's just normal and it's just a little bit more comfortable" (Hanna, interview, 6/30/23).

Appendix E

Director's Note from the We Move Together Program

Last summer, I was working as a teaching artist at BAT when students from All Together Academy (ATA), an inclusive school located in East Menlo Park, attended several access previews, sensory friendly versions of summer camp performances. After the last preview, I was approached by All Together's executive director. She expressed gratitude for the experience but asked us to consider – how might ATA students be included at BAT, not just in the audience, but onstage? Her question prompted reflection. By hosting access previews for all of our camp shows since 2015, we had increased accessibility for audience members with disabilities, but we'd also sent the message that the audience was where these folks belonged.

With support from the Harlan Hahn Endowed Fund, the Gatzert Child Welfare Fellowship, and the Center for the Study of Childhood Art at the University of Arkansas, I'm back at BAT this summer as a scholar in residence. A PhD candidate at the University of Washington Seattle, I'm interested in working towards theater education that centers Disability Justice, and, in doing so, demonstrates how people with disabilities belong everywhere— in the audience, onstage, backstage, and in leadership. It has been my privilege to work in partnership with BAT, ATA, and Connections (a local day program for adults with disabilities) this spring and summer to investigate how such theater education might take shape. The performance you're about to see represents a small step forward – a movement towards a future we're dreaming up together.

With support from myself, BAT teaching artist Heather, Connections client Chloe, BAT high school interns Emir, Aadhya, Jason, and Emi, and BAT alumna and volunteer Hanna, ATA students collaboratively created this play. We were inspired by the words and images of Disability Justice activists – Aurora Levins Morales, Patty Berne, Kelly Fritsch, Anne McGuire, and Eduardo Trejos – contained in the book, *We Move Together*. Some of these you'll see and hear in our performance. Throughout our artistic process, we followed three guiding principles, developed with influence from Disability Justice activist theory from Bay Area performance group Sins Invalid:



© Jen White
Johnson 2020

We are artists.

*Our work is beautiful.
Our art matters.*



© Lesley
Illingworth
2022

We are storytellers.

We have knowledge to share. We can share our stories in many ways.



© Kelly Fritsch,
Anne McGuire,
Eduardo Trejos
2021

We move together.

By making art and sharing stories with one another, we can transform the world.

Students began by creating a collage of all of their ideas for the show. From there, we grouped our ideas into twelve active verbs, actions we could take together. We then improvised scenes, songs, and dances based on these verbs. From these fragments and select lines from the *We Move Together* picture book, we assembled and rehearsed a script, adding props, costumes, and other design elements along the way. And we did all of this in just an hour a week, for 6 weeks! Just yesterday, we put everything together on stage at BAT.

We Move Together! will not and should not look like any play that you've seen before, at BAT or elsewhere. Rather than evaluate it against your past theatrical experiences, I encourage you to take it in, let it wash over you. Listen deeply to what these young artist-storytellers have to say and get curious about how they say it. Know that this play represents an important step towards inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility in theater education, but just a step. We're all learning, making mistakes along the way. Thanks for coming with us on the journey.

Maddie Zdeblick
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IDEA Coordinator, BAT