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THE PERFORMING ARTS: AN EQUALIZER IN EDUCATION  
FOR ALL STUDENTS, A TEACHING ARTIST'S PERSPECTIVE

A Thesis Presented

by

Annalisa Ledson

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Education  
Specializing in Interdisciplinary Studies

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis explores the topic of performing arts integration in public education from the perspective of a teaching artist. The writing is comprised of a series of personal narratives woven together with scholarly references addressing education policy, applied behavior analysis, inequities in exclusionary practices and Autism Spectrum Disorder research. The intention is to draw awareness to the accessible role of teaching artists in public schools, the benefits of performing arts integration in education, and potential education policy shifts that could allow for students to learn empathy, vulnerability and sense of belonging. These narratives are used to support my position that if students learn these transferable skills, regardless of their socio-economic status, physical or mental abilities, they will be able to gain access to a more equal educational experience.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I am thankful for my endlessly supportive family who is loving, patient, understanding, generous and makes me laugh. I would be lost if not for my friends who have listened, encouraged, questioned, inspired, performed and taught by my side. Full of gratitude for the hundreds of students who taught me endless lessons. I am grateful for the people who trusted me to teach those children. I am indebted to my dutiful committee members who have taught and guided me through this writing process. Overall, I'm thankful for all of the educational opportunities that I have had over the course of my life that have led me to this point. I am thankful for the possibilities that lie ahead.

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## CHAPTER 1: GETTING TO KNOW YOU

### 1.1. Introductions

*It's a very ancient saying  
But a true and honest thought  
That if you become a teacher  
By your pupils you'll be taught  
As a teacher I've been learning  
You'll forgive me if I boast  
And I've now become an expert  
On the subject I like most  
Getting to know you  
(Hammerstein & Rodgers, 1953)*

In the 1953 musical, *The King and I* by Rodgers and Hammerstein, the lead character, Anna, travels across the world to teach a group of children. The pupils and the teacher do not appear to have very much in common at the start, but as the story unfolds, the audience sees how much both parties learn from each other. “If you become a teacher, by your pupils you’ll be taught” (Hammerstein & Rodgers, 1953), is a lyric that sings true for me, as well as Anna’s journey in this musical. My pupils have taught me a great deal about the importance of arts integration in education, what it means to be an advocate, the potential for research opportunities in the classroom and ultimately how to learn and teach the value of empathy, sense of belong and vulnerability.

In this chapter I will introduce myself, Scholarly Personal Narrative writing, and Teaching Artistry. Throughout the course of this thesis, I will address matters of performing arts education, inequalities in the United States education system and some potential ways that individuals and communities can best support students in successful

educational careers and beyond. I can only speak to my own experiences and the research that I have done. I acknowledge that as one person, my perspective has limitations and I cannot attempt to summarize beyond my own experiences. My goal is to share the stories that have moved me to action while hopefully finding areas of resonance with you, the reader. I cannot get to know you through the exchange of reading and writing, the same way that a performer never truly knows who is sitting in the audience. I am striving to imagine what would garner applause, laughs, tears, gasps or sighs from an audience of educators, teaching artists, school administrators, leaders in education, parents and students. Not every chapter is for everyone, but hopefully the themes of empathy, sense of belonging and vulnerability will sing through.

In attempting to introduce myself, I must acknowledge all of the interdisciplinary parts of myself. In school settings I am an arts educator, teaching artist, student advocate, teacher ally, connection maker, planner, wing-it-on-the day-of-er, a person who encourages everyone to take a deep breath and needs reminders to take deep breaths myself. On stage, I am performer, storyteller, actor, singer, dancer and casual comedian. Behind the scenes, I am a choreographer, producer, director, and a community creator. If you know me personally, you know that I am a fierce friend, a dutiful daughter, a whimsical wife, cousin, niece, outgoing at parties, and full of curiosity. In the moment of writing this thesis, I am an academic author.

## **1.2. Scholarly Personal Narrative**

Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) writing allows me to share my experiences as a teaching artist while connecting the themes to larger issues within education. After

witnessing a great deal of inequity in New York City public schools, I was inspired to go to the heart of the issue. I wanted to learn more about education policies, practices and overall structures that have led to the current state of schooling in relationship to the students that I was teaching. I wanted to do more for students than celebrate them on stage in musicals, I wanted to ensure that those opportunities remained part of all students' education.

In order to do more, I needed to learn more. I was thrilled to find an Interdisciplinary Studies program at the University of Vermont which allowed me to take courses of relevance with professors who would field my questions and persistent desire to embed performing arts into public education. As I made connections within my courses, I was able to use SPN writing as an additional means of collaboration of stories and topics through themes. Etymologically, a theme (from the Greek and Latin, *thema*), is a proposition that holds everything in place. Dr. Robert Nash aptly reminded me that musically, a theme is the principal melody in a composition; a simple or complex tune which gives meaning to the variations in a composition. In theatre playwrighting, this is called a through-line. In choreography the term theme is also applicable when referring to movements that hold everything in place during the dance.

In order to find my themes, I had to do some digging. Nash defines SPN in four parts: pre-search, me-search, re-search and we-search (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p. 5). Before my fingers hit the keyboard and the words scrolled across the page, my pre-search began in the actions of my daily routines as a teaching artist. I'm fortunate that many of the magical moments of interacting with the students, classroom teachers and

administrators of the school were memorable and had lasting impacts on my day to day. Due to my predilection for verbal processing, much of my pre-search occurred over dinner with my husband or with friends at the bar, recounting the day's events. In the retelling, I began to notice how passionate I really was about these students, some of whom I barely knew. Many of the student did not have voices to express their needs, goals and desires within the education system and that was upsetting.

As I rode the subway home, difficult interactions with school administrators would play back in my head; why was it this way? My pre-search led me to my topic of performing arts education integration in public schools. I realized that the population that I have experience working with is students with disabilities and students in low socio-economic districts. This led me to the question, what are some actions that teaching artists, educators, students and leaders can do to make a difference? Hopefully these changes would lead to larger policy changes. Because my pre-search inspiration fell in interactions with a variety of people, my writing is geared towards a variety of audiences and may change chapter to chapter (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p. 52).

Regarding me-search, Robert quotes Maya Angelou saying, "You can never leave home. You take it with you no matter where you go. Home is between your teeth, under your fingernails, in the hair follicles, in your smile... Home is in every sentence of your writing" (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p. 93). I felt great solace in the idea that home was with me and could be found in my writing. In the process of writing this thesis, I moved from New York City to Vermont. I was able to feel a sense of grounding in remembering and

reactivating these stories in conversation with scholarly texts. Writing allowed me to both ground my body in one place, as well as center and focus my wide range of ideas.

My teaching artist anecdotes are intrinsically wrapped, tangled and soaked in the importance of daring and clear leadership, strong choices in philosophy of education, and the irreplaceable significance of sharing art through public performance. These experiences have led me, somewhat unexpectedly, to an interest in research involving students with Autism and the positive outcomes for social and emotional behaviors through the performing arts. To aid in the parsing through of these rich areas, I was grateful to find wisdom from inspiring perspectives in a number of books, conversations, journal articles, and time to reflect.

I hope that in my writing the we-search, or universalizability of themes that I have chosen to focus on, come across to the readers. I've included stories involving confusing leadership decisions, individual triumphs, questioning of choices made and celebration. I hope that the actionable ideas are clear to the reader and cause them to consider performing arts education integration regardless of their field. If it were not for many conversations with school administrators, classroom teachers, fellow teaching artists, education program managers, principals and all of the other fascinating people who make these programs happen, I would not have any stories to tell. "We tell our stories to prove that we've lived, that we're still alive, and that we intend to live into some unknown future. Without our stories, our lives are without form or content" (Nash & Viray 2013, p. 67). These stories have very much informed and created my form and content and are shaping how I hope to continue to learn and live more stories like these.

All of the stories included are from my memory. Every name used is a pseudonym. Occasionally, stories are a composite of similar happenstances. Everything is true, as true as a story can be through the memory of one individual. As a musical theater teaching artist, all of the epigraphs are moments in my scholarly musical, a burst of song to emphasize a point. Each song holds significant meaning to me, whether it be linked to a specific realization or to one of the students who sang it in my class. The same way that authors quote the great philosophers of the past, these composers and lyricists underscored many of my days so it only seemed appropriate for their words to weave through this piece of SPN writing.

### **1.3 Teaching Artistry**

*Getting to know you  
Getting to know all about you  
Getting to like you  
Getting to hope you like me  
Getting to know you  
Putting it my way  
But nicely  
You are precisely  
My cup of tea  
(Hammerstein & Rodgers, 1953)*

Being a teaching artist is my cup of tea, it also allows me to put education my way, and usually, nicely. I am a teacher in the sense that I stand in front of a class of students in a school and do my best to teach. However, I'm not a certified teacher. I am an artist in the fields of dance and musical theater. Over my half decade of balancing these two worlds of teacher and artist, at times I've struggled to truly define what it is I do for a job; whether this be to family members or to the Internal Revenue Service when

I complete my taxes. To reflect the general public's befuddlement with the term is the somewhat reductive and humorous Wikipedia definition:

Teaching artists, also known as art teachers or artist educators or community artists, are professional artists who supplement their incomes by teaching and integrating their art form, perspectives, and skills into a wide range of settings, such as by showing kids how to make clay mugs with faces in local libraries and elementary schools (Teaching Artist, 2019).

While I do not know anything about ceramic expressions, I do teach students how to use their own faces through musical theater and dance integration in public school settings.

Arts Learning Consultant, and editor of the *Teaching Artist Journal*, Eric Booth defines a teaching artistry as: “a practicing professional artist with the complementary skills, curiosities and sensibilities of an educator, who can effectively engage a wide range of people in learning experiences in, through, and about the arts” (Booth, 2003, p. 5). This definition resonates with me as it addresses the equitable nature of providing arts education in this manner. Teaching artists are assigned to multiple schools per week for varying amounts of time during the school year. This allows and demands for “engaging a wide range of people in learning experiences” (Booth, 2003, p. 9) and in turn, provides a wide range of perspectives into how, why and when students are given access to the performing arts. Additionally, since a teaching artists are implementing their own life experiences from outside of educational settings, they are often more adaptable and able to find means of engagement for all participants.

There is a debate as to whether Teaching Artistry is a practice or a profession; often this is a personal decision based on the individual and their relationship with the work. Daniel Renner, the Director of Education at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, says that the term “is becoming a professional designation born out of a professional dedication” (Booth, 2003, p. 8). Booth goes on to point out the etymology of the term profession is the Latin, meaning to acknowledge in public. This was one of the purposes of starting the journal, to share the stories of teaching artistry publicly as a means of legitimizing it as a profession. For me, I began simply as a practicing teaching artist and grew to claim it as my profession.

I am not alone, the country is full of teaching artists, sharing their passion and craft with students who potentially would not be exposed to it otherwise. In the following chapters I will address the complexities of being a visitor in a new school and the cultural challenges that it can present. In the same way that many of the racial and cultural tensions illustrated in the 1953 musical *The King and I* are problematic to modern day audiences, similar challenges can occur in teaching artistry. These tensions and differences are not always negative, but in addressing the inequities of public schools, it is important to acknowledge. I want to share my teaching artist experiences to open up a continuous conversation about the value and necessity for arts education in all public schools while also examining the complexities of leadership and the importance of public performance for all students.

### **1.3.1. Musical Theater**

Why musical theater? I am focusing on the performing arts rather than visual art, another very valuable element of education, because I believe that the performing arts provide an inherent link to public celebration of accomplishment. There is absolutely merit and joy to be found in the celebration of a public and everlasting mural or sculpture created by students, but that is a different experience and serves different purposes. As I will go on to explain in following chapters, the cognitive development that occurs in multiple areas of the brain when engaging in singing, acting and dancing simultaneously are extremely beneficial. The social and personal growth that occurs during the rehearsal process and the resulting cognitive and behavioral improvements is unique and significant for students to experience. The majority of the teaching artistry that I've had the opportunity to share with students is through musical theater. This multiple modality discipline is an extremely effective means of educating and engaging students with disabilities. This is because singing, dancing and acting provides means of expression and storytelling for many students regardless of their abilities.

I had a teacher who said that musicals happen because the character's emotions are so strong that they need to break into song, or they'll burst. That image always stuck with me, odd as it is. In real life, people do not typically burst into song, but why don't we question it in musicals? Why is it an acceptable form of storytelling? My theory is that the sing-able scenarios in musical theatre often pull an empathic trigger which allow for deep human connection.

Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio explains the science behind what happens physically to humans as organisms when we hear delightful music: emotions transform and “visceral operations are harmonized” meaning that there is a synergy between the body and the nervous system to allow for image production. “Our imagination becomes more fluid; positive images are favored over negative ones; one’s mental guard is lowered even as, interestingly our immune responses possibly made stronger” (Damasio 2019, p. 109). More simply, music makes humans feel better, more energized, more imaginative, more positive and, bonus, less likely to get sick! That’s a lot of reasons to burst into song.

#### **1.4. Education Equalizer**

*Getting to know you  
Getting to feel free and easy  
When I am with you  
Getting to know what to say  
(Hammerstein & Rodgers, 1953)*

In my striving to understand all of the inequities that I saw in the public schools I had a lot to research and question. Therefore in “getting to know what to say,” regarding education and equity, I went back to the source of this initial concept, American education reformer, Horace Mann.

Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, — the balance-wheel of the social machinery... It does better than to disarm the poor of their hostility towards the rich: it prevents being poor (Mann, 1839, p. 17).

The construct that Mann presents, social machinery, causes one to consider the amount of work, time and effort needed to create a machine. A machine implies that once it starts running, there will be little to cause it to stop it. However, there is maintenance required for any machine. In many communities that I've observed and been a part of, in order to offer equal opportunities for students, a tune-up in the education cog in the balance-wheel of society is required. By putting the concept of the great equalizer into context of Mann's original quote, he addresses the totality of the outcomes of education; the balance-wheel of social machinery as a means of closing a wealth gap and, in turn ending social clashes and hostility. In this regard, equality of opportunity means that all students, regardless of class, race or ability in any part of the country could have access to an educational system that allows them to learn.

My personal experiences have given me the opportunity to observe many different schools, but that is still a limited perspective given the size of our country. There may be a macro definition of equal opportunity which would allow all of the students in the United States to fall under it, but from what I have seen and experienced, that is not the case. I've worked as a teaching artist in all five boroughs of the New York City public schools, in rural Maine, and Vermont. In all of these different places, I've seen that there are simply too many factors that prevent students from overarching equality in our current education system. From the range of standards for educators, types of facilities, administrative support, curricular expectations and simply space; the variations are vast and complicated. This is not to say that there are no equal opportunities within the current education system in the United States. I believe that as a

country there are a number of standards and expectations that are easy to take for granted. However, there are a number of students in our country who do not have access to them nor do they know the extent of the difference between their education and others.

Public schools can ensure and preserve opportunities by prioritizing students and their learning beyond all else. To me, that means making sure that the public school is entwined with community decision making, planning and budgeting. The accessibility of a public school is contingent on its physical facilities. This means schools must have safe options for traveling to and from school, ADA compliant facilities, and classrooms that are age-appropriate for students and their imaginations. All of these factors contribute to equality of opportunity. A public school should be a space where students feel welcomed, heard, encouraged and supported through structure, joy and curiosity. In that same regard, I believe that families should feel welcomed to be in dialogue with the school and its staff and this means having accommodations for language, respect for work schedules and a welcoming environment to voice concerns. I'm sure that there are a number of other ways that public schools can ensure and preserve opportunities, and I also can see how under other definitions of equality of opportunity, some of these stipulations would not apply or adversely a list of others could be employed.

I believe a piece of the equal opportunity equation is performing arts integration in education. By giving students another means of learning beyond traditional seated classroom exercises as well as an opportunity to be applauded by the community, there is an inherent sense of belonging that is transferred through the performing arts.

Through these experiences, students learn empathy, self-confidence, accountability, leadership and social skills that are rich and vibrant. Students who have access to the performing arts through their public school have a different kind of educational experience than those who do not. The priority of performing arts integration in education needn't be with the end goal of proficiency of skills learned, but rather the additional social and emotional skills that are learned in the process. When school principals are powerless in what they can provide their students due to systemic issues, giving students the chance to perform in school is an equalizer that can cost very little.

Part of why I wanted to study education in Vermont is because of the state's support and policies that allow for equitable and inclusive education processes. When I was teaching in New York City, students with developmental disabilities were often held to different academic standards with varying opportunities to interact with students outside of the district. I will expand upon these inequities in later chapters. This kind of educational and physical separation, while with well-intended purposes, does not allow for equality of opportunity for these students.

Educators, thank you for all that you do! May this be a moment to consider incorporating performing arts into your already wonderful classrooms and perhaps you already do. Teaching artists, I hope that you see your worth and power in the classroom as a positive agent of change and empathy. I also hope that you see your potential as a collaborator in education and scientific research. To anyone else who has ever taken a risk by throwing seemingly disparate ingredients into a pot and hoping for the best, thank you for coming to the table.

## CHAPTER 2: ONE MOMENT

### 2.1. One Moment Towards Meaning Making

*It's about one moment  
That moment you think you know where you stand  
And in that one moment  
The things that you're sure of slip from your hand  
And you've got one second  
To try to be clear, to try to stand tall  
But nothing's the same  
And the wind starts to blow  
And you're suddenly a stranger  
In some completely different land  
And you thought you knew  
But you didn't have a clue  
(Brown, 1997)*

In the process of writing about the themes that I hold so dear; arts education, teaching artistry, advocacy, empathy and vulnerability, I realized that while all of these issues were a part of me, one instance sent me on a path of pursuing how to make meaning in my life. An incident occurred and my trajectory as a person in society changed from what I had thought it would be. I became a student of healing, patience and eventually resilience. The sentiments in Jason Robert Brown's song, *A New World*, resonate with me immensely. The sense of perceived stability and personal agency can change instantly leaving dread and doubt in its wake. Fortunately, I ended up in a completely different land with a new purpose and drive.

I was riding my bike home from work at night, turning onto my street, and a car struck me. The bike was bent in half, the windshield was shattered, I was concussed, conscious but not aware of my surroundings. Fortuitously, a friend was arriving at that

moment, saw what happened, called 911 and rode with me to the hospital. Rapidly, a flimsy neck brace went around my throat and as I came out of the concussion, I started to realize that I was hurt. A haze in and out of consciousness, I continued to discover intense, blinding pain in my neck, my skull, my ribs, my hip, my knee and my ankle. I don't know how long I was in the ER waiting room on the stretcher.

When I was twenty-five years old, I found myself in a neck brace for many months. The neck brace not only helped my vertebra to successfully fuse together, it limited me, gave me time for pause, gave me time to look inward, for which I'm grateful. Many things have changed since that final Velcro rip-off release. However, during that time, I lost my sense of balance in the truest, deepest sense of the word. Since that point I have been taking new steps to discover a new centering, a new balance.

In the hospital, I had no idea how bad my injuries were. I needed someone for every tiny movement, I was completely immobile. I remember feeling a dull panic that I had lost every part of what had made me, me, my authentic self. In Jennifer Jang's words on being authentic she states, "Practicing the art of asking for help brings up concerns of appearing incompetent and needy" (Nash & Jang, 2015, p. 143). Incompetent and needy were the words ringing through my head every second of those days in the ER and eventually the ICU. I had no choice but to ask, sometimes plead for help during those weeks. In moments of relief, I remember cracking jokes with the doctors about the Celtics as I went through multiple scans, in and out of the CT scan tube like a slide whistle. In those moments of stillness, when my lack of mobility was required, I felt the most calm. I was able to do what was being asked of me.

The helmet had saved my life. The cracks at the base of my skull were remarkably hairline fractures. The fracture in my C2 vertebra of my spine was centimeters away from leaving me paralyzed or, best case, in a 'halo' which would have involved drilling holes into my skull. Instead, I got my dark green neck brace with a little, yellow dial which tightened in a few clicks. It was scheduled to be on for four months, a whole winter of healing. Once all of this set in, how lucky I was, how much worse it could have been, I cried and cried. Fortunately, the brace did a very good job of keeping my head in place, my neck aligned, and a gentle rest for my chin. However, when I cried, the soft foam cradling my chin would get soggy and wet, and it would stay wet. The more I cried, the longer I would be trapped in what became a soggy chin diaper. I figured out early in this process that any of the thoughts of not healing, the thoughts of never dancing again, the thoughts of always being cared for; every one of those 'always' and 'never' ideas had to be pushed away. It was simply physically too uncomfortable to consider those hyperbolic, future-based notions. So, I did my best not to consider them. I was alive, the helmet had made sure of that.

The hardest part of wearing the neck brace and using the walker on wheels was feeling so incredibly unlike myself. The physical limitations put me totally out of balance with who I had believed I was. I am an active person, I struggle with sitting for long periods of time, my days are full of moving quickly, moving purposefully, constantly. During those months with of recovery, the only real activity that I had was to go to my lawyer's office. I chose to walk the 2.5 miles, in the winter, with my walker and neck brace, concealed under a green scarf. It would usually take me the whole afternoon but I

would not want it any other way. Yes, it was painful, but so was everything else. It made me feel a sense of purpose and I was grateful to get fresh air and get moving. I think that I did that as a means of regaining a sense of balance, getting back to who I was. Nash and Jang (2015) defined one part of balance as, “Balance is seeking to fulfill our potential, no matter how great or small the obstacles might be that threaten to diminish us. Balance is not static; it is dynamic, fluid, and action-oriented” (p. 140). By walking to the lawyer’s office, I removed myself from a static state physically, allowing for a larger shift. I wasn’t aware of the shift. To be honest I will probably piece it together for a long time. I was subconsciously shifting away from my then current life of the actor-server-hustle; a part of myself that’s still there but has been hedged out of center stage. I began to find new elements of life that allowed me to feel like myself, a sense of authenticity, a sense of balance, even if that just meant independently getting myself from one place to another.

In retrospect, I can now see how physically demanding my days were before the accident. Auditioning, working a restaurant job, and babysitting, constantly rotating through my days, mornings into evenings. All parts of my day involved giving away parts of myself with little return, all competitive, rare stillness, rarely places where I felt any kind of agency or autonomy of self. All instances where it paid to be clever and quick but rarely thoughtful and purposeful. I was not, “living a compassionate life in conjunction with others” (Nash & Jang, 2015, p. 42). I was living a life *for* others in competition *with* others and ultimately putting my own sources of joy secondarily. Then I got the neck brace, and I started to realize that practically speaking, in the name of self-sustainability

and self-preservation, I wanted and needed more balance. I realized that my career, my vocation, how I spend my time, needed to look different. But I had no idea how or when to start that process. In the neck brace, there were days when I would just sit, feeling like I could not accomplish anything at all.

### **2.1.1. Healing in Rehearsal**

*Then you realize you didn't know anything  
Nobody told you the best way to steer  
When the wind starts to blow  
And you're suddenly a stranger  
All of a sudden  
Your life is different than you planned  
And you'll have to stay 'til you somehow find a way  
To be sure of what will be  
Then you might be free  
(Brown, 1997)*

Sometimes a kick in the pants is just what you need, and that was what NACHMO, January Challenge did for me (NACHMO dance). I had committed to choreographing a dance piece during the month of January months prior. January 2<sup>nd</sup> rolled around and I felt helpless, I hadn't *done* anything related to dance in the past two months, how could I begin to face a room of able-bodied dancers and create? The neck brace was to be strapped on until the end of February, the task of choreographing felt impossible. I didn't realize it at the time, but Brené Brown's definition of vulnerability's abilities rang true: "Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy and creativity. It is the source of hope, empathy, accountability and authenticity" (2015, p. 34). In my vulnerable state, I reached out to a dear friend, Kristin, who was able to provide the kind of deep empathy that I received.

Fortunately, Kristin had already been enlisted to be in said dance piece. Her story of resilience inspired me beyond measure. She had been on the path to be a professional ballerina when she was diagnosed with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis (Deiss, 2016). Kristin talked about the healing power of even just being in the same rehearsal room as other dancers, the power of visualizing yourself dancing and moving. She encouraged me to choreograph in the most supportive, empathetic way possible. So, I said yes. I got together two other friends and got into the studio. The rehearsals for the trio were beautiful. All three of them came into the room full of compassion and humor. There was such attention and physical listening from everyone that I left each rehearsal feeling lighter and brighter. Peter Ferrucci describes how I felt beautifully, “Empathy has been necessary to our survival since prehistoric times: Human beings can thrive only in community” (2019, p. 134). It was true, just being in the room with my community of three other dancers allowed me to thrive, to heal, to do something that was unexpected and fulfilling. An organization’s support, a friend’s encouragement and I was back to finding the balance of part of my identity during a time of great vulnerability. The process reinstated that I love to create dances, I belong in the studio, dancing brings me joy and creating requires bravery. I was forced to use creativity and new parts of my brain and body to create a dance. If I hadn’t been held accountable to create that dance, I do not know if I would have reached that level of authentic balance within myself. In embracing my vulnerability of the moment, I was able to achieve what felt impossible.

### **2.1.2. Becoming a Teaching Artist**

From that experience, on this path to “newness,” I wanted to keep making dances, all the time. I also wanted to take care of my body which meant cutting back on the eight hour restaurant shifts. I started applying to new day jobs. Eventually, many months of physical therapy later, I started my work as a teaching artist. I started teaching musical theater in an after school program. I was making up new dances every week for a small handful of second grade girls. We were singing at the top of our lungs. I felt really happy, pieces were falling together to form meaning in my life. It was starting to feel like the alignment of my spine and the alignment of my core values were falling into place.

From after-school classes, I then started with in-school performing art residencies. After a few months, I began working with students with disabilities. Engaging with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) through singing and dancing was not something that I would have ever thought I’d do, nor be capable of. For my first residency within District 75 in New York City, I entered the class, took a deep breath, and began the class like I would any group of students. The class started with many of the students running at full speed in circles needing physical restraint from paraprofessionals, but by the end of the class, we were all singing disco and moving together. Miguel shook my hand and said thank you, Kevin told me he’d keep practicing at home and DeShawn nodded at me and made eye contact. I was hooked. I could see the different kinds of growth and expansion that students were experiencing just by being in the room. Being newly attuned to my authentic self, vulnerability and empathy had allowed me to use

those skills towards education, towards community making through movement and storytelling.

To me, giving students a chance to be seen on a stage, to be applauded, to be physically active and confident in their own skin, is inherently human and powerfully healing. The performing arts go beyond traditional educational and medical practices. That kind of healing empowerment worked for my body and mind, and I've seen it do the same for these students. This is not to say that my students were injured or even in a state that needed to be healed in anyway, but rather there are other kinds of vulnerable and empathic muscles that can be flexed, stretched and strengthened for all students, regardless of ability. Through a series of incredibly fortunate events, I was able to find meaning through my healing, through my physical suffering to seek happiness and fulfillment in sharing what is important to me with others.

It was an incredible day in mid-January when I was told by the doctors that I could start a different kind of healing process, without a piece of plastic and foam holding up my head. The doctors were impressed, they said it was unusual, that I must have been taking very good care of myself. I believe whole heartedly that if I did not have a surge of positive people surrounding me, if I had succumbed to an immobile existence, if I had rejected the opportunity to create, to contribute, I could have easily fallen into despair. But through all of these experiences, and many more sources of love from others, I stayed afloat in a new equilibrium. Victor Frankl, Austrian neurologist and Holocaust survivor, aptly states, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's

own way” (Frankl, 1962, p. 91). I was fortunate to have the ability to choose my attitude of creativity and embracing the vulnerable situation that I was in. I’m fortunate to see students choosing happiness in difficult circumstances. I’m choosing to continue to share what I love in a new way, through writing. I chose to educate myself on how to best incorporate new knowledge and my new center of balance and gravity. And hey, Neck Brace! I’m grateful for our three months together. With you there, I physically couldn’t turn to look back. I remained aligned, facing forwards, with my eyes on the future while finding stillness and clarity in the present. The neck brace not only helped my vertebra to successfully fuse together, it limited me, gave me time for pause, gave me time to look inward, for which I’m thankful. Many things have changed since that final Velcro rip off release. However, during that time, I lost my sense of balance in the truest, deepest sense of the word. Since that point I have been taking new steps to discover a new centering, a new balance.

*A new world crashes down like thunder  
A new world charging through the air  
A new world just beyond the mountain  
Waiting there, waiting there  
A new world shattering the silence  
There's a new world I'm afraid to see  
A new world louder every moment  
Come to me, come to me!  
(Brown, 1997)*

### CHAPTER 3: MAKE THEM HEAR YOU

*And say to those who blame us  
For the way we chose to fight,  
That sometimes there are battles  
That are more than black or white  
(Ahrens & Flaherty, 1998)*

"Freedom, equality and opportunity, while first cousins are not all the same thing. Opportunity without equality will never lead to freedom. Virtuous teachers know better" (Rooks, 2017, p. 211). In writing about inequities in education, I must attempt to address the deep, seemingly impenetrable roots of racism which determine the kind of educational rights that students have access to. As Noliwe Rooks eloquently states in her book, *Cutting School: Privatization, Segregation and the End of Public Education*, opportunity alone will not lead to freedom for students if they are in an unequal educational system. I understand that I am arguing for an opportunity for access to the performing arts as a means of equalizing students' educational experience. This will not solve the larger issues that face the system in United States.

The majority of chapters in this thesis focus on students with disabilities, however, I did not want to leave out my experiences which allowed me to see the benefits of the performing arts for all students. In public school systems one can find segregation based on disability, just as there is segregation based on race. The Civil Rights Movement and the Disability Rights Movement are relatively recent in our nation's overall history and those implications for students continue to reverberate.

I am a white, able-bodied, neurotypical woman who has had the privilege to teach in all five boroughs of New York City. I taught in some of the most diverse

neighborhoods in the country with students from all over the world, all different cultures and experiences. I experienced the extremes of segregated schools, all students of Asian descent, all black students or all students with disabilities. I was teaching in those schools because of an inequitable system that required an outside resource, or opportunity, a teaching artist, to come to provide a service of arts education integration. This does not apply to all of NYC schools, some of which have full-time drama, music and dance teachers for all of their students. I was typically not being hired to teach at those schools. This is not to say that there were not also schools with dance teachers in low socioeconomic schools, but it was rare in my experience.

I hope to illuminate the address the complexities of being an outside educator entering a school community. While I am making the case that teaching artists can provide a much needed educational element of performing arts integration for schools which may not have the bandwidth to support a full time teacher to do so, I am also stating the complexities of that circumstance. Rooks points out,

In order to have any hope of moving forward, we - communities both of and not of color; those of us with wealth and those of us lacking it- will have to learn how to productively include conversations about race, inequality and the role of white supremacy, past and present in our education systems and thinking (Rooks, 2017, p. 16).

I hope to move forward and while the conversations are difficult, I want to engage in them. I will share some stories that address the complexities of being a teaching artist in segregated schools.

### **3.1. What are You Doing Here?**

Many educators and people have witnessed that racism, or even acknowledgement of race, is a learned behavior. With younger students, the issue of race rarely came up when I would enter the classroom. The only time I would be more aware would be when a non-white student would gently touch my blonde hair or ask me if I was sisters with the other white teacher. This innocent question happened pretty frequently at multiple schools. With older students, the racial context was more prevalent, “hey white lady, what are you doing here?” would not be uncommon.

At schools where I had the opportunity to get to know the students, sometimes they would excitedly teach me their own cultural dances from Haiti or Brazil. I’d make my best attempts at the complicated moves resulting in a big laugh. There were other, not laughable moments. Students would honestly ask me about if I thought that they could get into college, if they could audition for Broadway, if “someone like me can be a dancer.” I did my best to encourage them that yes, of course, they could do it, and I believe that. Were these often brief, perhaps impactful, not truly fully thought out moments racist? Was I, as a white woman, entering racially and culturally education systems different than my own participating in inequitable practices by being there? In the spirit of practicing empathy, vulnerability and my own sense of belonging, I have to question these truths.

Dr. Kendi, historian and author, defines racist ideas expansively: any idea that there is something inherently better or worse about any racial group. He goes on to say that there is no such thing as “not racist” ideas, policies or people, he argues, only racist

and antiracist ones (Schuessler, 2016). I do not think that as a white educator, I was ever attempting to present something ‘better’ to a group, however, a moment with a student caused me to reflect on this exact issue.

### **3.1.1. Why are you Teaching Us?**

I was teaching a middle school dance class; for the most part the majority of the students were engaged and dancing along, with a few exceptions. One of those exceptions was one student, Eric, who was lying down on the side of the classroom. The classroom teacher explained her extensive attempts to engage him in the class, but to no avail, she told me to not take it personally. I was demonstrating how to do a pirouette, a spin on one leg, to the rest of the class. As I spun around, my foot landed near Eric’s head which was on the ground. He lazily looked up and said, “Why are you coming in here with all these racist moves? Why are you trying to show us all of the stuff that we can’t do?” Oh. I was completely caught off balance by those questions.

My initial, internal response was along the lines of, “This movement has nothing to do with race. What do you mean you can’t do it? The rest of the class who are all different races are doing great!” and another thought, perhaps the most detrimental of all, I saw his apathy by not participating in the class. Fortunately, I did not say that out loud. However, my response was equally dismissive and unhelpful, something along the lines of, “Please get up and join the class,” and continued teaching.

To Eric’s credit, pirouettes are derived from ballet which originated in Europe and therefore is culturally considered more ‘white.’ That being said, in 2019 when I was teaching, pirouettes had been incorporated into a number of dance styles over the course

of centuries. Looking back, it would have been beneficial and incredibly necessary to have used that as an opportunity to talk to this student about why he felt alienated from the dance style, maybe his classmates did as well. Maybe my presence alone represented, “all the stuff we can’t do” as a result of the pervasive inequities that many of these students had experienced in their schooling.

I’ve played the scenario back countless times, and in my 20/20 teacher hindsight I thought of a number of responses. I could speak to balletic principles that have been used by athletes to improve balance, strength and stability. I could have shown him videos of the Alvin Ailey Dance Company, a dance company founded by an African-American man with world renowned performers (Ailey, 2019). However, these responses further highlight opportunities within unequal scenarios. The core of the issue lies in why Eric felt the need to lie on the floor in the first place, what his neighborhood was like, what his home was like, if he had breakfast that morning. Those are situations that far surpass a pirouette. Rooks asks, "Can teachers alone solve educational inequality? This questions lives at the heart of contemporary discussions about the role, race and background of teachers in low-income communities in the United States and abroad" (p. 210), she goes onto say that while they have the experiences, they are rarely asked to share them.

Teacher hindsight could be a central force in policy decision making, but it is not.

In a very different kind of scenario, Dr. Kendi has a moment that he plays back as well, a graduation speech he says used racial stereotypes as a means of advising students on what not to do after leaving high school. In an interview with the New York Times Dr. Kendi said, “Every time I listened, I felt embarrassed and ashamed, both personally and

because of the spectacle I created, with thousands of people cheering on these racist ideas” (Schuessler, 2016). After that moment with Eric, I thought back on performances that I had choreographed, music that I had chosen and conversations with students; had I created a spectacle? Had I unwittingly included too many balletic movements creating a circumstance that made traditionally culturally ‘white’ movements seem ‘superior’ to others? I hope not. Dr. Kendi goes on to say, “Racial inequalities are pervasive and persistent in every sector of society. If a person does nothing in the face of racial inequities that are pervasive, if they don’t challenge them, what are they doing?” (Schuessler, 2016, p. 1). In that light, I believe that a means of facing these inequities is by giving students an opportunity to learn what a pirouette is (because it is fun!) and then they can choose to make it their own, to never do it again, or to continue studying to be a professional ballerina. Access to all art forms is a means of non-prioritizing (or super-prioritizing) any of them.

I was grateful to find literature written by Gloria Ladson-Billings, her words illuminated and articulated the historic impact on the education system that I was coming in and out of every day. She states the magnitude of the issues and the inherent racism that separates African American students from the education that deserve as American citizens. “Burdened with a history that includes the denial of education, separate and unequal education, and relegation to unsafe, substandard inner-city schools, the quest for quality education remains an elusive dream for the African American community” (Ladson-Billings 2006, p. 4).

I have witnessed these kinds of substandard facilities that she describes, and I have heard the way that children speak, the questions that they ask that demonstrate how little they have learned in comparison the white students that I teach. In his Speech on Race, Barack Obama makes a point to discuss the education system as well, stating, “Segregated schools were and are inferior schools; we still haven't fixed them, 50 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*. And the inferior education they provided, then and now, helps explain the pervasive achievement gap between today's black and white students” (Obama, 2006). With these grim realities, which at the time of writing this are 14 years after his speech, some could argue these racial disparities are getting more extreme rather than being rectified or addressed through any kind of government policies.

To that end, to the magnitude that our country has been and in many ways is still and may continue to be divided, I argue for giving all students access to the performing arts. Beyond cultural opportunities for learning and sharing, it also gives students access to self-confidence and a chance to be heard. There are still means to reach a generation of students through joy, through tools of expression. Philosopher and educator Marietta McCarty speaks about her students, saying, “With little philosophizing, children reluctantly become aware of the dormant stereotypes nestled in their own psyches. And while they realize that there is no vaccine to prevent this illness in anyone, including themselves, they’ve expressed to me how eager they are to try to overcome prejudice” (McCarty 2006, p. 169). The performing arts can give students a means by which to learn through empathy how to overcome inherited prejudice. But the students need to learn how to name it first, how to name prejudice, their emotions, or a problem. This kind of

articulation is what I find coming up more and more as I strive to weave these skills into lesson plans in the future.

### **3.2. Naming Emotions**

Having the ability to identify emotions and feelings are at the root of acting and performing. The next story takes place at a school that is near to my heart. Two second grade boys did not know how to name their emotions and I could see, the emotion radiating from one of them was anger. The students were putting their shoes on between the seats of the auditorium. Before I could interrupt a conflict, one student had his small hands around neck of the other young boy. The other students were screaming, swarming, creating a circle around the two boys physically joined together. As I pushed through in an attempt to separate them, another physical fight had started on the other side of the room, involving kicking between two boys. This was one of my first residencies, I was shocked. I was using a voice that I did not even know that I had access to in order to control the situation. In the midst of my roaring, I looked around the room frantically. The classroom teacher slowly walked towards the students. She just shook her head. In that moment, it became clear that she had seen this before, maybe even earlier that day. Seeing students that young with that kind of access and readiness for a physical response was new to me, which exhibited my privilege. The teacher's complacency in the moment exhibited her experience.

Former President Obama addressed this issue as well saying, "That anger is not always productive...And to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races"

(Obama, 2008). In an effort to not wish anger away, it is my responsibility as an educator to understand the roots of this anger. Additionally, non-white students who are classified as having disabilities are also experiencing racism and internal and external anger and negative emotions.

While it is not a solution to the problem, we can teach students to identify their anger. If a student has learned the capability to name their emotion, taking that extra internal step before the external step towards violence, it may prevent it. For an educator this can look like asking a student, why are you running around? If they can answer, “I feel riled up because all the other kids are” then they are taking a step to notice their actions in reaction to others. I am not educated in childhood development and I understand that these steps of cognition and recognition happen with maturity. However, if students are not given emotional tools early, the problems can increase towards more violence, or potentially an apathic student lying on the floor. Of course, anger is not the only difficult emotion that students are navigating. Finding ways to name those emotions, finding ways to address the outside stimuli, all of that is part of the larger contribution to emotional intelligence and empathy.

### **3.2.1 Leadership**

*Your sword could be a sermon  
Or the power of the pen  
Teach every child to raise his voice  
And then my brothers, then  
Will justice be demanded by ten million righteous men?  
Make them hear you  
(Ahrens & Flaherty, 1998)*

If we "teach every child to raise his voice" with the ability to name their emotions, identify the emotions of those around them, they are more likely to have the ability to be

a leader. Brené Brown addresses this in her book, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.* (2018). In order to effectively lead you must be able to be what she identifies as a Riser, meaning rise above your emotionally driven responses while maintaining a sense of curiosity about them. She states, “Risiers are connected to their bodies, and when emotion knocks, they feel it and they pay attention” (Brown, 2018 p. 67). Even if the emotion that a student is experiencing is anger, having the ability to pay attention to it makes the difference. She goes on to say, “Instead of feeling our emotions and getting curious, we offload them onto others. We literally take that ball of emotion of energy welling up inside us and hurl it toward other people” (Brown 2018, p. 251). I have seen many students, and adults for that matter, hurl their energy balls rather than paying attention to their bodies first. In dance and drama education, students have a chance to notice their own bodies and those around them in an emotionally charged yet controlled setting. In these safe spaces, students can learn to rise, but there must be tools provided to allow them to rise beyond the safe spaces of their school.

### **3.2.2. Pain is Pain is Pain**

To highlight the segregation of the NYC public schools, in 2015 I saw the extremes on a weekly basis. At one school at the end of the subway line, the students were not allowed to drink out of the water fountain due to lead in the water. Many of the students were coming out of a homeless shelter in the district, arriving at school malnourished and traumatized to the point of silence. The website sponsored by the Center for New York City Affairs cites that the students there were 71% Black, 24% Hispanic, 2% White, 1% Asian (Raschka & Lynch, 2020). I was fortunate to have the

joy and the challenge of dancing with these students Wednesday mornings. On Wednesday afternoons, I would take the subway from the last northern stop in the Bronx to the last southern stop in Manhattan.

Lower Manhattan has since been robustly rebuilt after 9/11, with beautiful high-rise apartments, new green parks and stunning public art. The students at the downtown school needn't worry about the drinking water. They had access to video cameras, laptop computers, wide open classrooms, smaller class sizes, views of the harbor. These students were often returning from vacations in foreign countries, sometimes fluent in multiple languages. The online 'snapshot' reflects that the school as 53% White, 20% Asian, 14% Hispanic and 4% Black (Raschka & Lynch, 2020). It is a public school, however, and in order to be able to afford the apartments in the district where the school was located, the families are inherently very affluent. I later learned about the racism inherent in zoning all over the country. This is not the case for all schools in Manhattan, nor are my examples of the Bronx universal either. But these two schools exhibit such segregation, dichotomy and disparity of resources that someone may not believe that they fall under the same educational system.

Unfortunately, acts of violence were not unique to one school despite these differences. At the school in the Bronx, a student threw a chair at a teacher. At the school in Manhattan, a student ran into traffic when they learned they hadn't gotten in a prestigious high school. Both boroughs welcome and are home to immigrants, despite the political changes occurring in 2016. In the Bronx, I welcomed a nervous student who had just immigrated to the United States from Haiti. At the other school, I welcomed a shy

student who had just immigrated from China. Students everywhere feel pain, empathy and worry for their families. A second grade student cried for her teenage sister who was pregnant and she didn't know what would happen to her. A second grade student cried because her mother left on a business trip without saying goodbye. Pain is pain is pain, no matter where a child lives and no matter who their parents are. Victor Frankl offers this:

To draw an analogy: a man's suffering is similar to the behavior of a gas. If a certain quantity of gas is pumped into an empty chamber, it will fill the chamber completely and evenly, no matter how big the chamber. Thus suffering completely fills the human soul and conscious mind, no matter whether the suffering is great or little. Therefore the "size" of human suffering is absolutely relative. (Frankl, 1962, p. 67)

The "size" of these humans and their suffering was unfortunately one of the universal realities that I witnessed. I nearly created an entire chapter dedicated to tears because of the frequency at which they seemed to fall in all of my classes. This is because my classes encourage and allow students to express their emotions and how they are feeling with their bodies. By removing the demands of words, I think that students are more comfortable to share what they often cannot through writing or other expressions. I believe that as educators, we have a responsibility to provide time and space for those tears with an emphasis on communication.

This relative joy and suffering are important to remember in any conversation about education. All of the students were able to experience what appeared to be moments of true joy and victorious expression when dancing, when performing and when

working together. The mitigating outside factors that were affecting these student's lives were so astounding. Their joyous screams of completing a dance together or their unfiltered leaps across the stage and genuine, wild hugs will always stay with me.

When students are able to show, exhibit, name and identify emotions they are inherently more empathic students. In the days when it seems like every song I put on makes a student cry or every dance move I do is misconstrued, I've learned that sometimes there are outside stimuli that they are reacting to. This relates to the intersectionality of inequities in education which are beyond teachers' and students' control. Awareness of the outside stimuli can be a key to empathy as psychotherapist Ferrucci explains, "Knowledge and practice of the arts, literature, painting, and above all dance, inherently include among their benefits the increased capacity for empathy. But the easiest and most direct method consists in putting yourself, with your imagination, in the other person's place" (Ferrucci 2016, p. 144). It is perfectly true, students learn through play and by playing what it's like to be another person, they are able to imagine what that other person may be feeling. This ultimately leads them towards empathy and hopefully leadership skills.

For this chapter I chose a song from the musical *Ragtime*. I saw this musical when I was eleven years old and remember beginning to understand our nation's history, and the magnitude of injustices in our country's policies. All students deserve access to being heard onstage. This will not amend the inequities but I believe that it is a step in the right direction. During those long subway rides between boroughs, at times I felt as angry as those little boys, "this isn't fair" ringing in my ears. As I zoomed underground, students

getting on and off, emotions being discussed or suppressed, the magnitude of inequities often felt overwhelming. But by continuing to consider anti-racist theories and practices that we as educators can integrate into decision making, listening and advocating for students, perhaps steps towards a more justice system can be made. Ultimately, the years of undoing will likely fall onto the shoulders of these students. Let us give them tools to be empathic leaders whose voices can be heard.

*Go out and tell our story  
Let it echo far and wide  
Make them hear you  
Make them hear you  
How Justice was our battle  
And how Justice was denied  
Make them hear you  
Make them hear you  
(Ahrens & Flaherty, 1998)*

## CHAPTER 4: NO ONE IS ALONE

### 4.1. An Educational Right

*People make mistakes  
Fathers, Mothers  
People make mistakes  
Holding to their own  
Thinking they're alone  
(Sondheim, 1987)*

In a musty, cavernous school auditorium, under flickering florescent lights being booted back up after the darkness of the performance, a parent rushed towards me. She grabbed my arm and exclaimed; “We never thought that we would see our kid up on that stage!” Her beaming smile was mirrored by her son’s toothless grin as he handed me a card. I’ve had the joy of being a part of those exchanges countless times after musical theater performances in public schools starring students with disabilities. It is difficult to find a quantitative measure for a parent or educator’s amount of pride, disbelief and sense of accomplishment in those moments of witnessing a student exceed expectations.

Growing up, I was fortunate to have had access to a performing arts experience in my public school. I can remember the feeling of being applauded on a stage as a 2<sup>nd</sup> grader as a part of a big cast of students onstage, a memory that many people can share as part of their time in elementary school. While not every student will go on to pursue the performing arts in a professional capacity, or necessarily enjoy that initial point of contact with the art form, there can be great value in having the opportunity to perform as a part of the educational experience in order to gain a sense of belonging and connection to others in one’s educational community.

The student who handed me the thank you card after his show, Jamari, was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The reason that his mother was so thrilled with his performance was that a combination of tempered expectations and previous educational experiences had resulted in fear that her son would not have the right to a typical childhood in school due to his disability. However, when given access to the same kinds of educational rights, he was able to participate, engage, excel and be applauded publicly for doing so. I hope to examine why certain language and definitions may be preventing or discouraging performing arts integration for all students, both with and without disabilities.

I believe that access to the performing arts should be an educational right for all students. To my knowledge, there is an increasing amount of literature surrounding the benefits that the performing arts can afford students. Similarly, we are aware of the health benefits for brains and bodies by having access to nutritious food, yet it is not always available to all public school students. The information is there, but the implementation is not. By providing performing arts education opportunities, schools have the ability to enrich the education of their students, especially those who may not excel in a traditional classroom. I wanted to find other organizations, scholars, scientists, specialists and educators who believe the same things to be true, or at least considering other possibilities. I wanted to investigate why I've had to spend hours on the phone with school secretaries to get them to process a check for a dance program. I wanted to find the root of the cause for separating students with disabilities from their fellow 'general ed' students. I was also curious why students with disabilities were so frequently being

pulled out of the classroom to engage in activities similar to performing arts. Through these guiding questions I started to piece together how the current forms of segregation are providing opportunities, but not in a sustainable way for all students. I learned that the words that are used, the labels, definitions and protocols, can determine the outcomes for what educational activities students do or do not have access to. The medical and social models of disability helped me to understand what educational policies can potentially leave students feeling alone or without a sense of belonging.

#### **4.1.1. Separate is Not Equal**

Jamari was enrolled in a New York City District 75 (D75) school. This school district is dedicated to students with disabilities, meaning that their schooling experience is separate from those who are deemed able-bodied or neurotypical in their development. The grant that allowed a teaching artist to come to the school to provide this performance opportunity was made possible from a grant from the New York City Department of Education, specifically described as a program that “helps schools build arts partnerships that enhance arts opportunities for diverse groups of students, with a focus on English Language Learners (ELLs) and Students with Disabilities (SWD)” (NYC Department of Education, 2020). This grant let these students have an experience outside of their regularly scheduled educational programming, but the segregation of the students into a separate district means that there are countless other opportunities are not accessible to them. This segregation is part of a larger conversation and magnitude of issues that I do not have the authority to speak on. However, I can say that in my experience, in many

ways, students in D75 have additional support and help, but in the wide scheme of things, they are alone.

Here is some information that helped me to decipher some answers to my earlier stated questions. Language is vitally important in these circumstances. According to the school district, Jamari is considered disabled. Previous research studies, organizational websites and published stories reflect different perspectives due to the heterogeneity of the populations that are under the umbrella term of disability. According to the World Health Organization, the definition of disability has many layers since disabilities are not always visible or even perceptible to others at times. Therefore, the World Health Organization published a statement citing that: “[Disability] is a complex phenomenon, reflecting the interaction between features of a person’s body and features of the society in which he or she lives. Overcoming the difficulties faced by people with disabilities requires interventions to remove environmental and social barriers” (World Health Organization, 2017).

This definition demonstrates the two views of disability, the medical model and the social model. In the medical model, a person is seen in comparison to able-bodied, neurotypical people and any flaws physically or cognitively are considered to be part of their disability. Another definition, which more directly correlates with outcomes and practices for public school students, is according to the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, is:

Person with a disability means a person with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity; has a record of such an impairment; or is

regarded as having such an impairment. The determination of whether a student has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity (and therefore has a disability) must be made on a case by case basis. In addition, when determining if someone meets the definition of a disability, the definition must be viewed to provide broad coverage of individuals. (Disability Discrimination, 2020)

This definition also adheres to the medical model of disability in terms of what constitutes a 'major life activity.' This subjectivity leaves the door open for the case-by-case basis of defining which student is considered disabled or not.

In considering performing arts in public schools, the medical model is applied by providing students with various one-on-one therapies or related services often administered by specialists (e.g., drama, music, dance or movement therapies). The language used by the IDEA Section 1401 approaches therapy as a 'related service' which, "means transportation, and such developmental, corrective, and other supportive services (including speech-language pathology and audiology services, interpreting services, psychological services, physical and occupational therapy, recreation, including therapeutic recreation...)" (2019). The word 'corrective' is present in this definition. While the therapies must be both relevant and necessary, this word choice is in line with the traditional definition of therapy, which is administered with the aim of curing or correcting an individual (Webster), implying that there is something that needs to be changed in an individual. Regarding the IDEA's call for related services being deemed relevant or necessary, given the struggle for general education to deem arts integration

relevant or necessary, the terms remain limiting with regard to ensured access to the education activity of performing arts, even as a form of intervention.

As a teaching artist, I am not formally trained nor certified in any kind of therapy; I may specialize in a field, but I am not an actual specialist. When I work with students, it is very rarely one-on-one and rather in groups ranging in size from 5 to 35. For these reasons, the work that I have done thus far as a teaching artist (with the exception of one study) would not fall under the medical model of disability, nor is it therapy.

The social model of disability relates to the people and environment who are defining, limiting and structuring the lives of people with disabilities. To my understanding, this is a means of approaching disability as defined by the intersectionality of an individual in an environment. The social model of disability has roots in the Civil Rights movement and there is conflicting literature regarding the current legitimacy of the terminology (Owens, 2014). However, I find it helpful in terms of looking beyond the medical diagnosis of an individual. By including students with disabilities in activities normally deemed as part of the educational right for typically developing students, they are provided with an opportunity to exceed expectations and gain a rich social and educational experience. My work is intrinsically woven into the social model of disability. The funding that is often provided for the kind of performing arts residencies that I have done in the past, I mentioned earlier, is typically from grants or funds that are designated specifically for students with disabilities. Even in working with students without disabilities, the subsidized funding is often a social reaction to the reality that these students would not otherwise have access to these kinds of programs.

For this section, I chose the song “No One Is Alone” by Stephen Sondheim. I believe there are immense benefits to one-on-one therapy sessions. However, I have observed that through inclusive group activities students are able to gain social skills and a sense of belonging which is often desperately needed. When educators approach students using the medical model, the student is seen as a one-dimensional diagnosis, rather than a complete human being who may have other hopes and desires beyond what had been communicated by the doctors. We all make mistakes, these students with disabilities make mistakes, the people who have power over their lives also make mistakes. I hope that in considering the totality of the student, educators and policy makers can continue to consider what kind of educational tools of engagement can best serve not only students with disabilities but all students.

#### **4.2 Brief History of Policy for Students with Disabilities**

*Honor their mistakes  
Fight for their mistakes  
Everybody makes  
One another's terrible mistakes  
Witches can be right, giants can be good  
You decide what's right, you decide what's good  
(Sondheim, 1987)*

Here is a brief history of educational policy, both mistakes and triumphs for people with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensures the right of students with disabilities to receive a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment and is solidly rooted in the guarantee of equal protection under the law granted to all citizens under the Constitution (Terry, 2018). The IDEA program is under stress as it is currently underfunded and has been since it was enacted in

1975 by congress. In a report issued to President Trump in 2018, the National Council on Disability laid out the lack of federal funding for IDEA. Additionally, the policy itself has not been updated by Congress to reflect the current situation for students' actual diagnosed demographics. For example, as of 1999 the category of ASD is classified as 1% of all special education students. However, in 2014 the population of students with ASD account for 9% of students served by IDEA, a number that has likely continued to increase (Terry, 2018). This is a complex issue which intersects with multiple areas of diagnosis, state and federal support. There is reason to believe based on this data and on some of my personal experiences that there are students in the ASD population who are not receiving services that they need in order to learn in an educational setting.

In the same report, parents were interviewed. They expressed repeatedly that during their Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, they were told that while their students required a certain number of hours of a given therapy, the state was only able to pay for half the amount (Terry, 2018). Again, this is a complex issue and these interviews highlight part of a larger communication challenge between families and schools. The impact of these cutbacks is significant and often resulted in complaints to the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR). In 2016 there were approximately 6,000 complaints describing violation of disability laws, one-third of which were in violation of Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). I include these numbers because of conversations that I have had with parents in various locations beyond NYC that have echoed these concerns in addition to what I personally have observed.

Historically, the disability rights movement is often linked to other minority group movements in America. In education, the Civil Rights Movement began with *Brown v. Board of Education* which banned segregation in schools in 1954 (The Smithsonian Institute, 2017). The civil action taken by individuals began to create human rights policy shifts in America. However, it was not until the 1970's that the Disability Rights Movement began to gain momentum, first with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, and then ultimately resulting in the signing of Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) under the IDEA in the 1980's (Terry, 2018). Both the Civil Rights Movement and the Disability Rights Movement ultimately resulted in political and societal changes, but they are considerably recent in our nation's history. For these reasons, one could argue that there are still gaps in the legislation protecting the educational rights for individuals with disabilities. In many of the schools that I have taught in New York City that are deemed "underserved", the students are racially homogenous and non-white, showing the strain of the Civil Rights Movement as well.

Unlike the Civil Rights Movement, The Disability Rights Movement as a concept required architectural changes, as in physical buildings needing to be altered in order to comply with inclusion laws (Terry, 2018). *An Overview of the Americans With Disabilities Act* summarizes how these societal structural changes were not required to be recognized by law until 1990 by publicly and privately owned businesses (2019). Additionally, unlike some racial minority groups, disability spans across race, class, gender, and enters people's lives in different ways (The Smithsonian, 2017). The heterogeneity of disability provides challenges in how to best create a supportive policy.

With the knowledge that, for a variety of reasons, IDEA is underfunded federally, school principals and communities are often the advocates to ensure the rights of students as the schools are not always able to reflect those changes due to lack of funding. However, a recent Supreme Court Ruling, *Endwin F. vs. Douglas County*, deemed that all students must receive a higher level of education based on their needs based on six implications (Yell & Bateman, 2017 p. 5). I will break down how these six implications can apply to potential arts integration as a means of general education for the student, not a one-on-one related service. First, the Supreme Court amended previous policy language that called for "merely more than de minimus" as an educational standard for students with disabilities (Yell & Bateman, 2017 p. 5). This meant eliminating educational settings and standards that would allow students to "sit idly..." (Yell & Bateman, 2017 p. 5).

I would argue that any student who does not have an opportunity to engage with kinesthetic, musical or storytelling-based learning is also being denied a basic right that could lead to engagement, the antithesis of idle sitting. Second, the justices said that children with disabilities should receive an education that shows progress in light of their unique disabilities and circumstances (Yell & Bateman, 2017 p. 5). The performing arts show progress of a student's social skills, confidence, communication and empathetic behaviors, all of which cannot necessarily be reflected in written or auditory tests. In order to show all types of progress, the performing arts should be embraced.

The third point relates to previous legislature and is a means of holding schools accountable by seeing if school districts are compliant with IDEA and if the

Individualized Education Program (IEP) for a student is appropriate to show their own progress. I have worked with teachers who incorporate a student's theater performance into their IEP as a measurable educational event.

Fourth, there were changes made to ensure that educational benefit was not de minimis for various states. This meant changes in standards were made for many states, including New York and Vermont. Fifth, the ruling provides clearer guidance for courts and school districts in assessing the appropriateness of how an IEP is put together and implemented for a student (Yell & Bateman, 2017 p. 5).

Sixth, "IEPs should be developed through meaningful collaboration with a student's parents" (Yell & Bateman, 2017 p. 5). Sharing public performances is an easy way for parents to feel welcomed at a school, to observe the progress of their student. It is an environment that is mutually beneficial for teachers and students and a performance is designed to be observed and could be an exciting moment to share for all parties involved. Under the new ruling, IEPs must be meaningful, ambitious, composed of special education and related services and involve collection of relevant and meaningful data. Jamari's mother was able to collect the meaningful and relevant data that her son was capable of an ambitious task in which he made immense progress. For those reasons, the *Endrew F. vs. Douglas County* provides policy support and arguments for more performing arts integration in special education.

#### **4.2.1. Performing Arts Funding**

For performing arts education, there has not been a Supreme Court case ensuring that students have access to this kind of schooling. Therefore, other avenues for arts

funding must be pursued for students with disabilities. An example is the ELL/SWD grant as I mentioned before. Those grants are supplied in part from a trickle-down from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Americans for the Arts is one of the chief lobbying organizations for funding for the NEA as well as number of other arts related fields including, “encouraging arts education reform” (Americans for the Arts, 2019).

In the literature on the Americans for the Arts (AFA) website, a dated sentiment of using the word "diversity" as a catch-all is reflected in their data presentation. On the website, there is visual representation illustrating ‘Arts and Social Impact,’ with a section titled Education and Youth Development. There is no information or research related to or mentioning students with disabilities. However, under the heading of 'Culture and Heritage' there is a section called 'Diversity, Access, Equity & Inclusion' (Americans for the Arts, 2019) containing a fact sheet highlighting groups of low-income students, groups devoted to feminism and racism and artists of color and immigrants. The solitary link for students with disabilities was a non-operational organization called Inclusion in the Arts, promoting performers of disabilities in media (Inclusion in the Arts, 2018). The dissolution of the organization was published on their website prior to the publication of Americans for the Arts fact sheet, exhibiting a lack of research and therefore inclusion.

The purpose of focusing on this distribution of information is because this is also how politicians are receiving facts on underfunded programs. There is evidence showing that while significant strides were made ensuring equitable education for students with disabilities made through the Endrew F. vs. Douglas County case, there are still schools that are not receiving adequate federal or state funding based on the brief written in 2018

appealing for more funding from the president (Terry, 2018). In considering that funding for the arts in education as a whole is also in jeopardy then it is difficult to see how these kinds of programs can easily receive funding. The organization, AFA, which is primarily communicating with politicians regarding arts funding has little to no public information on an entire population of students and how their educational needs could be met through arts in schools. How is any kind of governmental funding going to reach the students who need it even with large shifts occurring in supreme court rulings? Students still need more support and access to alternative ways of showing their progress as members of their educational communities.

### **4.3. Advocacy**

*Just remember  
Someone is on your side (Our side)  
Our side  
Someone else is not  
While we're seeing our side (Our side)  
Our side  
Maybe we forgot, they are not alone  
No one is alone  
Someone is on your side  
No one is alone  
(Sondheim, 1987)*

Back in a different though equally dusty auditorium, it was the day after the 2016 election. I was standing in front of three long rows of fifth graders who were taking off their shoes getting ready to dance on the stage for our weekly class. For attendance, I would always have the students reply with one word of how they were feeling, a means of checking in and getting a temperature for the class. Going down the list of names I was met with similar replies as previous weeks: good, fine, tired, Lebron James, excited, and

then in a small voice, scared. I looked up the student, usually very positive and engaged with big glasses and blue pig tails, was looking right at me, not caring that her fellow students were snickering. “Why are you scared, Melinda?” I asked. “Because of who won the election and what he says about black people.” She was about to cry. From speaking with other educators, I learned this was not a unique case. Students all over the country were scared and continued to be scared for days to come. Other students comforted her while another said, “Yeah, I’m scared too.” The truth was at that moment, I was scared. That morning I barely knew how I was going to put on a happy face and teach leaps across the stage.

I told them the truth. We agreed that we didn’t know what was going to happen but that right now, we could dance. I threw the lesson plan out the window and the students got to choose the music, we were loud and joyous and silly, stomping and swinging. After the class I checked in with Melinda to see how she was feeling, she said, “I wish we could have dance class every day.” With that those words in mind, I went home and signed up for Arts Advocacy Day with the aforementioned Americans for the Arts that March.

I did not know what I was getting into. I had no political experience but there I was with hundreds of other people from around the country on Capitol Hill learning about the challenges facing the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) budget with the new policies presented by the administration. Nearly all of the teaching that I had done thus far was funded by grants that were made possible by the NEA. Armed with our binders of facts, our little lobbying armies were sent to various offices of congressmen

and women. Our instructions were, “Hit them with the facts, with the numbers and finish it off with a story, a story about what made you come here and if it’s related to their district, all the better.”

As I frantically scanned our assignments and their districts, I was thrilled and shocked to see that I had taught in schools that were situated in all of their districts. I had actual, individual stories about children who had parents who could and would vote for these elected officials. When it came down to it, the process was very human, just sitting down and telling a story. I was also thrilled and shocked to hear that it was truly a non-partisan issue, arts funding. All of the officials that we spoke with guaranteed a vote to override the budget to match the proposed number. At the end of the day, Nancy Pelosi thanked us with a truly moving speech, ending with her widely quoted, “Organize, don’t agonize!” I felt a deep sense of belonging, I did not feel as alone.

What a gift to in some way be able to reassure my students that they were not alone either. I returned to the auditorium the next week and explained to that fateful fifth grade class why I had been absent the week before. I told them that while we weren’t able to change the election, I was able to tell their stories so that maybe they could keep having dance class once a week, if not every day. It’s a silver lining that while the schedule and day to day of a teaching artist can leave one feeling scattered, it left me with the ability to share five very true, very important stories with a person who has the ability to make sure that funding gets to these programs. The process was so much less intimidating than I thought it would be. For those reasons, I encourage anyone to feel comfortable speaking up to their elected officials, about anything! I learned that while it

does not feel like this, there is power in the people. Sometimes we need to listen to the students to remember that.

If I were to write a thank you note to my students, I would thank them for continuing to show up, to surprise us and to remind us what is important in education. The history of disability rights has continued to grow towards policies that are more humane, thoughtful and in my opinion, logical. I ask you to imagine what schools could look like if the performing arts were an educational right, for all students. By including all students on the stage, taking on the ambitious task of telling a story, maybe their own story, think of all that we could stand to learn. If stories are what politicians are listening to before their make decisions, why wouldn't we teach all students how to tell a story? If decision makers respond to those stories, why wouldn't we teach students how to listen to a story? To me it just makes sense, as a non-partisan choice to give all students a voice. I have to believe that I am not alone in this call to action.

*You decide what's right, you decide what's good  
Just remember, Just remember  
Someone is on your side (Our side)  
Our side, Someone else is not  
While we're seeing our side (Our side)  
Maybe we forgot, they are not alone  
No one is alone  
Someone is on your side  
No one is alone  
(Sondheim, 1987)*

## CHAPTER 5: WAVING THROUGH A WINDOW

### 5.1. Finding Balance

*On the outside, always looking in  
Will I ever be more than I've always been?  
Cause I'm tap, tap, tapping on the glass  
I'm waving through a window  
(Pasek & Paul, 2017)*

When thinking about the educational ‘balance-wheel’ that Mann described in 1864, we must consider what is out of balance. The intersectionality of the various inequities in public education is vast, historically charged and cannot be summarized into one area. In this chapter I’d like to offer what it means to teach and practice the art of empathy and why, in the mid-2000’s, this is an increasingly important part of any student’s education.

A brief presented by the National Education Policy Center states that in order to regain a sense of balance within the education system, “Equal opportunity requires a broader understanding of the social and economic forces that undermine individuals’ life chances” (Rice, 2015, p. 14). I believe that empathy is an element in that referenced broader understanding of social forces, allowing that educators and policy makers need to consider the full picture of every student when approaching decision that are being made. The brief goes on to say, “...equal opportunity will require a much greater commitment to ensuring that students from disadvantaged backgrounds have the highest quality of educational resources” (Rice, 2015, p. 14). I cannot speak to the specific backgrounds of the students that I’ve worked with. To put a judgement on whether their background was disadvantaged is not my aim.

I have observed that there are students who have not necessarily had the opportunity to learn intrinsic skills and other important 'habits of the mind' (Goldstein et al., 2017) that may not be taught at home. Regardless of a student's background, ensuring empathy training as part of all students' education is important and can lead to a better society.

Why focus on empathy in schools at this moment in time? It may seem distant, dismissible or like a fad, but cyberbullying is prevalent in the daily lives of many students. In both rural and urban communities, I have observed students using various social media networks to communicate. In a study conducted nearly a decade ago concerns of cyberbullying and empathy were raised and I would say that the problem has only increased. The study found that, "Two meta-analyses confirmed the negative relationship between antisocial behavior and empathy. Both cognitive and emotional empathy were shown to mitigate aggressive behavior" (Steffgen et al., 2011). As an additional connection, antisocial behavior can be mitigated by providing students with a sense of belonging, a team, a cast, a place where they feel heard and celebrated, such as in the performing arts. The study found that cyberbullies showed less empathy for others than non-cyberbullies (Steffgen et al., 2011). The findings indicate that prevention programs should be aware that empathy plays an important role in the context of online aggression. "With regard to prevention, skills training for adolescents may, therefore, include specific components to train empathic responsiveness in the context of media use. This may be achieved, for example, by showing the consequences for the victim of cyberbullying" (Steffgen et al., 2011). In many ways, performing arts integration can act

as a balance-wheel for these challenges of ensuring that all students have access and opportunity to learn how to be empathetic and potentially to mitigate antisocial behavior which can lead to bullying.

### **5.1.1. Empathy**

The musical *Dear Evan Hansen* (Pasek & Paul, 2017) uses its story to show the consequences for a victim of cyber-bullying. To be completely transparent, when I chose a song to choreograph and teach to a general education class of 25 seventh-graders, I had not been thinking about empathy training. The class was very challenging with a number of students who required individualized attention but were unfortunately not able to receive it. The classroom environment and general vibe were dictated by the alpha students who set the tone of the room, a dynamic that at times I felt powerless against. One of the alpha students was Cassidy. She frequently skipped class, talked back, and was often violent towards other students, seemingly seeking attention at every opportunity.

The performance date was looming a few weeks away and I knew that I needed to just forge ahead and get these students dancing. As I came into the classroom, Cassidy was running in circles around the dance room, screaming with laughter, hitting people with her shoe and somehow on her phone, all at the same time. Without trying to manage the classroom, I simply put on the song that the class was going to be performing, “Waving Through the Window” (Pasek & Paul, 2017). Cassidy stopped dead in her tracks, “Wait, I know this song, I love this- guys shut up, shut up.” Ironically, she was quieting the class down in the wake of her own chaos. The song continued to play, and

we read the lyrics. She began to cry, she started to run away from her friends again, saying, “I can’t believe I’m crying; I don’t know why I’m crying. I saw the show and it made me cry, I don’t know.”

*On the outside, always looking in  
Will I ever be more than I've always been?  
Cause I'm tap, tap, tapping on the glass, Waving through a window  
I try to speak, but nobody can hear  
So I wait around for an answer to appear  
While I'm watch, watch, watching people pass  
Waving through a window, oh  
Can anybody see, is anybody waving  
(Pasek & Paul, 2017)*

In observing Cassidy, I realized my error of not considering the trigger effects of using a song from a musical that deals directly with adolescent anxiety, depression and suicide all through the guise of social media. She avoided eye contact and was saying that she was fine and rubbing her tears away. I had no choice but to believe her and continue on with class. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio describes triggering emotion by saying, “We often end up learning that an emotion is happening not as the trigger situation unfolds but because the processing of the situation causes feelings; that is, it causes conscious mental experiences of the emotional event” (Damasio 2019, p. 111). Cassidy appeared to be in the state of processing her own situation in a way that I do not think any of her classmates had seen. It was difficult to see a student in tears, but there was a poetry to her complicated grief that was almost beautiful in a way. She appeared to be having an empathic connection to the story, music and eventually the movement that she helped to choreograph. I asked her if it would be ok with her if we performed the song in a few weeks, she said, “Yeah, of course, I already said I love this song.” She rolled her eyes and

walked away. I should have been more conscious of the material that I was sharing with the class, but ultimately, I think that my lack of censorship led to positive results.

### **5.1.2. Accountability**

From that day onward, once I put that song on, Cassidy was focused and engaged, even offering ideas for choreography and volunteering to be in the front. We choreographed the song based on gestures from the students, and complex walking patterns. The rallying cry from Cassidy to take it seriously caused the rest of the class to follow suit, and I felt very lucky to have happened upon such an impactful song. There's something in the story, the music, the movement, that resonated with her; and in my eyes, it appeared to be healing something. The song was like a release valve for her to press and relax into expressing herself in the mini-performance moments of the class. I think that this was in part due to feeling empathy towards the character in the story, finding solace in a shared sentiment. "Other approaches suggest that empathy involves both an emotional and a cognitive dimension. Here, empathy is defined as the ability to understand and share another person's emotional state or context" (Steffgen et al., 2011). Cassidy was able to take in the lyrics, which in many ways are a cry for help, attention and questioning one's own future. In challenging those emotions, she could control her own. In turn, her empathy translated into self-accountability. She was responsible for her own actions in the classroom in a way that she had not previously been. Her behavior improved through the empathic understanding of the material.

I do not know if Cassidy was involved in any kind of cyberbullying. Based on conversations with the classroom teacher I learned that was an issue for the school writ

large. The anonymity of the internet removes witnessing the effects of a harsh word or cruel comment. The musical makes those private moments of shame and vulnerability come to life, everyone bearing witness to the pain that can be caused by invisible swipes and key strokes.

Musical theater is built on expression of emotions. The lyrics of a song act as a window into a character's life, their story, your story, our story. I discuss with my students that it is not enough to simply know how you are feeling, but you need to make sure that the audience knows how you're feeling, the empathetic journey has to continue past the fourth wall of the auditorium proscenium. This sharing of empathy is powerful, for both the students and the audience. In the case of that difficult class, the triggers of empathy in that one song solved the problem of engagement and focus. Ferrucci continues this thought, saying, "But empathy does not only resolve problems; it helps us feel better. Studies have shown that people who are more capable of empathy are also more satisfied in life, healthier, less dogmatic, and more creative" (Ferrucci, 2006, p. 135). I hope that Cassidy and her classmates continue to find songs that they're excited about, that feel good to cry to and ultimately are more satisfied with life.

## **5.2. Universal Design**

*We start with stars in our eyes  
We start believing that we belong  
But every sun doesn't rise  
And no one tells you where you went wrong  
Step out, step out of the sun  
If you keep getting burned  
Step out, step out of the sun  
Because you've learned, because you've learned  
(Pasek & Paul, 2017)*

There are other students out there like Cassidy, other people too, who just need a song to catch their ear for a minute to stop them in their tracks. Cassidy was able to express herself verbally to let me know how she was feeling, even if she didn't completely know how to articulate it. But what about the students who do not have the ability or desire to verbally communicate? The novel *Beautiful child: the story of a child trapped in silence and the teacher who refused to give up on her* by Torey Hayden (2002) is an example where both social construction and medical models of disability can be applied in conversation to allow for a student to receive the support and services that she needed.

The story takes place nearly forty years ago, yet my personal experiences in non-inclusion classrooms echo challenges that Torey described in her exclusionary classroom from the past. There are many intersections of issues as to why this is the case, including lack of funding, resources and access. However, "little progress can be made without using inclusion and Universal Design in the classroom for both general and special education" (Turnbull et al., 2013, p. 228). I would like to present another option for how to approach universal design, which allows for all students to engage in with the material through different modalities.

Universal Design is the creation and implementation of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design (Mace, 2008). While I, as a teaching artist have little say nor ability to control the environment or products used in the classrooms that I visit, I do my best to make each learning experience accessible and usable. Essentially, it all

comes down to how information is being communicated and what tools the student is given to respond or illustrate their engagement with the material. For example, when teaching lyrics to a song, the classroom teacher and I will collaborate to provide both printed sheets for the students with large font and wide spaces in addition to having a projection of the words on the board or wall. I also make sure that I am repeating the words frequently with my voice both spoken, spoken in rhythm and in song. When teaching movement, I similarly will use words to describe the motion, give alternatives that match the quality or feeling of the motion, using counts to the music and give students time to try it on their own. For example, if the movement is a jump and there is a student in a wheelchair, they will put their arms up quickly for a similar feeling. The fact that the three options, of singing, telling a story (facial expressions) and dancing, allow for students to engage with the material on their own terms and abilities. Researchers Delgado and Humm-Delgado summarize this by saying:

Specialized design or assistive technology may be necessary, too, even with universal design, but universal design can help to include many youth with disabilities who would otherwise be excluded. Although any community may need to continue to strive to address these barriers well, acknowledging and analyzing them are the first steps in addressing them (2017, p.).

Many teachers, parents and facilitators make these quick, automatic adjustments as they see students struggling from the existing structure or benefitting from a change. I can think of many wonderful classrooms and lessons that teachers have creatively and aptly designed to reach all students. Sometimes, the adjustment in the classroom

communication can aid in classroom management and cohesion. In Torey Hayden's case it came in the form of song and dance.

In Hayden's book, she described the immense challenges in her classroom based on the five students, all with different learning styles and special needs. She says, "The music thing caught on *very* quickly... Within a short time, we were singing so often, it felt like living inside an operetta. Right down to the slightly surreal quality when people unexpectedly burst into song" (Hayden, 2002, p. 149). Through a progression of trial and error, she eventually learned that by singing and dance she was able to unify her classroom through silliness, giving each student a sense of belonging. "The sense of belonging – that is, the feeling that we are part of a whole great than ourselves, with which we are physically, mentally and spiritually involved- is a necessary factor to our well-being" (Ferrucci, 2015 p. 99). Hayden was able to encourage and infuse well-being into her students by giving them a common rallying cry. I've witnessed this as well and have had teachers recall the joy to see everyone in the classroom with the same shared focus even if they are completing the task in their own way.

*While I'm watch, watch, watching people pass  
Waving through a window, oh  
Can anybody see, is anybody waving?  
When you're falling in a forest and there's nobody around  
Do you ever really crash, or even make a sound?  
Did I even make a sound?  
Did I even make a sound?  
It's like I never made a sound  
Will I ever make a sound?  
(Pasek & Paul, 2017)*

### **5.2.1. Communication**

Beyond her innovative and accidental performing arts integration in the classroom, Hayden's story centers on one student named Venus, who is described as a selective mute. The true story unfolds revealing that Venus did not begin life physically impaired. The home that she was born into was a product of the socioeconomic climate which her family was operating under. This was not communicated to Hayden as her educator, an unfortunate common circumstance for educators. As supported by Oliver (1992), "Disability is not a product of bodily pathology, but of specific social and economic structures" (p. 371). Venus' environment of scarcity led to mental and physical abuse from her mother's partner which was said to be the cause of her muteness. By definition Venus was not physically impaired, however she was disabled in that she could not communicate.

Her muteness led to a medical, physical impairment which temporarily prevented her from walking due to additional physical abuse she suffered at home. "Medicalization can focus attention to increasing social and clinical understanding toward acceptance of difference in communities" (Baglieri, 2017 p. 19). Venus' need for medical attention gave Hayden the ability as the educator to take action, something that she had been wanting to do earlier. Hayden was already intrigued due to the lack of speech, but unfortunately the leg injury was able to garner the kind of social or empathetic understanding that Baglieri discusses.

One of the first words that Venus says out loud to Hayden is described in a magic moment: "Dance," she murmured so softly it was nothing more than a breath. And so we

did” (Hayden, 2002, p. 183). Hayden continues to use another performing arts integration method, where Venus reads a book and then pretends to be a superhero. Through embodying, using her imagination and being provided with the safe space to feel her emotions, Venus lets out a scream of passion and eventually words. Fortunately, the story resolves to Venus finding the support that she needed and eventually speaking and communicating freely with Hayden. I highly recommend this book for any educator, parent or friend of a seemingly silent individual. By using empathetic training, learning and listening, Hayden is able to incorporate performing arts into elements of Universal Design to engage all of her students. The story of Venus and Torey Hayden breaths humanity into the red tape that can often surround the services that educators have to navigate in order to give a child access to their right to learn.

*On the outside, always looking in  
Will I ever be more than I've always been?  
Cause I'm tap, tap, tapping on the glass  
I'm waving through a window  
(Pasek & Paul, 2017)*

### **5.3. Empowerment**

One could argue that both Cassidy and Venus, though very different, were constantly aware of their status and place in the classroom. “If a student feels incapable or inferior in some way due to societal stereotypes about disability and/or learned helplessness, it can have detrimental impacts on confidence and performance” (Turnbull et al., 2013). This is a truth for all students. Cassidy was a white student in a classroom that was mixed socioeconomically and racially and was not, to my knowledge, singled out for needing or deserving any kind of one-on-one attention or individualized

assessment. Venus was a black student in an exclusionary classroom that was also mixed socioeconomically and racially. Cassidy learned ways to gain power by using her voice in the classroom and being disruptive. Venus learn ways to gain power by staying silent. I, like Torey Hayden, did not know the full story of my student. With no social or medical tools, all we could do was observe what worked and what didn't and provide options and artistic space to allow the student to express themselves.

In attempts and hopes to restore and equalize schools to provide the “highest quality of educational resources” (Rice, 2015, p. 14), the opportunity to sing, dance and tell stories can help them to become an empathetic person. Education can and should provide students with tools to understand their own emotions and others, as a means of avoiding bullying, both face to face and through screens. By creating an alternative space of learning, through dance or song, students can find alternative ways to lead, be empowered and ultimately have their voices heard. High quality educational resources are inclusive and provide multiple ways into the content and activities by using concepts from Universal Design. Hopefully, by paying close attention to the ways that students are tapping on the glass, we, as educators can find ways to wave back at them.

## CHAPTER 6: THERE'S NO BUSINESS LIKE SHOW BUSINESS

*There's no business like show business like no business I know  
Everything about it is appealing, everything that traffic will allow  
Nowhere could you get that happy feeling  
when you are stealing, that extra bow  
(Berlin, 1946)*

“That happy feeling,” might be the best way to describe witnessing another person perform an act that is truly, joyfully, unexpected. In order for the act to be unexpected, there need to be existing expectations, which are then exceeded. The means by which these expectations are agreed upon is often based on the average or majority. Any given group of people has over time found something to strive for and then likely succeed in accomplishing it, resulting in the expectation. In the previous chapter, the stories of Cassidy and Venus focused on the process, or rehearsal period where incorporation of performing arts into the classroom lead to unexpected areas of growth for those students. I want to share a few stories about how these "happy feelings" can occur in surprising ways, often at the last minute for students with ASD when they are in front of an audience. I hope to illustrate why it is so important to give students a chance to surprise us and sometimes themselves. These moments in performance provide an educational tool in teaching transferable skills of courage and leadership. The special moments that can be achieved during a performance may be why the business of putting on a show is “like no business I know,” as Irving Berlin coined the term in 1946.

Expectations are set or decided upon at a certain level for all categories of human beings, and I would argue that education has a foundation and subsequent ladders built on expectations. As students we are all expected have the ability to sit still, read, write, take

tests, complete math equations, listen, ask questions, and eventually contribute to the society that set up those expectations. There are groups that have a subset of expectations beyond one category that they fit into, the underserved, the underseen or the undervalued. The expectations for those populations to meet are different and when they exceed them, we as humans have a moment of seeing the error in our ways of only seeing one rule book. This isn't sinister in nature, it's everywhere. I'm sure you can think of a story, movie, book or person who for whatever reason has expectations that are low. Then, at just the right moment, they unexpectedly do exactly what needed to be done.

### **6.1. Argument for Inclusion**

As I mentioned, I taught many residencies that were in New York City's Public School District 75 or D75. This separate district within the school system was designed for students who are classified as having intellectual disability or multiple disabilities. This is a product of the very large scale of numbers of students who are in the school system. There are 1,126,501 students in the NYC school system, the largest in the U.S. Students with disabilities comprise 20.2% of the population: approximately 225,300 students (NYC Schools at a Glance, 2020). The district defines the students as having "mild to moderate behavior challenges...adaptive behaviors well below age expected levels" (New York City of Department of Education, 2020). Classes in D75 follow New York State Learning Standards as well as Universal Design for Learning. There are smaller classes of students who all fit the criteria as described.

The district, for the most part, does not have a separate school building to house it. This means that the D75 schools are often delegated to one floor of a general education

school which are then broken up into multiple sites. For example, I was hired to teach for one school within D75, which had three different locations. In a recent interview, NYC parents of students with disabilities presented additional areas of concern, stating that, "school leaders and teachers must be better about communicating expectations- something they felt was inconsistent school to school" (Amin, 2020). I also witnessed vastly different kinds of expectations for students in various schools.

I believe that dispersing students is a form of segregation that can affect a student's sense of belonging and in many ways is a step backwards for disability rights. I do not intend to gloss over this large issue. However, given the size, scale and magnitude of the school system, I understand the challenges which would allow these students access to their educational needs and rights that they deserve. In an interview with NYC parents of students with disabilities, "Some parents called for increasingly inclusive environments for children with disabilities, with additional exposure to general education students, challenging academics, and more field trips" (Amin, 2020). I agree with this sentiment. There is an opportunity for collaboration between the districts, with students both participating as performers and audience for school productions, addressing all of the parents' concerns stated here. The performing arts provides an equal level of expectation for all students to meet and exceed.

The stories in this chapter occurred in D75 schools. The opportunity for these students arose because their principals prioritized the performing arts for their students. These circumstances could happen and I believe they likely do happen all over the country in various kinds of educational settings.

## 6.2. Getting Onstage

Alek was a first generation Russian immigrant living with ASD who I worked with for three years. Alek was consistently engaged in learning the songs and dances during class and would often ask relevant questions relating to the story. However, when it came time for the first rehearsal in the auditorium, he was inconsolable. Screaming, crying, clawing his way along the seats, searching for the exit sign. Fortunately, due to his incredibly kind and patient teachers, we respectfully but persistently guided him back in auditorium. Later, we debriefed about how uncharacteristic this reaction was. The teaching team agreed that they would work with him to slowly introduce this new environment. I did not know it at the time, but they were using Applied Behavior Analysis (as referenced in a later chapter) and made a strong and clear plan which gave Alek the opportunity to ease into the performance space. The teaching team taught Alek the space was safe by showing that there was nothing to harm him and also did not give up on his entering and interacting with the space. After some time, Alek began to finding comfort in the uncomfortable, and a change started to happen. These concepts can be true for anyone with any circumstance: teach, show, encourage towards the uncomfortable.

For Alek, the auditorium caused him to feel a sense of flight, an avoidance, or in a simpler term, extreme stage fright. His reaction, though louder and more physical than a neurotypically developing student's reaction to entering a room, is not foreign to the actual feelings that many students go through. The thought of performing on a stage in front of people causes us to be vulnerable. I can remember many times of being backstage before a performance and wanting to run the other direction to the exit sign.

For teachers in a classroom, there may be moments of utter terror as you stand up before a room of students, another form of stage fright to be certain; these are vulnerable situations. Brené Brown summarizes this feeling:

We know that vulnerability is the cornerstone of courage, but we often fail to realize that without vulnerability there is no creativity or innovation. Why?

Because there is nothing more uncertain than the creative process, and there is absolutely no innovation without failure. (2018, p. 41)

I have to remind myself of these concepts but believe them to be true. Even though Alek was screaming by from entering the auditorium, his teachers persevered in order to give him the chance. We wanted to give an opportunity for him to express his creativity and an opportunity for him to gain courage through his vulnerability in this environment.

Later, I was shown a hand-drawn playbill for the performance that he had made earlier that week, unprovoked. This kind of artistic expression showed that Alek was making strong, relevant connections between the work we were doing and other forms of communication, in many ways a Universal Design Learning moment. The act of creating a playbill demonstrated that Alek was excited about the show, he was invested in the storytelling. The issue was not even necessarily performing, but it was the auditorium or the environment of performing and being seen.

After weeks of using well-crafted applied behavior analysis positive reinforcement schedules, we reach the day of the performance. Alek was able to feel calm and safe. He watched the other students from the back. The next day, the same routine and struggle, but less duration of resistance. While there is always a feeling of, “let’s go

on with the show” (Berlin, 1946), ultimately any educator would rather have a student feel safe and calm rather than in a state of constant anxiety. We talked about the playbill, about how talented he was and how fun the show could be connecting all the hard work he had done in the classroom leading up to the show. Eventually, he said that he was worried about all the people looking. This was the most coherent, honest and direct that he had been in the past two days. We, as the team of educators, had been worrying about the physical space and unforeseen fears within the environment, when really it was just like any other form of stage fright, all the eyes on you.

I asked him what he thought the people in the chairs of the auditorium would be thinking and feeling. We discussed when he went to the other schools to see their plays. I asked if he was, he thinking bad thoughts about the kids on stage? No, he was just there to have a good time! The intimidating audience would also just be there to have a good time. I tried to reassure him that no one would be looking to make fun of him or looking for what he was doing wrong. This appeared to empower him, he walked into the auditorium and sat closer to the stage. His ability to make connections between the playbill creation and the show seemed to translate to his ability to make a connection between being an audience member to be a performer in the show. His classmates were encouraging him to get on the stage with them, as members of his self-advocacy community.

The day of the performance we had a contingency plan to cover Alek’s lines with a paraprofessional on call, should we need to make sure he felt safe and comfortable. His mother was also aware of the potential behavioral outcomes and she was prepared to step

in as needed too. We set our expectations based on his previous behavior, but still gave room for the chance to be courageous. The show started. Alek walked confidently onto the stage with his classmates. He performed the whole show! He was smiling and even ad-libbing lines for more laughs from the audience. By the final bow his mother was overwhelmed with emotion; she knew what he had just overcome. We all did.

This was a fortunate circumstance where the potential expectations were exceeded, I believe due to the adults in the room approaching the performance from a place of steady hope and calm anticipation. The behaviors associated with Alek's anxiety and fear of the stage were eliminated. The backup plan allowed for calm leadership and progression forward. When I returned for other residencies, Alek excitedly anticipated the performance. It was a shift in empowerment that his teachers and family recognized throughout his interactions and approaches to new challenges. "Empowerment implies agency on the part of people and communities using their power to obtain what they have a right to within society by their own actions..." (Delgado & Humm-Delgado, 2017, p. 3). I believe that Alek gained an ability to use his own actions to overcome his fear.

### **6.2.1. Unexpected Expectations**

*There's no people like show people, they smile when they are low  
Even with a turkey that you know will fold, you may be stranded out in the cold  
Still you wouldn't change it for a sack of gold, let's go on with the show  
(Berlin, 1946)*

Here is another unexpected performance moment, a journey with Lucy. "She's going to love this, trust me," a classroom teacher with a thick Brooklyn accent said as she maintained eye contact with me and gently yet firmly wrestled a student back into her spot before we started our musical theater rehearsal. "She always gets really excited when

we put music on, I think she'll love it, we just have to *[more gentle wrestling, pulling a toy from the student's hand, putting her shoe back on]* we just have to get started.” So we got started. I faced the students, and slowly together they began to follow me, like a mirror. They would bring their arms up when I did, clapped when I clapped, sang the when I sang until they could do it without me. I was their mirror, that was how I led them to move all together as one loud, excited unit.

Lucy was seven years old with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Lucy exhibited many of the stereotypic behaviors of a student with ASD: frequent hand flapping, avoiding eye contact, pacing, jumping, self-biting, and very little verbal communication. The end goal or expectation of the teaching residency culminated in a performance on the stage. The classroom teacher and I had worked together before, we knew that some of the students would make it to the stage, and others may not end up performing, which no one faulted them for. However, performance was the end expectation.

As the weeks progressed, Lucy started independently going to the area of the classroom where we would rehearse. She followed along with all of the movements and the song, at times getting visibly upset if I stopped the song to work on something with another classmate. She knew the choreography. The teacher said that she would sing the song independently throughout the day. All of this was new behavior which was exceeding expectations that had been previously set based on her prior behavior in the classroom. As with many other circumstances, these expectations were based on other students that came before her with similar movements and habits, but they weren't Lucy.

The week of the show came, and the auditorium presented its new set of stimuli, as exhibited by Alek's story. I believe that the students can feel that sense of expectation in the space itself. For Lucy, we could not interpret how she felt. She was looking around in her seat, active but not choosing to join her classmates on the stage. In response, I chose to give her a moment, not push the issue, let her decide. Observing the other students had been beneficial for Alek, maybe it would be for her too. This went on for two rehearsals; she was not interested in getting on the stage but she would sit, and she would watch. Her classroom teacher said, "It's really a shame, ya know? She was doing so well in the classroom." I agreed but I had to hope for the best.

The day of the show came, costumes were on, the colored lights were strung up, the sound board was set. I was in front of the students, bellied up to the edge of the stage, facing them in case they needed a reminder of what to do when the music came on. I noticed that some of the students were freezing up under the lights, they knew the movements but were transfixed with all of the people watching them. As I started to move back from the stage to do the dance with them, I heard the classroom teachers behind me gasp and scream with joy. "Yeah Lucy!!!" I turned around and saw that Lucy was standing up in the aisle, facing the students, and she brought her arms up and then the other students did, they clapped when she clapped, they sang it loud and proud together. Lucy was their mirror, that was how she led them to move all together as one loud, excited unit. The expectation had been that Lucy would join that cast onstage, not be the leader. She exceeded, she succeeded, she showed us what she needed and that was to lead.

Expectation in Latin translates to “anticipation, an awaiting,” or, from past-participle stem of *expectare/exspectare* “await, look out for.” Look out for Lucy, world, she is coming! And she might need to be given the tools in a different way, but once she has them, she will lead – heck she stole my job right from under me. When we await, we can find incredible results that move us to tears, cause us to reevaluate ourselves and give a new buoyancy to what we thought to be true. Researchers are beginning to study these impacts more and more. Goddard (2015) provides an excellent example of youth empowerment and the activities of a United Kingdom youth troupe with learning disabilities that used theatre to express the emotions and dilemmas they face in “transitioning from young people ‘participating’ in their world to more actively engaging in arts leadership roles” (Delgado & Humm-Delgado, 2017, p. 9). This exceeding of expectation is possible if students are given the opportunity to do so.

### **6.3. Complications of Inspiration**

*The butcher, the baker, the grocer, the clerk  
Are secretly unhappy men because  
The butcher, the baker, the grocer, the clerk  
Get paid for what they do but no applause.  
They'd gladly bid their dreary jobs goodbye for anything theatrical and why?  
(Berlin, 1946)*

In the process of encouraging students to perform on stage, I recently started to wrestle with the concept of "inspiration porn" as coined by Stella Young in the 2014 TEDxSydney talk. In relating this concept to Berlin's song in the above epigraph, the butcher does their job, and no one applauds them. However, if a person with a significant visual disability were to perform the same act as the butcher, there's the potential that their actions would be deemed inspirational. This is a portrayal of people with disabilities

as inspirational solely or in part on the basis of their disability. Stella Young, a comedian, journalist, educator and disability rights activist who was in a wheelchair for most of her life due to osteogenesis imperfecta, breaks down inspiration porn further in her TED talk:

Well, ladies and gentlemen, I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint you dramatically. I am not here to inspire you. I am here to tell you that we have been lied to about disability. Yeah, we've been sold the lie that disability is a Bad Thing, capital B, capital T. It's a bad thing, and to live with a disability makes you exceptional. It's not a bad thing, and it doesn't make you exceptional. (2014)

As an abled-bodied, neurotypical person, it's hard to imagine telling one of my students with ASD that they are not exceptional. However, if I am striving to treat them equitably, that should be considered as an educator.

If Lucy had been able to verbalize, “Ms. Annalisa, I would like to be the leader on performance day,” would the pay-off be as significant? Would I have even allowed another student to have that position of power for fear of favoritism? Should I even be writing about my students' accomplishments or is it belittling and continuing to set low expectations for other students with ASD? I hope to continue to learn and grow in these areas. For now, I see these performances as celebrations of accomplishments, just as you would celebrate any student for having the bravery to go on stage. It is not forcing them to be inspirational, but rather giving them a chance to change what the expectations are. Regarding a shift in expectations, Young states:

I want to live in a world where we don't have such low expectations of disabled people that we are congratulated for getting out of bed and remembering our own

names in the morning. I want to live in a world where we value genuine achievement for disabled people, and I want to live in a world where a kid in year 11 in a Melbourne high school is not one bit surprised that his new teacher is a wheelchair user. (2014)

In this way, a stage performance is a genuine achievement for all students. To overcome a fear of stage fright, to take the lead in helping other students onstage, these are significant regardless of the students' disabilities. Additionally, by increasing the visibility of students with disabilities, the expectation that they can be seen in front of a classroom as a teacher increases as well.

The classroom community rallied behind Lucy, they knew that she was ready and we all believed in her. Delgado and Delgado-Humm examine this kind of community engagement and empowerment in their research. Youth empowerment is also closely associated with leadership (Moore, 2016). The experiences of youth with disabilities in participating in community activities are very limited, though, which reduces their opportunities to experience empowerment processes associated with meaningful engagement (Law *et al.*, 2015; Lee, 2015; Murphy & McFerran, 2016; Willis *et al.*, 2016). This is all the more reason to give students that opportunity in public educational settings.

After the experience with Lucy, I try to give all students opportunities to lead. Whether it's the physical warm up or leading the day of the show, I learned a great deal from Lucy that day. I will always remember her. Her actions were not inspiring, they were true to her and that is what is important to remember. "Disability doesn't make you

exceptional but questioning what you think you know about it does" (Young, 2014).

There is a lot about disability that I do not know, so I will strive to continue questioning what I think I know through how I present expectations to my students. Let's give all of the students a chance to be show people and maybe they'll surprise us with a smile when we believe that they are low.

*There's no business like show business and I tell you it's so  
Traveling through the country is so thrilling, standing out in front on opening nights  
Smiling as you watch the theater filling, and there's your billing out there in lights  
There's no people like show people, they smile when they are low  
(Berlin, 1946)*

## CHAPTER 7: ANYONE CAN WHISTLE

*Anyone can whistle, that's what they say, easy.  
Anyone can whistle, any old day, easy.  
It's all so simple.  
Relax, let go, let fly.  
So someone tell me, why can't I?  
(Sondheim, 1964)*

The etymological root of the word 'educate' come from the Latin *educare*, "bring up" which is related to *educere*, "bring out, lead forth." In this chapter I want to explore the different means of performing arts education integration and the ways in which it can bring up, bring out and lead students forth towards exciting futures. I chose the song "Anyone Can Whistle" by Stephen Sondheim because the sentiment of the song rings true for many students, if something is easy, why can't I do it? There are many things that I cannot do, and to be honest whistling is one of them! But expectations are based on the perceived majority's ability, so if someone cannot achieve that skill, other measures are taken. In an educational setting, these areas of lacking skills that students can face such as speaking correctly, reading, motor skills, math etc. are treated through different types of one-on-one sessions with a specialistic instructor. Ideally, in these situations the students should be able to 'relax, let go, let fly,' but with that there are pros and cons.

Thinking back to my biking accident with the neck brace, I was just starting physical therapy. I was taking the subway regularly back and forth between Manhattan and Brooklyn to my specialist's office. During this stage of the recovery process I felt very physically vulnerable to jolts and sharp, unexpected movements. On a particularly crowded train, I couldn't find a handle to hold onto and I could feel my muscles tensing up in anticipation of the jolts. I knew that I didn't look like I was in pain, but it was

excruciating. No one offered me a seat, despite having the neck brace on. Eventually, on the verge of tears I looked down at a woman who was reading and managed to say, “excuse me?” and she jostled, saw the neck brace, and kind of fumbled to get up. I felt small and embarrassed to ask for a seat. Simultaneously I also felt embarrassed for all the times I hadn’t given up my seat for others in the past. I had been seen as a regular, able-bodied adult, until, in the vulnerable state, I practiced the art of asking for help. It was a rare moment in my very fortunate life, where I was seen differently.

Many of the students I work with do not have physical differences indicating that they need help. I imagine that many students feel that sense of anxiety of an upcoming jolt and no handle to hold all of the time. Likewise, many of the students would be the first to offer their seat to others if given the opportunity. But it is difficult to ask for help or observe when a student needs help, which can mean that sometimes students do not receive the kind of one-on-one attention in school that they need.

### **7.1. Beyond Therapy**

In the process of researching studies investigating the quantitative and qualitative benefits of drama, dance and music in educational settings, the areas of research revolved primarily around these modalities in the form of therapies. This presents a larger issue of semantics. By calling these educational experiences ‘therapies’ there are assumptions that accompany that word: costs, cures and a disabled only environment. As I mentioned earlier, the word ‘therapy’ is defined as a medical treatment of impairment, injury, disease or disorder with the synonyms: cure, remedy and corrective (Webster). The word itself implies a medical model that should be used to cure or treat an individual. People

with ASD cannot, should not and will not be ‘cured’ by any type of intervention. In a general education inclusion classroom, it would not make sense for the teacher to have a block of ‘group drama therapy’ after all of the students had just been learning during their math block. Why call it that? Just have a musical theater block. Give all students the benefits of these arts forms, both socially and medically, and then no specification or singling out needs to occur.

This is not meant to discredit the educational requirements and training that is required for these specified therapies. I am trying to highlight the naturally occurring ‘therapeutic’ benefits that can happen for students when engaging with the performing arts in an educational setting. These benefits can be taught by any one by playing a song related to a story and giving students an opportunity to move their bodies. These rights should be accessible to all students regardless of their abilities and the funding at a given school because the word therapy is being used.

Therapies can be expensive for schools to hire specialists in the given areas necessary. Considering the aforementioned report regarding the state of IDEA, where parents were interviewed and expressed repeatedly that during their IEP meetings, they were told that while their students required a certain number of hours of a specific therapy, the state was only able to pay for half the amount (Terry, 2018) despite the court rulings as mentioned in the previous chapter, meaning that some of the students are not receiving tools for their education. I am not suggesting that working with teaching artists or having classroom teachers integrate the performing arts into curriculum is a replacement for certain much needed therapies and other services; advocacy for that

funding is important and necessary. However, in some areas, I believe that performing arts integration could benefit many students.

Given that the research that supports the benefits for students being brought up, brought out and led forth through use of music, dance and drama uses the word 'therapy,' I will use and cite this wording accordingly. This is with the knowledge and interest that students do not need to seek any kind of cure or change but rather another means of education. The content of these studies is exciting and interesting, and I hope that the reader can consider the application of these practices in ways beyond the confines of therapy.

In the research process, I was encouraged by the work that so many teaching artists are already doing for all of the students in their classrooms. I believe that while there is overlap between the two worlds of art therapy and art education integration, there are differences. Those differences could potentially open doors for educators and school leaders when considering curriculum and in school activities. The research that I dove into relates to both students with ASD and without. Hopefully this will serve as an argument for providing these modalities to students in the classroom, even if they do not appear to need it, hopefully they will be able to relax, let go, let fly.

#### **7.1.1. Drama**

The use of drama therapy, as it is called in the studies, in the ASD educational community is widely researched with positive results. Many theater-based interventions are investigating social skill improvements through the use of theater. Theater provides a means of using and understanding facial expressions and scripted conversations, and an

opportunity to express oneself through the means of playing a character. This process of literally assuming another person's perspective accomplishes a significant amount for any student. The practice of reading, learning, saying and memorizing words that are not your own inherently teaches a student empathy. Ferrucci states, "Bit by bit, empathy – which at first is only a simple instinctual capacity to resonate – develops and becomes the capacity to understand other people's feelings and points of view, to identify with them." (2006, p. 135). Often this process is bit by bit but I have witnessed social skills improve from students in PreK through adulthood by using simple theater games. Additionally, this concept of role playing can ease students' anxiety as it provides a means of expectations (Delgado, & Humm-Delgado 2107). If a student with ASD does not have to worry about their behavior being acceptable or not because they are provided with a script, then there is a sense of letting go that can occur in the classroom or on stage.

Theater and the act of putting on a play requires memory at a high level of executive functioning: spatial awareness, anticipatory planning, anticipation of other behaviors and responsibility of oneself. Most importantly, an area where there is currently relatively little research is the use of story and sequencing. In my experiences I have observed it can be challenging for students with ASD to identify parts of a sequence - beginning, middle and end - or even a sense of causation within a story. Therefore, becoming familiar with a given story or script and having the opportunity to embody and interact with a story can and often does increase this kind of comprehension (Scharoun, Reinders, Bryden, & Fletcher 2014). This research supports the theory that integration of the performing arts can support a student's educational growth.

### **7.1.2. Music**

The use of music therapy has been studied with students with ASD to address the stereotypic behavior of echolalic speech (i.e. repetitions speech patterns) (Lim & Draper 2011). I will address this further in a later chapter. In a study by Lim and Draper, they were able to identify increased verbal ability through music therapy, specifically within echolalic speech. A well-rounded education provides all students with tools for self-expression (Delgado, & Humm-Delgado, 2018). If an individual's speech patterns are limited or non-traditional, then expression of their feelings or needs is likewise limited. In a medical study involving children with ASD and nurses using music therapy for treatment, similar positive verbal and non-verbal improvements in communication were reported (Haesler, 2011). In my experiences, I have observed this kind of shift in positivity in a classroom when any kind of music is played through a speaker or used as part of a lesson. It is such a simple tool that many educators and even students use while studying or exercising, we turn on the jam!

Studies have also shown that music-induced positivity can increase the means of cognitive auditory attention (Putkinen, Makkonen & Eerola, 2017) which also proves beneficial for students with ASD, or any student in a learning environment. Additionally, a British study found a link between positive mood and text processing (Scrimin & Mason, 2015). A different type of energy is required to dismiss an upbeat song; it is almost harder to fight against the beat than to join in and tap your toes. Students can find a calm and consistency in music. This comes with the caveat that volume and type of

music should be taken into consideration when working with students with ASD given any preexisting sensitivities to sound.

### **7.1.3. Dance**

Speaking with physical therapists, often an issue for students is lack of physical activity. This can be because there is physically not space at the school which means limited recess time to be distributed to all classes or lack of funding for a gym teacher. An element of the diagnosis of ASD can be poor motor functioning in some cases (Scharoun et al., 2014), which often results in potentially low physical activity which can lead to greater health problems in life. Therefore, in order to engage students with ASD in a physical activity, a level of creativity and safety is required. In other conversations with educators they have observed an aversion to sports for students with ASD, perhaps due to the over stimulation that sports can provide or the additional rules of a team agenda with winning and losing which can be challenging as well. An alternative to traditional physical education and a safe means of engaging in physical activity is dance/movement therapy (Scharoun et al., 2014).

American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA) defines Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) “as the psychotherapeutic use of movement to further the emotional, cognitive, physical and social integration of the individual” (American Dance Therapy Association, 2009). Movement that involves physical mirroring (i.e. physically imitating another person exactly as though in a mirror) has shown increases in what is considered to be appropriate social and physical behavior for students with ASD (Koch et al., 2015). “Mirroring allows a child to see the effects of their movements on another person and in

that way, explore what his or her own body is capable of accomplishing” (Koch et. al, 2015 p. 216). As we saw with the case of Lucy, this kind of physical activity can have empowering effects of leadership as well through this form of clear, non-verbal communication amongst a group.

Movement and mirroring can have a very meditative effect on a classroom as well. In 2020, there are more and more schools from PreK to higher education prioritizing mindfulness. I could honestly write an entire separate thesis on this concept; however I do think that dance and movement play a key part in that puzzle. In Buddhist learnings, in walking meditations led by Andrea Bocconi, Ferrucci states, “In five minutes, the atmosphere in the group changed, from being distracted and dispersed to being clear and open” (2006, p. 123). This kind of shared, group, focus is paramount for any classroom or learning environment. I would argue that while mindfulness can be achieved on an individual level, the collective benefits are outstanding. Learning and experiencing these benefits of said therapies give student the possibility to perform and share what they are able to do. Therapy allows for moments of discovery and exploration on an individual level. Beyond the physical health benefits of movement, dance is able to provide students with ASD an additional means of expression and communication as well.

*I can dance a tango, I can read Greek, easy.  
I can slay a dragon, any old week, easy.  
What's hard is simple.  
What's natural comes hard.  
Maybe you could show me  
(Sondheim, 1964)*

## 7.2. Combining Three Modalities

I'd like to show you something that for whatever reason comes naturally to me and that is combining singing, acting and dancing. The word 'modality' means a particular way in which something exists or is experienced or expressed (Webster). The etymology relates back to the Latin *modus*, "measure, song, rhythm, manner, way" which evolved into "mood" in Late Latin's grammar and logic. It's interesting that the word itself relates to the elements of musical theater. During my research I found little literature on musical theater interventions or educational practices, therapies or otherwise. It makes sense that it is easier and more aligned with scientific practices to look separately at each discipline and evaluate their merits as a therapy. While dance, theater and music therapies or experiences are beneficial for students, each discipline only accesses one area of the brain, one element of engagement, rather than three intersecting and exciting areas which contribute to a well-rounded education. Additionally, by using three modalities, there is a higher likelihood that a student will be drawn to one element rather than dismissing the entire experience outright.

All of the studies that I researched (few of many) highlight the positive outcomes and demonstrate an opportunity for students to gain abilities and skills in an educational setting through the performing arts. Being able to showcase a student's capabilities in front of an audience is an important means of empowerment and sense of belonging within a community. In a comprehensive article on students with disabilities and the performing arts, Delgado and Humm-Delgado say; "There is little doubt that this youth field is primed to continue expanding and embracing concepts such as empowerment and

challenging our thinking of how it will undergo changes” (Delgado & Humm-Delgado, 2017, p. 115). They also highlight the opportunities for community engagement with people of all abilities and various backgrounds as an additional step towards inclusion. By limiting students with disabilities to therapies rather than fully realized performing arts experiences, which they may or may not have in their IEP’s, they are missing out on a part of their education. Likewise, for students in schools with limited space, resources or time dedicate to the performing arts, the same outcome is true.

### **7.3. Misinformation**

I believe that the performing arts unlock and uncover existing doorways of communication that lie within people with ASD. However, societal, educational and medical models hold beliefs can prohibit those doors from being revealed. Along those lines, the performing arts carry a stigma within American culture and society as a frivolous pastime. Recently, an article in the New York Times highlighted a story of an organization that researched and gave a space for dance for students with ASD (Hollow, 2019). The article included many positive personal narratives from parents including one anecdote where a child told his mother he loved her for the first time while he was dancing. People who have experienced interacting with students with limited verbal abilities due to ASD know that this is a significant step.

While it is often danger to read the comments section in an online forum, it is always a window into how the greater population feels about the topic. The article was couched with comments that ranged from contributing supportive literature to negative comments including an individual who stated there was no “empirical evidence” to

support the benefits of dance for students with ASD as described in the article and dismissed the act of dancing as a pastime. The author of this comment reflects an often-generalized viewpoint on arts integration and special education.

Interestingly, as I delved into the research highlighted in the Times article, I found that the author, Bhat, omitted the word dance in the research keywords, and rather used: rhythm, robots, communication, autism, embodied and interventions (Srinivasan, Eigsti, Gifford, & Bhat, 2016). This is another example where semantics may be limiting progression due to socially preconceived notions. It is as though the authors did not want to diminish their findings by using the word dance. Anecdotally, I have had other conversations with grant writers who echo the benefits of omitting traditional performing arts language but rather focus on the concepts of ‘communication’ and ‘embodiment.’ Perhaps this is a cultural shift which could lead to more acceptance of these modalities of expression for people with disabilities or in schools without access to these kinds of educational opportunities.

Despite the wide variety of published articles regarding the value and effectiveness of art therapy (e.g. dance, drama and music) for students with ASD and other disabilities (Lim & Draper, 2011; Delgado & Humm-Delgado, 2017; Scharoun et al., 2014), access to these therapies can occur within school time but is not guaranteed through current educational policies. For typically developing students without diagnosed disabilities there is also little educational policy in place nationwide to ensure their access to dance, drama or music in the school day. This illustrates that while there can be

scientific evidence of an educational technique, intervention or support for a student, it does not guarantee that they will have access to it (Americans for the Arts, 2018).

### 7.3.1. Unnecessary Band-Aids

*Maybe you could show me  
How to let go,  
Lower my guard,  
Learn to be free.  
(Sondheim, 1964)*

There are times when the students show you how to let go, lower your guard and learn to be free. In the same moment, a principal can force you to hold on, raise your guard and feel anything but free, but in that moment, I learned a lot. There is an inherent and automatic inclusion of abilities that often occurs within the performing arts. Due to the heightened sense of reality that theater allows for, there is a fluidity between realism and what is possible. Before I had the opportunity to learn more about the culture of disability, I was working at as a teaching artist at middle school for students with disabilities. I had been embracing this kind of performing arts fluidity as a means of putting on a successful, celebratory and inclusive production of the *Wizard of Oz*.

After getting to know the students, I thought I'd try the first scene with non-traditional casting. Katie, a non-verbal 7th grader, was playing Dorothy. Toto was being played by another non-verbal student, Amir. Katie used her iPad (facilitated language device) to verbalize sentences based on visual pictograms. Toto responded in emotionally driven barks to each of the device's 'spoken' words. The scene went great! When it came time to sing, *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*, Katie smiled and put her head down. As the adults in the room began to trouble shoot, Denny started making noises and gesturing

from the audience. He communicated that he wanted to be wheeled to the stage. Denny was not able to wheel himself due to his severe Cerebral Palsy. He volunteered to sing *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*.

We rehearsed the scene with Denny singing and Katie mirrored me in a balletic dance, Amir still sitting on the bench as Toto, fully engaged and smiling. We kept rehearsing, as you would any other play, fixing spots that didn't work, stopping and starting, giving notes. At one point, I had been so focused on Katie's dancing that I hadn't realized that Denny was singing through tears. I don't know him well enough to know what that meant for him, but his paraprofessional and the other teachers were encouraging him to continue. Katie gave him a fist pump and a smile. Denny's lip was bleeding but he kept singing.

The principal of the school heard about this concept of two students representing Dorothy in that moment, each using a different artistic modality to perform. She was vehemently opposed and said that it was undercutting their abilities to put on a traditional show. She said, "We are trying to put Band-Aids on issues that do not exist. These students are capable." I certainly had not seen anything like this kind of reaction before. The decision to cast multiple students in the roles of *The Wizard of Oz* came out of a collaborative conversation with the teachers who were aiming for equity, giving all of the students an opportunity to have a named role. The teachers and I had joked, this was what Glinda would do, the fair, empathic witch of the East: give all of the students a chance to shine.

It was important to the principal that the final performance was a reflection of the students' capabilities, but in the more traditional societal model of what a musical is and what the expectations of a middle school student are. At the time, I could not understand what felt like a very narrow, single-minded perspective, but now I can see that she was doing her best to adhere to societal expectations of a performance while acknowledging the potentially low expectations the audience would likely have. At the time, it seemed like a self-centered argument, like this woman wanted to have her school put on a good-looking show at any cost. As Brené Brown defines leading, "Daring leadership is ultimately about serving other people, not ourselves. That's why we choose courage" (Brown 2018, p.69). The issue of equitable opportunity within this performance setting led both the principal and me to believe that we were serving others, not ourselves, yet through opposing decisions and philosophies of representation onstage and in casting processes.

Upon reflection, I now see that one could argue that the rehearsal was offering a kind of therapy for Denny, Katie and Amir an isolated moment of expression, not to be shared with an audience. It was individualized, maybe not truly performance based. However, if the definition of therapy is a correction or cure, our rehearsal did not appear to be 'curing' any of the students, they were having a good time and if anything putting themselves through a big challenge to do so. And wouldn't that non-traditional performance provide a type of correction for the audience? A correction of the normative standards that these students are held to. It is a complex issue to be certain.

I feel hopeful and confident that there will be an increase in performing arts modalities used in educational systems in the future. The current research studies are abundant and are increasingly looking at benefits for students from cognitive, physical, behavioral and intellectual vantage points for not just students with disabilities but for all. To me it seems clear that any kind of advocacy for change falls onto individuals to instigate change within the ongoing Disability Rights Movement. Those advocates are often parents, teachers, school officials and students themselves sharing needs and the lack of outside support. The road may look long but it is worth pushing the limits in demanding the right to be empowered through the performing arts as a part of the education for all students, especially those with disabilities.

## CHAPTER 8: NEW PHILOSOPHY

### 8.1. Applied Behavior Analysis

*Just like a busy bee  
Each new philosophy  
Can fly from tree to tree  
And keep me moving!  
(Lippa, 1999)*

One of the most interesting elements of being a teaching artist is being exposed to a myriad of classroom teachers' philosophies. It was always fascinating to observe moments of incredible classroom management and individualized attention that adeptly mitigated student behavior. I observed, just like Sally Brown in the musical *You're a Goodman Charlie Brown*, each new teaching philosophy could change at a dizzying pace (Lippa, 1999). Sometimes, the key to a student's participation appeared to be found in clear plastic boxes with cut-up gummy bears, a timer next to the iPad, a few calm reminders or a perfectly timed high five. How did they do it? I learned that these successful techniques were using aspects of applied behavior analysis (ABA). In the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, Baer, Wolf, and Risley (1968) defined applied behavior analysis as the "process of applying sometimes tentative principles of behavior to the improvement of specific behaviors, and simultaneously evaluating whether or not any changes noted are indeed attributed to the process of application" (p. 91).

I learned that the keys to those successes did not lie solely in the objects of desire for the students, but in the teacher's diligent and consistent observation and then implementation of plans. ABA uses a variety of extensively researched instructional

methods, most recognizably positive reinforcement, along with many others, such as shaping, modeling, errorless learning, time delay, task analysis and chaining. The behaviors that I observed being addressed were to help student stay safe and ultimately learn more in the classroom. ABA can also be used to increase communication and language, social skills, self-care, play or leisure activities, motor skills, learning and academic skills. Additionally, I have observed what I believe were attempts at using ABA by teachers who were either undertrained or used similar techniques without the full extent of knowledge required to effectively change a student's behavior through this form of educational attention or intervention.

I wanted to include portions of a study that I conducted because I believe that it is important for both teaching artists and educators to consider this interdisciplinary opportunity to use selected elements of ABA when teaching a new skill in the performing arts. Additionally, the example that singing can be used as a positive reinforcer for the right student could also be beneficial to some educators. I am not a certified behavior analyst or behaviorist as they are occasionally referred to in the public schools. All of the information in my study was for my own education purposes.

I have changed the language to reflect my thought processes rather than the formalized presentation of the case study. Traditional ABA studies use specific vocabulary to aid other ABA specialists to quickly understand and potentially replicate the intervention. I've done my best to casually define the vocabulary so that if a teaching artist, parent or student is working with a behavioral analyst, maybe these terms will seem less daunting or intimidating. The process of putting together, implementing and

documenting a student's progress was a positive and beneficial experience for me and I hope that the reader is able to also see how clarity of expectations can lead to exciting surprises.

### **8.1.1 Using ABA with Song**

*It's like a guarantee  
Each new philosophy  
And things are sure to be a whole lot brighter!  
(Lippa, 1999)*

The intervention I designed and implemented used individually selected ABA procedures with an elementary school student with ASD to increase accurate answers to target questions using positive reinforcement and a prompting hierarchy. The participant, one of my old students, engaged in a singing-based intervention which was designed to increase answers to target questions. A prompting hierarchy was used as part of the intervention with a positive reinforcement schedule based on social reinforcers, which I will describe later. Intervention resulted in the participant showing an ascending trend for percentage of accurate answers and a decreased trend in echolalic responses, meaning it kind of worked! The implications may result in the use of song for future interventions as a means of increasing engagement and accuracy for students with ASD.

Communication is vitally important for human beings as a means of survival, expression and connection. Deficits in communication are one of the primary characteristics of ASD and therefore developing interventions focused on communication and language skills is necessary for any person with ASD (Lim & Draper, 2011). A common form of voicing for individuals with ASD is via echolalia, a verbal disorder where speech is repeated or echoed (Sterponi & Shankey, 2014). Echolalia is

characteristic of at least 85% of the children with ASD who acquire speech, therefore this large population could greatly benefit from effective interventions (Lim & Draper, 2011). Research suggests that echolalic speech may serve interactional goals based on the multifunctional and often sophisticated use of echoes (Sterponi & Shankey, 2014). Other studies infer that echolalic speech is a result of prefrontal abnormalities and therefore subjects with ASD lack the ability to separate background noise resulting in an environmental dependency (Grossi et al., 2013). For these reasons, the exact cause of echolalic speech and its meaning has not been concluded, which means that interventions related to this type of speech and communication are not traditional nor standardized. The observable outcome of behavior related to echolalia is an inability to communicate accurately, which is being addressed in this study.

Many of my students used echolalic speech, to the point where I began to recognize it as their own language or non-traditional means of communicating. After these repetitions with multiple students, I began to notice patterns. However, I knew that if these students did not have empathic ears listening to them, their means of communicating may come across as meaningless or even irritating. I also observed teaching songs with call and response gave these students an opportunity to truly excel, which makes sense, of course. I wanted to see what kind of existing research was out there related to this.

Previous research (Lim & Draper, 2011) suggests that when music is integrated with ABA and verbal behavior (VB), communication deficits for students with ASD can improve. In this research, Lim and Draper found, "Pairing target verbal behavior with

musical experiences establishes effective automatic reinforcement, and it can increase the frequency of the communicative behaviors and social interaction in children with ASD” (p. 534). By using music to increase communication through ABA techniques, students with ASD can potentially overcome deficits such as echolalia.

Part of the issues of communication surrounding specifically elementary aged students with ASD is the inability to relay to their parents, caregivers and instructors what they did during the day at school (Murdock & Hobbs, 2011). We all know how hard it can be to have a student reply to the age old question, “What did you do in school today?” to be met with a shrug and “nothing” and eventually, the kid will eventually leak some details about getting a sticker on their test or the surprise fire drill. But imagine if every day that question was met with a line from a TV show, and always the same TV show. As a parent or guardian you would begin to feel discouraged, worried and frustrated.

In an ABA study conducted by Murdock and Hobbs, an investigation using a visual cueing system (VCS) was effective in assisting students in their abilities to share information about their school day (Murdock & Hobbs, 2011). This can take the form of a laminated sheet of paper with various pictures or graphics that the student can point to answer a question rather than verbally engaging. There are many kinds of visual cueing systems. However, when VCS does not prove effective for all students with ASD given the heterogeneity of the disorder, one can infer that another form of intervention could be implemented, such as giving the voice an alternative way of interacting with a question.

In thinking about the effective and fun sessions of singing with students who had echolalic speech patterns, I wanted to find what research had been conducted related to song or music and students with ASD. Studies have shown that music can induce a positive mood and also broaden the scope of auditory attention for all students (Putkinen, Makkonen, & Eerola, 2017). The positive mood finding is not so surprising, but auditory attention may be something that we do not always consider. Given this correlation between music and positive mood, there is also literature supporting increased comprehension when students are in a positive mood (Scrimin & Mason, 2015); also a fact that makes sense, since happy students are more likely to be happy participating and engaging. Research supports connections between increased communication and comprehension due to music, positive moods and the use of video technology, ultimately supported by the use of ABA. Lim's studies reflect a similar outcome, "Participating in musical activities is a positive reinforcement for continuing the desirable verbal behaviors in children with autism" (Lim & Draper, 2011, p. 534). Therefore, the research design adhered to traditions within ABA while incorporating additional approaches which served multiple purposes.

### **8.1.2. Singing the Schedule**

In my study, called 'Singing the Schedule,' the dependent variable or desired outcome of the process was the number of correct responses to target questions. When asked target questions, the elementary aged student with ASD, Bella, would correctly answer after engaging in a directed song. The independent variable, or means by which this was to occur, was the song itself which served as a means of educating through

modeling and shaping and also positive reinforcement. The importance of the study was to provide an intervention which could result in an increase in correct answers to questions about a daily schedule. An additional purpose of this single-subject design was to investigate if singing could also serve as a generalizable condition for other subject areas.

In addition to special education services, Bella received speech/language pathology for echolalia and general communication as well as occupational therapy for her motor control. Bella was linguistically able and used speech as her primary mode of communication though much of her speech was delayed echoes (i.e. repetitions from utterances heard earlier in the day or week) (Sterponi & Shankey, 2014). She did not use any kind of augmentative communication device.

Prior to this intervention, Bella verbally and physically exhibited enthusiasm about singing. In previous musical sessions, Bella demonstrated excitement by independently transitioning to her designated musical theater spot, solely based on my walking in the door. Her classroom teachers reflected that this was uncommon behavior as she often required multiple forms of prompting to transition between activities during the school day. Bella independently practiced the lyrics to the songs unprompted in the classroom and at appropriate times she would verbally request to watch the rehearsal videos. Bella had the ability to match vocal pitches and singing styles, although at times she will sing either very high or very low in an unpredictable manner, a feature of echolalia (Grossi et al., 2013). Bella was physically affectionate with teachers, verbally requesting and giving hugs and high fives.

During previous musical theater classes, when Bella began spontaneously reciting words from television shows in an echolalic manner she was able to be redirected from this form of communication. She was able to be redirected by: (a) close physical proximity from an instructor, (b) direct eye contact from the instructor, (c) the words “Bella, turn the TV off”, and (d) physically prompting her with a ‘microphone’ (e.g. a large drawing marker). These methods served as a punishment as they instantly decreased the behavior of echolalic speech. In ABA, punishment does not necessarily mean a negative outcome, just an end to one kind of behavior (that vocabulary can be confusing). Use of a microphone object appeared to give Bella a direct visual and tactile focus on singing the lyrics of the song. She used it like a true super star! We also telecommunicated for sessions which meant that perhaps she felt like she was on tv.

When asked target questions, Bella would, ideally verbally, correctly answer three questions related to her daily schedule after singing her schedule. The operational definition of the target response was considered an answer that is: (a) relevant (i.e. an event that had, would or could occur in the school day or could be considered relatable to the material); and (b) accurate, answering the event questions correctly correlating to when it occurred in the day.

These goals were based on conversations that I had with the speech therapist. The plan needed to be: (a) of value to the student to be able to communicate with her parents and teachers about daily events, (b) achievable based her on previous exhibition of song lyric retention, and (c) using ethical practices during the intervention, as it consisted of only singing and asking questions. It was important to her teachers and parents that Bella

start to communicate and demonstrate her comprehension of daily events. Prior to the study, visual cue sheets (VCS) were inconclusive in their effectiveness as a means for Bella to communicate, therefore the use of a different form of intervention was chosen for this task (Murdock & Hobbs, 2011). The goal of the study is to increase the number of responses to target questions. The target questions that were asked were: (a) When do you go to school? (b) Where do you eat breakfast? (c) What do you learn? (d) Where do you learn? The lyrics to the song reflected all of the desired accurate answers: (a) morning, (b) cafeteria, (c) math, reading and writing and (d) classroom or at school.

At the beginning of the process when asked, “What do you do at school?” Bella was either silent or would say a seemingly unrelated line of dialogue from a TV show. To start each session, Bella was greeted by my smiling digital face and a wave and some kind of verbal praise along the lines of, “Hi Bella! It is so good to see you! Today we’re going to sing our, ‘This is what I do Each Day Song.’” I’d ask Bella the target questions before, during and after the singing of the song, recording all of the responses. This kind of enthusiasm and joy is something that I think is very important when interacting with any student, but especially to establish trust. Even if it seems like a student doesn't understand me, I always try to remember to say that I am happy to see them, as I think it makes a difference.

I made up the lyrics based on what the SLP had said were basic questions that they were hoping she’d be able to answer. During previous sessions, Bella would often clap and sing more frequently when a song had a driving, discernable rhythm. For that reason, the instructor found an existing instrumental song called ‘Groovin’ (Mitchell, 1967) and

wrote the lyrics of the song that were sung to that rhythm during intervention. By taking Bella's preferences into consideration when designing the study, the song acted as the generalized conditioned reinforcer. Additionally, her preferences being honored led to a more positive learning experience and potentially increased accuracy (Scrimin & Mason, 2015).

The song was taught using a combination of chaining, modeling, shaping, fading and a simple prompting hierarchy. Forward chaining was used by teaching the student one line of the song at a time, eventually leading to a completion of a chorus or verse. The instructor would sing one line of the song then ask Bella to repeat on her own or with the instructor. If Bella did not respond, I would say: "Bella, you do it" or, "Your turn" or, "Now you sing." This would continue by adding the next line of the song, and the next until the end of a verse or chorus was completed. As a form of modeling and total chaining, the instructor would use the music track and sing a larger piece of the song from start to finish using gestures as she sang. Often, Bella would not sing along but would engage in the gestures. Adding gestures to any song helps students to remember the words and gives them an additional opportunity to show engagement and get the information into their bodies in a different way. Nearing the end of the session, I'd sing the remaining lines that had not been taught using call and response as a means of introduction to familiarize for the next session. As sessions progressed, fading, or pulling back on instruction, was used as Bella sang more of the song independently and unprompted along with her responses to questions.

The reinforcement schedule was based on natural, positive, social reinforcers, meaning that we, myself and the SLP, were letting Bella know that she was on track in very natural ways that made her feel happy. Because singing was already a desired activity, the entire intervention served as a generalized reinforcer while implementing social and verbal praise. This decision was based on previously successful motivators in the classroom. Bella's social reinforcers included: (a) expressions (e.g., smiling, laughing, nodding, clapping, undivided focus and attention from the instructor via the screen); (b) contact (e.g. the speech therapist would give Bella a high five or a hug); and (c) words and phrases (e.g. Good job! Wonderful singing! So proud of you! That's right! and other phrases that were sincere and related to her actions in the moment). Additionally, at times the SLP would cover Bella's image reflected in the Skype screen and she was told that the stickie note would be removed if she answered a question correctly. On average Bella was asked each of the four questions two to four times resulting in a total of six to 12 opportunities to answer.

Data was collected using event recording, or tally marks every time she answered a question. The target questions were asked at the beginning of the session, prior to singing, and at the end of session after singing. Responses were recorded immediately following the 20-minute session on data sheet by the instructor. Answers were recorded and coded by: (a) appropriate one-two word answer, (b) appropriate phrase, (c) unrelated one-two words, (d) echolalia phrase, or (e) no response.

I analyzed the data by assigning a point value to each of the answers on a scale of 0-3: (a) echolalic answers were assigned 0 points, (b) relevant answers one points, (c)

accurate answer two points. These numbers were then totaled and the total number of responses for that session was divided by the answers. The overall arch of echolalic responses was within the one-two range for five of the seven sessions. Relevant answers were on an ascending trend until session five, followed by an increase on to four responses. During the final session, the relevant answers declined to three responses. The goal of the intervention was focused on accurate answer increase and therefore the decline in relevant answers in this case was a result of those responses being replaced by accurate responses. Accurate answers remained higher than three responses after the second session, culminating in an ascending trend.

There were a number of limitations to this study, which are helpful to learn from. This is to say, while the participant's accurate responses ascended, I could not identify whether those responses were due to comprehension or rote memorization. The accurate answers averaged above 50% for the duration of the study, which is significant considering the initial baseline of 0%; however, the averages did not truly ascend after the third session. This exhibits another limit to the study which was the types of questions that were asked. If given different types of mand or tact verbal responses options (Lim & Draper, 2011), the participant may have had a greater ascending trend of average accuracy, as further addressed in the discussion.

Another limitation was relying on wi-fi to communicate with the participant. While studies have supported the use of video for increased engagement for students with ASD (Hart, & Walton, 2012), issues of live streaming wi-fi can be seen reflected in the graph. During session five, there was an observable decrease in total number of responses

and accuracy this was also a day when the internet connection was causing a lag between the instructor's voice and movement resulting in a change in behavior for the participant.

The overall impact of this intervention on the target behavior of answering questions accurately was effective. The participant was engaged in the intervention and while her answers did not exceed expectations of accuracy, the types of responses demonstrated enhanced functioning over the course of this intervention. Bella never exhibited observable behaviors that could indicate that she was feeling a sense of stress, frustration, anxiety, distrust or complete disengagement. Moments when Bella was non-responsive did not continue for long durations and she was easily re-engaged through simple verbal requests typically with one to three repetitions. These observable behaviors of participation and enjoyment proved to be an effective outcome of the intervention as well as ethically sound in practice. Ultimately, it appeared that it was a fun and enjoyable experience for her.

## **8.2. Creative Problem Solving**

Based on discussions with Bella's SLP, personal reflection and additional research, in the future I would make a number of alterations to the research design in hopes of creating a more effective study. Firstly, I would be in the same physical space as the participant in the future. The additional challenges that wi-fi connections and screen engagement presented were not beneficial despite the research supportive video use for students with ASD. I would change the type of questions asked. I learned that 'when' questions are very challenging for students with ASD, specifically in Bella's case. In future studies, perhaps beginning with 'what' questions would prove more beneficial to

the participant as a starting point. Likewise, I believe that if I had been able to physically engage Bella (i.e. standing up, participating in mirroring gestures), there would have also been an increase in targeted behavior. This is based on my past experiences as well as supported through cognitive studies charting student behavior through physical and rhythmic engagement (Srinivasan et al., 2016).

In future studies of this nature, it would be helpful to be able to identify the antecedent which occasions the behavior of echolalic speech in order to best create a consequence related to the possible function for the individual participant. For Bella, my observations led me to believe that echolalic speech was used when she was overly excited or distracted, however these are not definable behaviors. The existing consequence of saying, “Bella, turn the TV off” was effective in punishing the discrete behavior, however without knowing the antecedent a functional relationship cannot be established. Additionally, due to the short duration of the study, there was not an opportunity to thin the positive reinforcement which could have shown how effective the study was.

An anecdotal observation that could potentially imply generalization was Bella’s reaction after the first session. The SLP noted that when they were walking to the room for the second session with me, Bella was able to answer the questions of where she was going, what they were going to do, and who would be at the session. Previously, as reflected in the baseline, those were questions that Bella had not answered nor volunteered. This kind of spontaneous conversation is in many ways more significant than her ability to routinely answer, “Where do you eat breakfast?” however the study was not

designed to collect data related to spontaneous speech. It could also indicate that having the opportunity to sing during the day was engaging enough for Bella to either want or be able to answer those questions.

I believe in and have witnessed the effectiveness of ABA for students with disabilities, specifically ASD. In my six years of teaching, I have observed increases in social skills, communication and engagement due to participation in the performing arts for students with ASD. There is overlap between the two areas of educational practice, to be certain (i.e. teaching material through shaping, fading, chaining, using prompting hierarchies, and positive reinforcement schedules). However, I think that the most effective area of collaboration between ABA and the performing arts would result in educators using singing, acting and dancing as a means of implementing Osborn-Parnes Creative Problem Solving (CPS) when working with students with disabilities (Giangreco, 1993).

Creative Problem Solving is a process that many people use all the time by following six steps: identifying the "mess" or objective, gathering information through observations, clarifying the challenge, generating ideas, evaluating ideas, turning ideas into action (p. 116). In many ways this process is similar to the scientific method and other sequential decision-making models. Another simplified means of thinking of CPS is clarify, ideate, develop and implement (Puccio, et al., 2011). This kind of problem solving happens frequently in the classroom, sometimes in a matter of seconds or, in the case of ABA, over the course of many days or weeks of problem solving.

Bella's engagement with material greatly increased and the speech language pathologist shared that she was making correct, verbal connections between her location, the future and identifying an individual by name, all atypical behavior for her. I believe that this change in behavior was because she was creatively engaged with the material that she was learning. I was using CPS when considering how to incorporate my previous experiences with the research design, creating a "forced relationship which is achieved when two objects or ideas that appear to have little or no relationship to each other are combined or rearranged in some way to generate a new idea to solve a problem" (Giangreco, 1993, p. 118). I believe that if Bella's educators use song and gesture to engage with her throughout the school day, there is the potential for an increase in a variety of targeted behaviors as determined by her individualized learning program (IEP). Additionally, with closer listening to her means of communicating through echolalic speech, looking at that problem as an opportunity, perhaps she will fade that behavior if given alternatives through differential reinforcement based on her means of communicating.

### **8.2.1. Creative Listening**

*Some philosophies pick and choose  
Deciding what goes in it  
Some take a lifetime!  
Mine take a minute!  
(Lippa, 1999)*

I found some interesting anecdotal observations related to the content of the echolalic responses that I would not have anticipated nor have known how to account for in this study. For example, the initial echolalic phrase that Bella repeated during the first

session was related to music that I had taught her two years prior. She was making a clear connection between who I was and a past experience, exhibiting comprehension and a personal memory. I acknowledged that she was attempting to communicate and striving for an accurate means speaking. Explicitly, Bella kept repeating: “Abiyoyo” and I said, “Yes, Bella, I hear that you remember singing Abiyoyo with me. You can say, ‘I remember singing with you.’” She did not repeat me, however, she also did not say ‘Abiyoyo’ in any of the sessions after that. Acknowledgment of a potential meaning appeared to stop her repetitions of that particular phrase.

During that session, she also calmly repeated the phrase: “Of course, Mommy.” I do not have a point of reference for that phrase, therefore I could not provide any kind of support or context related to that speech pattern and she continued to repeat it for multiple sessions. No acknowledgement of meaning seemed to lead to continued attempts from her. These are just observations and speculations. In the later sessions, she began to use phrases such as, “Thank you, thank you, that was our last song.” This phrase would happen after applause, in many ways an acceptable scripted response, therefore I did not offer a correction for this behavior. Go ahead and say thank you, Bella!

In the final sessions, she began singing, “The Itsy, Bitsy, Spider” along with the movements that correspond with the song. The SLP stopped her multiple times from doing this. However, in retrospect, I could see an attempt for Bella to communicate that she understood that she was supposed to sing a song and also that she was using hand gestures with the song. The same way that any kid would come into gym class saying, "Look what I learned how to do!" and dribble a basketball that was in front of them, she

was sharing a relevant skill in a relevant context. I was not able to make that connection until after the conclusion of the study and wish that I could have told her, “great connection, Bella, thank you for showing me what you know.”

This study and the ABA course taught me a number of valuable skills which are transferable for my current and future teaching practices. Having the ability to define and consider teaching styles such as backward, forward and total chaining among others, are practices that I have used but will now be able to apply in a more consistent manner. These are tools that educators use all of the time, likely without naming it. Considering what and how to implement a positive reinforcement schedule has already proven beneficial, even in classes where I am not familiar with the student’s pre-existing behaviors. Considering the steps of Creative Problem Solving; clarify, ideate, develop and implement, are paramount in any kind of specialized or general work with students, lesson plans and classroom management. Overall, ABA has shown me the value in clarity of expectations for both the students and the educator allows for exponential growth by removing gray areas which can lead to barriers.

## CHAPTER 9: PUTTING IT TOGETHER

*Bit by bit, putting it together  
Piece by piece, only way to make a work of art  
Every moment makes a contribution  
Every little detail plays a part  
Having just a vision's no solution  
Everything depends on execution  
Putting it together (That's what counts)  
(Sondheim, 1984)*

"Having just a vision's no solution, everything depends on execution" is a lyric from *Sunday in the Park with George*, a musical inspired by Georges Seurat's immersion into the famous painting "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte" (Sondheim, 1964). In the process of mixing these personal narratives with scholarly references I wanted to make sure that these examples weren't mere 'visions.' I was curious about what other means of 'execution' could be considered through performing arts education integration. In all of these moments that I've shared I began to wonder about how more students could have experiences of empowerment and empathy through the performing arts. How can I share my experiences with others who are passionate about learning about this? How can research create lasting education policy change for these students? What is another form of action to take?

In my quest to learn more, I turned to the empirical research on the topic of students with ASD. I was fortunate to enroll in a course with Dr. Emily Coderre, where I learned about how research is conducted on, with and for people with ASD. The same way that I had experienced the challenges of creating consistent curriculum and set of expectations for students with ASD, researchers have also come across these challenges. An individual with ASD may exhibit a range of behavior. At times it may appear that the

extent of social, cognitive, physical and verbal variances is so vast that conclusive research cannot be determined. I am speaking in general terms as there is extensive and conclusive research that continues to expand the breadth of knowledge on the subject.

Some of the generalized stereotypic behaviors that can inhibit research on a larger sample size are hyper-sensitivity, communication deficits, physical limitations and lack of eye contact or traditional means of showing engagement (Volkmar, 2014). Another generalization is that people with ASD are limited in their ability to show empathy, a difficult human behavior to define let alone prove an individual's ability to show or feel. Empathy is at the core of so many exciting moments that I have experienced with students in this population, so I was intrigued by studies that attempted to quantify and tabulate this as well.

In previous research, common challenges are often cited as small samples sizes and initial 'cooperation' from participants when being studied in research settings (Billeci et al., 2016). From my perspective, one of the most important factors in these research studies is access to a naturalistic setting to aid in feasibility of participation, sample size and willingness to engage with the interventions. Based on my previous challenges of having a student enter an auditorium for an activity involving their peers and familiar faces, I would venture that it could be difficult to ask a student to enter an unfamiliar room with a new person at a research site.

I believe that there are studies and methodologies that could be employed that are both beneficial for future research while providing participants with an immediate positive experience and ideally a future of educational growth. Through mixed-methods

research, I believe that a comprehensive collection of data could lead to future research in a variety of fields.

### **9.1. Interdisciplinary Research**

*First of all you need a good foundation  
Otherwise it's risky from the start  
Takes a lot of earnest conversation  
(Sondheim, 1984)*

Through earnest conversations, I realized that my experiences could be beneficial for individuals who were conducting studies to learn more about the complicated elements of ASD. I understand that I may dipping my toes into the big-unfounded claims pool by saying that arts integration and ASD research both have a place in the classroom and could lead to findings that could help future educators and students. In seeking to find a good foundation, I fell down the research rabbit hole. This information guided conversations with professors, artists and students to begin piecing together a kind of call to action, or at least planting the seeds of interdisciplinary collaboration.

I found that there is extensive research supporting the use of various types of art integrated therapies for students with ASD, as noted earlier. The benefits of these therapies have been primarily investigated as evidence base practices (EBP) which have been incorporated into educational and therapeutic settings for students with ASD (Delgado & Humm-Delgado, 2017). Research has increased regarding the benefits of learning performing arts through traditional rehearsal techniques and the benefits of integrating the art forms into education settings as a means of increasing comprehension of material and cognitive activity (Wandell, et al., 2008). I am presenting the idea of combining these research questions for larger sample sizes.

### 9.1.1. Memory

For typically developing students, a number of studies also reflect positive outcomes in studies involving these modalities of drama, dance and music. One particular study caught my eye involving typically developing (TD) college students, 11 with extensive musical training and 11 without musical training. The students were tested on memory tasks in two different types of rehearsal processes using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) (Jonides, 2008). The process of rote memorization elicited more brain activity for the musicians, while an “elaborative” rehearsal (i.e. using emotion) showed higher brain activity for non-musicians (Jonides, 2008, p. 11). The same author conducted a similar study with 21 TD actors and non-actors. The findings revealed that actors were more able to extract the general idea or “gist” from verbal material, rather than verbatim verbal memory (Jonides, 2008, p. 12). As a trained actor, I found this interesting and could see the truth in it. For an audition, it always felt more important to have a sense of what the scene or monologue was. From there, I would engage my imagination. The specific words came after and rarely stayed with me beyond the audition room.

While these studies were not conducted with participants who have ASD, the subject matter is significant as it identifies a cognitive increase in memory when emotions are involved and that skills acquired in theater and music aid in comprehension. As described by Jonides (2008), “[what] we seem to be learning from the study of the effects of two arts (music and acting) on cognition is that the benefits of each are not a result of structural changes that they produce in the cognitive system; rather, the benefits

are the result of strategic changes on the cognitive system” (p. 12). My understanding of this concept is that “strategic changes” allow for proper preparation to occur in the brain. The openness of “strategic changes” which occur as a potential result of music and theater could also lead one to believe that any student could benefit from these practices in the classroom.

### **9.1.2. Comprehension**

*Is putting it together  
Bit by Bit  
Part by Part  
Fit by Fit  
Start by Start, Stride by Stride  
Kick by Kick, Glide by Glide  
(Sondheim, 1984)*

Comprehension of abstract content for TD elementary students was aided through the use of bodily movement or *embodied cognition*, the idea that cognitive processes are grounded in our bodies systems of perception and action planning (Kaschak, Connor, & Dombek, 2017). This concept of embodiment cognition is at the center of Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT), which traditionally uses the technique of mirroring, or “empathetic imitation movement” (Scharoun, Reinders, Bryden, & Fletcher, 2014, p. 216), as a means of intervention for many populations including ASD. Another DMT research reflected increases in: (a) psychological well-being, (b) body awareness, (c) self-other distinction (i.e. boundaries between self and others in the study), (d) empathy, and (e) social competence (Koch, Mehl, Sobanski, Sieber, & Fuchs, 2014). Without realizing the full impact, I realized that I have been using embodied cognition and mirroring in

nearly all of my teaching. Learning the vocabulary is important, although it can make the actual practice seem further away from the practice.

Imagine a classroom of students with ASD. All of the aforementioned stereotypic behaviors are at play in the room. There are as many adults as there are students. Like the story with Lucy, with a big smile, I say, “I am your mirror, do what I do!” I put on the music and we start with something simple such as shaking our hands in front of the body. This is a stereotypic movement for many of the students and appears to feel good, whether from a release of energy or a generating of energy. From there, the movements get more precise and specific and for the most part, they will follow along. I’ve had full classes following my movements so closely that when I went to brush my hair out of my face, they all did the same action!

In a study with 36 students with ASD, findings showed that material taught using rhythm and movement-based interventions resulted in increased communication and social skills specifically for non-verbal students (Srinivasan et al., 2016). This study also used the term embodied interventions but did not use the word dance at any time in the research. The findings were collected and analyzed using joint attention test, voice output communication aids, picture exchange communication system and Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (Srinivasan et al., 2016).. The study found an increase in verbalization and communication along with social interactions.

These studies, primarily conducted post-2005, show an increased interest in the research field between cognition and dance, theater and music; specifically, how these modalities interact in the brain and their impact on ASD linked to social skills and

communication. However, a gap in the research is a study which looks at the integration of all three modalities (emotions, rhythm, and embodiment) engaged simultaneously for students with ASD. Additionally, comprehension, or gaining the “gist” of a story or any kind of sequencing does not appear in the literature either. Because all three modalities have not been explored, I hope to encourage others to considering what it would be to investigate the value.

I have witnessed students demonstrate an increase in comprehension of a story after participating in an integrated intervention involving storytelling through rhythm and movement engagement. I’m interested in investigating how storytelling through movement and rhythm is an effective means of increasing: (a) comprehension of material, (b) social cognition, and (c) spontaneous communication for students with ASD. Comprehension of material could be defined by understanding the “gist” of a story and remembering key details and sequences. Social cognition looks at students’ ability to use facial perception, shared attention, theory of mind, perspective and empathy (Baar, & Gage, 2013). Spontaneous communication is any kind of unprompted communication with another person.

As I mentioned earlier, I have observed it can be challenging for students with ASD to identify parts of a sequence, beginning, middle and end. Even a sense of causation within a story can be challenging for students with ASD. An interesting research study conducted by Dr. Coderre involving linguistic and visual narratives supported that the understanding of the narrative comprehension abilities of individuals with ASD is incomplete, making it difficult to fully interpret what they are truly capable

of (Coderre, et. al, 2018). If information is presented like a true story, like a play, with actors, then perhaps we could learn more about students with ASD's ability to comprehend sequences. This was the issue that Bella, the super start singer from before also struggled with.

### **9.1.3. In Action**

To support memory, comprehension and empathy improvement in action I'd like to share the story about the song "Giants in the Sky" by Stephen Sondheim (Sondheim, 1987). The musicality and lyrics are challenging for the most adept musical theater practitioners. However, that did not matter to group of fourth grade students with ASD. Their ability to memorize the lyrics and syncopations far surpassed any other group of students or adults that I've worked with. The song tells the story of Jack and the beanstalk from his perspective, spreading the news about the giants that he's just seen in the sky. In terms of an emotional arc, the song goes from an excited retelling, full of details which bring the character through curiosity, bravery, fear, and comfort to the final resignation that he must go home. The story seemed to resonate with the boys in the class in a way that I could never have anticipated; they were able to fully comprehend and retell the story when this would have been something that was otherwise challenging.

One section of the song was difficult to sing due to the high notes. As a class, without outside prompting, they democratically delegated to have a student sing it as a solo. Just like the actors and musicians in Jonides study, these fourth graders were creating "strategic changes" in their cognitive minds which allowed them to perform and understand the lyrics. The act of assigning a solo on their own may not sound significant,

but given the aforementioned behaviors for students with ASD, among them limited in their ability to show empathy (Volkmar, 2014), recognizing that one student's voice was a benefit for the group was a true act of empathy. I used extensive "empathetic imitation movement" (Scharoun et al., 2014, p. 216), when working with these students, some over the course of three years. It was powerful to see that sentiment echo through their behavior.

Their teacher recounted their enthusiasm to rehearse, their encouragement towards each other if they made a mistake, highlighting the benefits of assigning a challenging song. The process sparked spontaneous conversations and actions between the boys which had not been previously observed, a hand to help the other one up, a slow repetition of the lyrics for one who was struggling. These kinds of social skills are challenging to teach, measure and authenticate, but it's all the more reason that we as educators can and should try every trick in the song book to achieve this art of putting it together for each student.

## **9.2. Collecting Data**

*Working for a tiny compensation  
Hoping for a thunderous ovation  
The art of making art  
Is putting it together  
Bit by Bit  
(Sondheim, 1984)*

A potential barrier for collecting any kind of data is linking these observations of seemingly significant outward progress in comparison to the experience of the participant. For example, perhaps Joel, one of the "Giants in the Sky" singers, had been feeling happier and more supportive of his classmates because of something that

happened on the playground, totally unrelated to the musical theater experience. The only way to know would be to ask him. Due to the heterogeneity of students with ASD, multiple means of demonstrating comprehension and engagement based on each student's predilections for communication appear to be key. For research, just as with Universal Design, considering multiple means of options of communication for participants including and not limited to video recording of vocal or physical response, assisted written evaluation or visual cue boards could prove beneficial. I found some studies which use this kind of multiple modes of data collection.

An additional potential means of data collection and analysis post intervention could be through the use of wearable technology to track electroencephalogram (EEG) to record brain wave patterns and heart rate variability (HRV). Previous studies have found this technology to be a feasible means of collecting data post-therapy for students with ASD, but it has yet to be used in naturalistic settings (Billeci, et al., 2016). Along those lines, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) could also be used to research the areas of the brain that are engaged for students with ASD when using integrated rhythm, movement and storytelling. The comprehension questions could be monitored using the N400 event related potential (Coderre et al., 2017). Again, due to my limited experience with these means of data collection it is difficult to propose an exact procedure that could align with said disciplines. However it seems as though there are gaps in the research that could be explored through these possibilities.

There are a number of disciplines that could gain new information through this study beyond educators. Collaboration across disciplines ranging from neuroscience,

psychology, childhood development, occupational therapy, speech language pathology, communication sciences, human motion analysis and special educators could collect relevant data within a given field of interest. While I'm learning that my passion is focusing primarily on students with ASD and TD students, the findings could be applied to students with other cognitive disabilities.

### **9.3. Education Policy**

Education policy could also benefit from this kind of interdisciplinary research. Students with disabilities are currently underfunded in the United States education system as highlighted by a recent plea to the president from the National Council of Disability to increase funding which has been in jeopardy since 1975 (Terry, 2018). Within this lack of funding, ASD is also under-represented in budgeting as the information is based on information from 2002 and does not take into account the increase in ASD diagnosis (Terry, 2018). Additionally, arts education funding is also frequently being challenged (Hardiman, 2016). The primary lobbying agency for federal funding, Americans for the Arts, currently shares information about students with disabilities on a generalized fact sheet with little research supporting positive outcomes (Americans for the Arts, 2019). Vermont, a state that has gained recognition in its inclusive education for students with disabilities, used qualitative studies to determine changes in academic policy and advocacy for these populations (Furney, Hasazi, & Clark/Keefe, 2005). For these reasons, an interdisciplinary study that addresses gaps in the literature for students with ASD and arts education could ultimately result in education policy change based on mutually beneficial research.

I believe that it is important to investigate the potential positive outcomes of teaching material to students with ASD through musical theater. As other studies have pointed out, the actual benefits of artistic brain activity may result in inconclusive information for students with ASD, yet I believe that it is worth investigating. There are numerous anecdotal accounts from parents, teachers and students themselves about the benefits and improvements thanks to performing arts education. However, without empirical evidence, their content may be dismissible in the eyes of some people who have the power and ability to make a change in their lives. An additional benefit is the enjoyment and lack of anxiety that students with ASD often exhibit when engaging with these activities! I believe that by integrating musical theater into classroom curriculum for both ASD and TD students, significant benefits can be achieved, and if researchers are watching and involved, the information could be shared in new and exciting ways.

*Bit by bit, putting it together  
Piece by piece, only way to make a work of art  
Every moment makes a contribution  
Every little detail plays a part  
Having just a vision's no solution  
Everything depends on execution  
Putting it together (That's what counts)  
(Sondheim, 1984)*

## CHAPTER 10: I WANT TO BE A PART OF IT

*Start spreading the news  
I am leaving today  
I want to be a part of it  
New York, New York  
(Ebb & Kander, 1977)*

I have been emphasizing the importance of the performing arts in education as a means of teaching empathy, vulnerability, sense of belonging and leadership skills. However, there will be students who want to learn beyond those transferable skills and are bitten by the Broadway bug. This has never been my intention as an educator, to inspire students in a pre-professional manner. But there have absolutely been students who I have thought who truly excel as a professional performing artist. Many actors share stories of struggling in school, often with invisible disabilities themselves.

Beyond the student's potential careers, representation on stage and on screen is important and significant, for all races and abilities. Having the opportunity to see performers who reflect the diverse nature of our society makes a difference. Here, I look to examine some victories and challenges at the center of musical theater on Broadway.

*If I can make it there  
I'll make it anywhere  
It's up to you  
New York, New York  
(Ebb & Kander, 1977)*

These words have become synonymous with the idea of "making it" as a performer on Broadway in New York City. For some, the question of *if I can make it there* is very real. From the perspective of an actor with a disability being considered for a role, for a writer who is exploring representing disabilities on a stage or for an audience

member who is hoping to enjoy the show; in 2019 the 'if' remains. The perspectives of Ali Stroker, the first wheelchair user to win a Tony and Mikey Rowe, 'The First Actor with Autism to Play Curious Incident's' (Rowe, 2017), provide candid insights into their realities of being both performers and advocates for people with disabilities. Scott Wallin, Ph.D, theater director, professor and psychiatric social worker, reviews the critically acclaimed musical *Next to Normal*, examining the use of the contemporary biomedical model (Wallin 2012). Professor Sandahl provides perspectives on the overarching "representational conundrum" of disability in performance practice and the complexities that it presents. Broadway provides a highly consumable product in which society's attitudes determine the shows that are produced, the shows that continue running and ultimately how an overall shift in acceptance and advocacy can occur. There have been conversations in the media of a large shift within the Broadway community into being a more broadly inclusive arena in 2019; these sources show how complex that shift can be.

### **10.1. Accessibility**

Ali Stroker has had a full career in the performing arts for most of her adolescent and adult life. In 2019, she was awarded a Tony for her performance of Ado Annie in the remount of *Oklahoma* on Broadway. This public acknowledgement of her skills and performance was covered in media as a conversation about the physical accessibility of Broadway theaters. Rather than focusing on the individual accomplishment of reinventing a timeless role, articles focus primarily on the fact that Strokes needed to stay backstage during the award announcements as there was no way for her to enter the stage from the audience. For this reason she could not celebrate on stage when the entire cast

won for Best Revival (Kim, 2019). The public witnessed a moment of inaccessibility which appears to have restarted a conversation about the responsibilities that fall onto the theaters. "Broadway theaters [are] all made accessible to patrons, but the backstage areas are not," Stroker said soon after her win on Tony night (Kim, 2019). She asked that theater owners and producers consider how they can begin to make the backstage accessible for all performers. Fortunately, most public schools that I attended were accessible, which is encouraging.

Some would even argue that Broadway theaters are not completely accessible to patrons either, to the point where there is an independent company completely devoted to providing an accessibility services to audience members (Theatre Access NYC: Official Site for Accessibility to Broadway). Due to these constraints, it appeared that Stroker was excluded from celebrating her career accomplishment physically on the stage. Additionally, she was forced to advocate for her environment and for others in that moment rather than speaking to her achievement.

## **10.2. Representation**

Ado Annie, Ali's role, has traditionally been played by performers who were not physically disabled, but the script does not define or determine the casting one way or another; the director made a choice. Another show that has been running for 15 years with many casting opportunities, *Wicked*, has yet to cast performer with a physical disability to play Nessarose, the Wicked Witch of the East, who the script calls for uses a wheelchair (Kim, 2019). This is part of what Sandahl sites as the 'representation conundrum' where the questions that casting can conjure up lead to a variety of other

questions, all of which seem to have no definitive answer. “Might disabled actors inadvertently lend authenticity to stereotypes, stereotypes that general audiences do not necessarily recognize as such? Would the stereotypes seem even more real?” (Sandahl, 2018 p.131). These are just a few of the many questions to consider. Perhaps the role in *Wicked* hasn’t been cast with a disabled person because the track of that character also participates in other roles, but then who is to say the actors couldn’t play those roles in said wheelchair? The questions can continue and strive towards inclusion but do not always get there.

Another Broadway performance offered the other side of the casting conundrum for disability, 2015 Tony Awarded Best Play, *A Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime* (Kim, 2019), which has become known as a show starring a lead actor with ASD. The play was inspired by the novel by Mark Haddon. After receiving accolades for representation on stage for neurodiverse characters, Haddon clarifies that he did not deliberately write the main character Christopher as a person with anything beyond "behavioral problems." He does not claim that the character is diagnosed with any kind of neurological disability (Sandahl, 2018). This statement alone shows the kinds of assumptions that the consumers of media will make and accept as a deep truth, also highlighting the difference between intention and outcome for writers, directors and audience members.

Haddon further asserts a different point, that the show is more about ‘us’ and how ‘we’ interact with outsiders, rather than about Christopher (main character). This shows Haddon's bias that ‘us’ is the non-disabled population. This kind of separation between

the populations, the inference of a potential metaphor being expressed through a person with disability shows a contradiction in original intent and final consumed product. The novel itself is widely acknowledged as means for educating people on the topic of ASD and is commonly used in the workforce and schools. That means that Haddon's non-intentional view of autism could be the first voice that a person dialogues with regarding an entire population of people.

The propensity to perceive representations of disability as “authentic”—even against an author's public proclamations against doing so— points to narrative prosthesis' stubborn resistance to disentangling disability metaphor from its reality. For this reason, those of us advocating for inclusion of disabled actors in the mainstream media (including myself) need to think carefully about our strategies. (Sandahl, 2018 p. 141)

This point is important to consider when talking with students about their potential future roles in the performing arts industry and what challenges they may face in the representation conundrum.

If the person creating the art is using a character with a disability for another purpose besides telling their human story, but the consumers do not know or understand that, does that mean that the story is no longer legitimate or acceptable? This opens the door for misrepresentation that leads to continued stereotypes that have been born from media culture. To the point that this author is making, is the ‘metaphorical autistic’ a new storytelling trope to be considered in the strategy of mainstreaming representation in

media? These questions offer a dichotomy of disabled representation and roles created with or without the intention of representation on the stage.

An example of another Broadway production where the creators intentionally represented disability onstage is the musical *Next to Normal*. Brian Yorkey and Tom Kitts wrote one of the first major theater productions in the United States to present madness through a contemporary biomedical model on stage (Wallin, 2012). The musical is about a "typical-middle-class-white-American family where the mother has bipolar disorder." It gained acclaim in the media as a show that was raising awareness and opening a dialogue about modern day psychiatry, medication and treatment options. Reviewer for the New York Times said, "*Next to Normal* gives full weight to the confusion and ambivalence that afflict not only Diana but also everyone around her" (Brantley, 2007).

Critics within the field of psychosocial disabilities such as Scott Wallin believe that show did not give full weight to the larger societal issues. The story presented on the stage is a product of a society that values a certain sense of normal. "This marginalization is revealed on stage by a narrative, characters, and images that ignore significant socioeconomic and cultural factors that greatly impact experiences of psychosocial disability" (Wallin, 2012). Wallin goes onto compare the musical to one of his former patients who happens to attend the show as an audience member. His patient represents another side of the American mental health system. The patient does not have access to familial support or consistent insurance like the characters on the stage, yet he sought a ticket in efforts to see himself represented onstage.

The dichotomies continue with dueling reviews of *Next to Normal* between scholarly journal writing of advocates and a theater reviewer for culture's renowned news source; "...cultural values, assumptions, knowledge, and institutional structures that impact disability yet remain problematically ignored or under-discussed" (Wallin, 2012). This contrasts with the NY Times review, "...something of authentic and original value beneath the formulaic flourishes...Anger, yearning, sorrow, guilt and the memory of what must have been love seem to coexist in every note she sings" (Brantley, 2009). The difference between the two focuses on the universality and the individual. Wallin sees this musical as an opportunity for the general public to wake up and think about these large societal issues, issues that they could vote on, issues that they could also advocate for. Brantley is acknowledging the individuals on the stage, the intimate story that an audience member could consider and then hopefully apply to their own lives with individual empathy and compassion for a person they may encounter. Both points are valid, both are complicated to accurately and authentically represent in one musical.

I see a connection here in education as well, the universal viewpoint that arts education integration could take away valuable time of instruction versus the individuals who gain invaluable transferable skills during the process. This could go the other way as well with the beliefs that not all students should be asked to partake in vulnerable activities such as the performing arts versus the public celebration of students' accomplishments. The issue of representation and decision making is mirrored in these circumstances.

### 10.3. Acting is a Dichotomy

To return to the aforementioned *Curious Incident...*, the play that became tasked with providing a handbook for ASD, Mickey Rowe played the lead role of Christopher and has been the first actor with ASD to do so. In an interview with Playbill, he does not seem to be concerned with the issues of representation and acknowledges a different kind of dichotomy that he personally experiences and fully embraces. He states,

Acting is a dichotomy. A tension between what is safe and what is dangerous.

What is known and what is unknown. What's mundane and what's exciting. I put my dichotomies to work for me. It's about doing the work and being in control so the audience trusts you to lead them, and then being vulnerable and letting the audience see your soul. The skill, study, and training help create the trust. The challenges make the vulnerability. You need both of them. As an autistic I have felt vulnerable my entire life—to be vulnerable onstage is no biggie (Rowe, 2017).

To me, this quote says it all. In order for any kind of progression to move forward, it seems like the continuous conundrum questions need to land on at least a couple answers. This isn't to say that the questions and conversations should not continue, they should thrive and need to do so. But at this point it seems clear that theaters should provide a safe way for audience members to 'make it there' without danger. Productions can embrace and challenge what is 'dangerous', such as Ali dancing in her wheelchair at high paced speeds. Creators and consumers might need to find a sense of peace and dialogue with what is known and unknown about representation.

Humans have been creating art for a long time. Much of the art created involves people with disabilities, and it's possible to move past a time of mundane and move into exciting. Like Mikey, how can Broadway put its own dichotomies to work for it? Vulnerability is intrinsically linked with these decisions; it requires a certain kind of bravery. If those responsible for making choices in theater adopt this kind of brave, vulnerable and educated decision making, Broadway will become an inclusive arena for any student to step into as leaders in the professional field.

## CHAPTER 11: RAISE YOU UP

*Feed your fire, to take you higher  
We'll light you up like a live wire  
Celebrate you, to elevate you  
When you struggle to step, we'll take a helping hand  
(Lauper, 2013)*

To conclude this thesis, my only option was the song "Raise You Up" from Cindi Lauper's musical *Kinky Boots*. Somehow, during the duration of getting my master's degree, every student performance that I directed and choreographed had this song as the finale. The positivity of the lyrics spoke to all of the different students that I was working with. The themes of individuality, self-advocacy, celebration, bravery, leadership embracing vulnerability, and sense of belonging kept every student clapping, smiling or jumping to the beat. It became my empathy anthem. On the long commutes home with the hundreds of other weary New Yorkers, I was able to buoy myself on the students' joyful voices belting out these lyrics.

*If you hit the dust  
Let me raise you up  
When your bubble busts  
Let me raise you up  
If your glitter rusts  
Let me raise you up, and up  
Raise you up  
(Lauper, 2013)*

The auditorium is often the last place that I see the students at the conclusion of the teaching residencies. Post-show, a quick hug and their parents whisk them away or their teachers take them to lunch. It can also be a moment of mass confusion, despite the attempted preparation. Students say, "Wait, this is the last time? We don't get to do it again?" I feel the same way every time I close a show or even end a class, this special

time together is over and complete. There's a specific kind of deep sadness or mourning period, even. I suppose it's one of the harsher transferable skills, learning to deal with the ending of an ephemeral experience. This is of course a challenge; as a teaching artist, I was often ephemeral as well, coming in for a residency and then leaving until the next year. I often felt saddened by being yet another inconsistency in the students' already fragile relationships. McCarty offers an interesting perspective on students and permanence versus ephemeral:

In my conversations with children on the subject of time, I have found that they have a strong belief that time can't change what is truly beautiful. Their examples of unchanging beauty include love, trust and ideas. Some things in life are so perfect that not even time can hurt them. (McCarty 2006, p. 121)

While I may not know how to find solace in a final bow, my students might. Hopefully, the experience at the microphone will last with them, it will stay in their memories as a glorious, joyful afternoon in the auditorium. Maybe that joy will propel their confidence, lighten them when they are feeling sad, and give them access to always finding solace in the performing arts or otherwise. Perhaps they will become advocates for other students to share the microphone in the future, encourage their own voices and others to be heard in the vast spaces that are divided for reasons beyond their control. I hope that they will strive to redefine their own definitions of perfect, so that nothing can hurt them, and their own spontaneity and joy allows them to be comfortable and heard loud and proud in any auditorium or otherwise.

As a final call to action to make sure that all of our students are raised up in their educational process, I ask you the reader to consider how singing, storytelling and movement can be incorporated into your life. Even if this means letting yourself sing along to the radio in the car or encouraging a friend to step up to the karaoke microphone, you will still let yourself and your brain experience some of the positive impacts that music can have. This is transferable to your students, your children, your community.

I hope that the reader will consider means of arts integration in the practices and interventions of applied behavior analysis. Students with disabilities and specifically ASD are capable and should be encouraged to participate in these activities, in whatever ways possible. There is so much more research to be done regarding ASD and the performing arts, I hope that creative problem solving leads to more collaboration across disciplines to do so. While I did not address this specifically, these kinds of educational practices are needed more than ever, given that STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) curriculums are being championed in schools above all else. Those skills can be taught using arts integration and new connections can be made for students who may not have otherwise done so. The performing arts can act as a doorway to other subjects for all students.

The education system in America is not equal. I do not think that a musical theater performance will fix a school district, but I think that it is a positive kick-ball-change in the right direction. My journey towards this scholarly personal narrative began with questions about my students lives and my role in their classrooms. Those questions still exist, but by writing this, I have learned about my strengths as an educator, author,

researcher, performer and person. I hope that those strengths will help me continue on this path towards positive change for all students through performing arts education integration.

*Raise you up  
One, pursue the truth  
Two, learn something new  
Three, accept yourself and you'll accept others too!  
Four, let love shine  
Five, let pride be your guide  
Six, you change the world when you change your mind!  
Just be  
Who you wanna be  
Never let them tell you who you oughta be  
Just be  
With dignity  
Celebrate your life triumphantly  
You'll see (it's beautiful)  
You'll see (it's beautiful)  
Just be (it's beautiful)  
Just be  
(Lauper, 2013)*

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