What is a Learning Disabled Artist?
Questions of identity, interdependence and leadership.

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is their own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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I acknowledge the use of artificial intelligence (AI) software to support aspects of writing within this thesis, specifically for rewriting, rephrasing, or paraphrasing sections of my own writing to improve clarity, coherence, and the overall standard of English expression. This use was conducted in accordance with the principles outlined in the York St John University Generative Artificial Intelligence Policy.

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A NOTE TO THE READER: Positionality Statement

At the outset of this PhD, I prioritised making the research accessible to learning disabled artists, the broader learning disabled community, and practitioners or venues without an academic background. This commitment was not only practical but political, grounded in disability justice principles that challenge the exclusionary tendencies of academic knowledge production. I wanted the voices within this thesis to feel authentic and accountable to the lived

experiences from which the research emerged. Creating a series of short, accessible films, designed to complement the written thesis or stand alone, became one way of redistributing access to the research and unsettling the dominance of text-based dissemination.

This approach is inseparable from my positionality within the research. Alongside my role as researcher, I developed an ongoing relationship with Mind the Gap as an associate artist. This role emerged over time through sustained collaboration, rather than being a neutral or predefined position. As such, my presence within the research cannot be understood as detached or observational. Instead, I was implicated in the creative and relational dynamics that shaped the work. Recognising myself as both researcher and associate artist required an ongoing critical interrogation of power: how authority was constructed, how interpretation was negotiated, and how my academic framing might both enable and constrain the meanings generated with and by the Artists.

The films were produced after the main findings were written, creating a deliberate pause in which interpretation could be revisited and re-opened. Although these dialogues were no longer 'live' within the data gathering process, this temporal shift became generative. I shared excerpts from my written chapters with the Artists at Mind the Gap, inviting them to respond not as participants but as co-interpreters. From these conversations, the Artists scripted their own reflections, at times affirming, complicating, or directly challenging the claims I had made. This process resisted the closure often imposed by academic writing, instead positioning knowledge as dialogic, contingent, and collectively held.

In this sense, the films operate as a critical intervention into the authorship of the thesis. They redistribute interpretive authority by returning my analysis to those whose experiences informed it, enabling a form of co-authorship that exceeds citation or acknowledgment. This also raises important tensions: while the written thesis remains institutionally attributed to me, the meanings it contains are neither singular nor fully owned. The films therefore function as a site where these tensions are made visible, foregrounding the partiality of my perspective and the necessity of multiple, and sometimes conflicting, voices within Disability Arts research.

To capture the films, I collaborated with Jack King, a filmmaker and colleague at Mind the Gap, who had an established relationship with the Artists and an intimate understanding of the research context. Our approach to filming was informed by an ethics of access and representation: prioritising captions, pacing, and framing that centred the Artists'

communicative styles and preferences. These decisions were not merely technical but political, attending to how disabled voices are often mediated, edited, or constrained within dominant visual cultures. Through this process, the films aim not to 'translate' the research for accessibility, but to reconfigure how knowledge is produced, shared, and recognised.

There are five films in total, each corresponding to a key area of the research. You may watch these independently or alongside the thesis. If viewing in tandem, I recommend the following order:

Video 1: An Introduction to the Research

Watch before reading Chapter 1: Introduction

Video 2: Finding One – Identity

Watch before reading Chapter 5: Identity

Video 3: Finding Two – Interdependence

Watch before reading Chapter 6: Interdependence

Video 4: Finding Three – Leadership

Watch before reading Chapter 7: Leadership

Video 5: Listen Up – A message to the Creative Industries

Watch after reading Chapter 8: Conclusion

The final film was co-created with Paul Wilshaw, an Artist at Mind the Gap, and emerged from discussions during the Staging Change & Engage project. Paul and I explored examples of good practice in Disability Arts and learning disability-led work, uncovering the persistent gap between these areas and the wider creative industries. Paul's passion and frustration about this imbalance led us to centre his voice and perspective in the film. Its tone is more direct, serving as a call to action rather than a reflection. I recommend watching Listen Up after reading the full thesis: this research began with the voices of learning disabled artists; it is also their words that should carry forward into future activism.

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores what defines a Learning Disabled Artist and how people with learning disabilities can be better supported to increase their representation in the arts. While there has been some progress in diversifying representation, with learning disabled actors like Liam Bairstow (Coronation Street) and Sarah Gordy (Call the Midwife) being cast in roles traditionally played by non-disabled actors, the pace of change remains slow. Many learning disabled actors are still limited to playing characters with learning disabilities, and arts organisations need further education on the benefits of inclusion and best practices for the creative industry.

The research is based on three years of embedded practice at Mind the Gap Theatre Company, one of Europe's largest learning disabled theatre companies. This allowed for observation, interviews, and focus groups to explore themes of identity, interdependence, and leadership,

which form the key insights of the thesis. The research methods were semi-structured, allowing for flexible exploration of key questions such as ‘What does learning disability mean to you?’ and ‘What does identity mean to you?’.

The first four chapters examine the history of disability and learning disability theatres and outline the methodology and ethical considerations underpinning the participatory research approach. Chapter 5 focuses on identity, examining how a learning disability can become a ‘master identity’ that is socially constructed and undervalued, and how the arts can challenge this through practices such as Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. Chapter 6 explores interdependence, questioning whether true independence exists for artists, and how learning disabled theatre companies challenge conventional ideas of professionalism. Chapter 7 examines leadership, exploring whether learning disabled-led practice is tokenistic or whether meaningful collaboration between disabled and non-disabled artists is possible.

The conclusion examines the practical implications of these findings, including access to education, artist payment, and continued institutional practices. The research suggests that the lack of employment opportunities for Learning Disabled Artists may be more due to the arts industry's current models of independence and leadership rather than learning disabilities themselves. Ultimately, the thesis advocates for the value of Learning Disabled Artists and presents models of best practice to foster greater inclusion and representation in the arts.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

> I have had autism from birth, so I can't say this is Alison and this is the bit of Alison that is my autism. Autism is part of my personality, and I can't tell you who I would be without it.
>
> (Alison Colborne, Artist Interview, 2021)

This opening statement from a Learning Disabled Artist sets the tone for a thesis that centres lived experience and refuses to treat disability as separable from identity, personhood, or creative practice. This thesis investigates what it means to be a Learning Disabled Artist - a simple question with complex connotations and ambiguities. Through embedded research with Learning Disabled Artists and the organisations that support them, this study explores how learning disability shapes artistic identity, practice, and leadership; how artists with learning disabilities are uniquely positioned to develop more interdependent ways of working and creating across social, cultural, and political spheres; and what it means to move towards learning disability-led practice that challenges ableist power structures within the arts sector.

The thesis employs a participatory, embedded methodology, working across three years with Mind the Gap Theatre Company and engaging other learning Disability Arts organisations including DIY Theatre (Manchester), Access All Areas (London), and Pyramid of Arts (Leeds). This approach prioritises the voices of Learning Disabled Artists themselves, using deep ethnographic engagement, life narrative interviews, and reflective conversations to ensure that the perspectives and expertise of disabled people are not merely included but genuinely guide the research findings. This methodological choice reflects a commitment to participatory action research rooted in Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (1974), which seeks to empower people with learning disabilities and position them as active agents rather than subjects of investigation.

1.1 Three Key Contexts: Power, Politics, and Learning Disability

Learning disabled communities have a long and painful history of oppression and systemic under-representation in society. This history is not distant or abstract; its impacts resonate acutely in the present moment. In the early twentieth century, non-consensual sterilisation and institutionalisation became official policy 'solutions' to the perceived 'problem' of the 'feeble minded' - a starkly named euphemism that masked eugenic violence. The twentieth and twentyfirst centuries have continued to reveal the precarious position of learning disabled people within systems ostensibly designed to protect them. In 2012, a BBC Panorama investigation exposed widespread abuse by staff at Winterbourne View Hospital, an institution housing people with learning disabilities. In 2021 - mere months into a global pandemic - reports emerged of 'do not resuscitate' (DNR) notices being issued to COVID-19 patients with learning disabilities (Covid Inquest, 2025), revealing how quickly learning disabled lives can be deemed expendable when systems face pressure. These are not historical footnotes but ongoing demonstrations of systemic oppression. Understanding power is therefore foundational to understanding learning disability and, consequently, to this thesis. This research draws on Foucauldian discourse analysis, which emphasises that 'discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it' (Foucault, 1978, p. 101). Foucault's framework positions power not as a force wielded by a single authority but as a productive relation - something that creates possibilities, shapes knowledge, and can be resisted or reconfigured. This understanding is crucial because it allows us to examine how power operates within the arts sector and within learning disability without presuming that the only response is to destroy existing power structures entirely. This Foucauldian lens complements the analysis of disability activist Alan Sutherland, who writes: 'We don't see our disabilities as obstacles we have to overcome before we try to make our way in the non-disabled cultural world. Our politics teach us that we are oppressed, not inferior' (Sutherland, 1989, p. 10). Sutherland's distinction between oppression and inferiority is vital. It refuses the medicalised notion that disability is a personal deficit requiring remediation; instead, it frames disability as a political condition rooted in social arrangements and structures. This forms part of the disability rights movement's foundational concept: the social model of disability, which shifts focus from 'fixing' individuals to examining and dismantling the barriers, prejudices, and exclusions embedded in society.

Vic Finkelstein, one of the founding figures of both the Disability Arts Movement and the Disability Rights Movement, articulated this political vision with particular clarity. As the principal drafter of the Fundamental Principle of Disability, Finkelstein insisted that disability

be understood as a form of social oppression rooted in barriers, and was the precursor of what we now term the social model. Finkelstein's own perspective was shaped by lived experience as a wheelchair user as well as by his involvement in anti-Apartheid resistance in South Africa, demonstrating how frameworks of liberation and anti-oppression can translate across struggles for human rights. Finkelstein recognised that art and culture were essential vehicles for disability political consciousness and coll,ective identity:

> Disability culture must arise out of the spontaneous desire of disabled people to share our feelings, experiences and desires, our love and hates, our pleasures as well as our sufferings, amongst ourselves. In other words, we have to make the choice that we want to identify ourselves as disabled people. We have to be willing to express our separate identity. There can be no disability culture without this freely made choice.
>
> (Finkelstein, 1987, pp. 4-5)

This thesis operates within a framework that recognises Learning Disabled Artists as both subjects of oppression and agents of political change. The research examines how power operates within the arts sector, how Learning Disabled Artists and the organisations supporting them navigate and reconfigure these power dynamics, and how new forms of power and interdependence can be created that do not simply replicate traditional hierarchies. Rather than seeking to dismantle power structures entirely, this research amplifies the voices of Learning Disabled Artists who are creating alternative power configurations - models that might sit alongside traditional mechanisms without necessarily destroying them.

1.2 Disability Arts: From Theory to Practice

Disability Arts, as a distinct field and movement, creates work that actively counteracts the misunderstandings, misconceptions, stereotypes, and negative narratives that have historically surrounded the lives of disabled people. This work is created and performed by disabled people themselves - artists and creatives who draw on the deep truth of their lived experiences of disability to produce art that can be simultaneously captivating, remarkable, exciting, and urgently contemporary. This is why Yinka Shonibare's designation of Disability Arts as 'the last Avant Garde' (Shonibare, 2007) is so resonant. By naming Disability Arts as an avantgarde movement, Shonibare positions it alongside the emergence of feminist art, Black arts, and Queer arts in the 1960s - movements that fundamentally challenged what art could be and who

had the authority to create it. Disability Arts is not a therapeutic tool or a feel-good inclusion initiative; it is a radical artistic and political practice.

A core principle within Disability Arts is that disability itself is not something that needs to be overcome or transcended through art, but rather is a legitimate subject and perspective from which to create and theorise. As disability scholar and artist Carol Marcus writes: 'Disability is not a brave struggle or “courage in the face of adversity”. Disability is an art. It is an ingenious way to live' (Marcus, 1989). This reframing shifts the entire conversation. Instead of asking disabled people to produce art despite their disability or as an inspirational overcoming narrative, Disability Arts asks: what can we create when we begin from the premise that disability is a valid standpoint, that it offers unique ways of understanding and being in the world?

This shift has profound implications for how we understand disabled artists and their work. Jennifer Eisenhauer's pedagogical analysis offers a crucial distinction between ‘disabled people doing art’ (which may be therapeutic, recreational, or primarily about inclusion) and ‘disability artists’ (who are engaged in deliberate, critical practice). As Eisenhauer writes:

> The inclusion of disabled people doing art in the curriculum places an emphasis upon the representation of difference through a curriculum of admiration and appreciation in which individual artists are admired for their ability to create work like other ablebodied / neurotypical artists. In contrast, the discourse of the disability artist engages in a critical process of questioning the socio-political construction of disability and related ableist ideologies. Such work can include the expression of admiration and appreciation inherent to the construct of disabled people doing art while also introducing critical questions about the formation, maintenance, and possible disruption of ableist ideas.
>
> (Eisenhauer, 2007, p. 9)

The recent public debate surrounding Nnenna Kalu’s 2025 Turner Prize win, the first time the award has been awarded to an artist with a learning disability, offers a vivid example of these two discourses clashing in the public sphere. Much of the celebratory coverage framed Kalu’s success as a historic milestone for *inclusion*, emphasising her status as an autistic, Learning Disabled Artist and the barriers her win was said to break, sometimes with relatively little engagement with the qualities of her work. In contrast, a number of critics insisted that the

work should be judged ‘on merit alone’ (Joshi, 2025), accusing the judges of ‘virtue-signalling’ or confusing ‘therapy with talent’ (Januszczak, 2025), and questioning whether Kalu’s practice could really be evaluated within the same parameters as other contemporary artists. Read through Eisenhauer’s lens, these reactions map onto the tension between a discourse of disabled people doing art, where disability and inclusion become the primary story, and a discourse of the disability artist.

This distinction matters enormously. A disability artist is held to the same rigorous aesthetic and conceptual standards as any other artist; they are not primarily being celebrated for their achievement despite disability but for the quality, innovation, and critical engagement of their work. They are credited as an Artist with a capital A - a socially invested role within society that carries cultural authority and the potential for social influence. As contemporary artist David Stern articulates: 'I think artists help society process the human experience. Art has been an integral part of human history. Artists take what's happening in the world and help people digest it' (Stern, 2020). This is the role that disability artists occupy within the cultural landscape: they take the political realities of disability oppression and create work that helps society understand, reckon with, and transform those realities, however it is worth acknowledging that there is still a struggle to consistently be recognised in this frame which will be exploring more throughout the findings chapters (Chapters 5 - 8).

The intersection between Disability Arts and learning disability has not received sufficient scholarly attention, yet it is a vital terrain, as evidenced by the work of Matt Hargrave and Dave Calvert. This thesis addresses that gap by exploring the particular dimensions of learning Disability Arts practice - the specific challenges, and political potentials of artists with learning disabilities working within and beyond the Disability Arts framework. Learning Disabled Artists bring their own distinct perspectives, informed by the lived experience of both disability oppression and the particular stigmas, expectations, and support systems that surround learning disabilities specifically.

1.3 The Researcher's Position

I come to this PhD as an interdisciplinary artist and researcher, someone whose work has always sat at the intersection of art-making and advocacy, a position increasingly recognised within the emerging literature on scholar-activism (Bashiri, Perez Vico and Hylmö, 2025; Ackerly and True, 2020). Scholar-activism may be understood as the mobilisation of academic

capacities in support of transformative, counter-hegemonic social change; as a concept, it is fluid and contested, shaped by local, institutional, and socio-political contexts (Bashiri, Perez Vico and Hylmö, 2025). Although it is fair to say that this PhD process has shaped a lot of my thinking, my identity as an artist-activist-researcher is not incidental to this project - it is its methodological foundation. My interests are not neatly contained; they sprawl across questions of social justice, representation, and who gets to be seen and heard within the cultural landscape.

My commitment is to those whose voices are most readily absorbed or erased by the mainstream: those who have been historically sidelined, tokenised, or overlooked by institutions that claim to speak for them. I name this concern carefully, because it needs to be. The researcher who is simply 'drawn to' marginalised communities risks replicating the logic of what Urry (1990) calls the tourist gaze - a socially organised, culturally framed mode of looking that retains interpretive authority in the observer, even when that observer holds sympathetic intentions. In the context of disability research, Oliver (1992) was similarly direct: traditional research paradigms risk being driven by the desires and agendas of non-disabled researchers and funding bodies, reproducing the very exclusions they purport to investigate. I understand my role in relation to Learning Disabled Artists not as observer but as ally, a term I use in the specific sense developed by Hadley (2020) in the context of Disability Arts, in which allyship demands willingness not merely to include but to transform the structures that have historically excluded. This is a relationship grounded in cultural safety, trust, and reciprocity (Hadley et al., 2024), and one in which my positionality is not a vantage point from outside but a site of shared and accountable engagement.

What I mean by the claim that institutions speak *for* rather than *with* marginalised communities is captured most precisely by Fricker's (2007) theory of epistemic injustice: a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower. Fricker identifies two primary mechanisms. The first is testimonial injustice, in which a speaker suffers a credibility deficit because of identity prejudice held by the listener - they are not consulted or dismissed as a reliable source of knowledge about their own experience. The second is hermeneutical injustice, in which structural gaps in collective interpretive resources prevent marginalised groups from making sense of or adequately articulating their social experiences (Fricker, 2007). For learning disabled people, both forms are operative: their testimony is routinely discounted, and the conceptual vocabularies through which their experiences are framed have historically been produced without them (Rosas Rodríguez and Álvarez Sánchez, 2022). Research that claims

to centre marginalised experience while reproducing these epistemic conditions is not a corrective, it compounds the original harm.

For me, the arts are not a luxury; they are a space of political possibility. This perspective significantly influences how this PhD was conducted and written. In her foundational essay, Haraway (1988) dismantled the myth of the view from nowhere, the idea that knowledge can be produced from a disembodied, universal objectivity. What Haraway suggests instead is that all knowledge is partial, situated, and accountable: 'the knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another' (Haraway, 1988, p. 586). This deeply resonates with my own understanding of what it means to be a researcher in this field. I do not occupy a stance of neutrality, and I do not believe I would want to. I am shaped by my commitments to social justice, by my conviction that research which centres the experiences of marginalised people must involve those people, and by the particular historical moment and institutional context from which I am writing (Haraway, 1988; Corbin Dwyer and Buckle, 2009).

This places me firmly within a tradition of critical, practice-based, and arts-led inquiry that challenges the positivist model of the detached, objective scholar. bell hooks' articulation of the margin as a 'space of radical openness' is instructive here (hooks, 1990, p. 149). hooks argues that marginalised standpoints do not merely offer a different perspective on the same landscape, but rather a fundamentally different understanding of how power structures operate. My own position as a researcher working in and around learning Disability Arts is not politically neutral: it is informed by a feminist and social justice commitment to understanding how cultural institutions include or exclude, and how those mechanisms can be disrupted. As hooks insists, this kind of situated political commitment is not a form of bias to be corrected; it is the epistemological condition that makes certain kinds of critical knowledge possible (hooks, 1990). My lens is, in this sense, both an ethical and a methodological choice.

1.3a The Funding Framework of this PhD

This PhD, undertaken with York St John University, is set within a specific and ethically important funding context. It was fully financed by Mind the Gap Theatre Company as part of their Staging Change & Engage project. That initiative, supported by investment from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, and Arts Council England, aimed to tackle employment inequalities in the performing arts. It sought to create meaningful

opportunities for learning disabled individuals not only as performers but also as producers, researchers, directors, and creative leaders.

Understanding how this might affect the research involves engaging with Bourdieu's (1993) idea of the field of cultural production. For Bourdieu, a cultural organisation doesn't exist in isolation; it is a structured space of power relations where various forms of capital (economic, cultural, symbolic) are distributed unequally, and actors constantly strive to maintain or improve their position (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 30). Mind the Gap operates within this field in a specific way: as a learning disability Arts organisation committed to social change, it simultaneously seeks artistic credibility (cultural capital), financial sustainability through funding bodies (economic capital), and reputational authority within the Disability Arts sector (symbolic capital) (Leahy and Ferri, 2024). The commissioning of PhD research is itself a form of acquiring symbolic and cultural capital; it signals intellectual seriousness and creates the kind of evidential infrastructure that funding bodies value. To be the researcher embedded within this field-position is, therefore, to be involved in its power structures from the very beginning. However, being funded by Mind the Gap meant that this PhD was never purely an academic task; there was a dual purpose: to produce original scholarly research for a doctoral thesis, and to create a practitioner-facing report documenting and evaluating the Staging Change & Engage project for the organisation, which you will find in the appendices. These are not the same, and the potential tensions between them are worth recognising directly.

A PhD thesis and an organisational report serve fundamentally different purposes, audiences, and epistemological registers. The thesis is a piece of original scholarship that contributes to academic knowledge; it is assessed by examiners with expertise in the field and written following the conventions of academic discourse, including rigorous argumentation, an extensive literature review, transparent methodology, and sustained engagement with theory. The thesis asks: what does this research add to the field? What new knowledge does it produce? In contrast, the organisational report is a practical document aimed at the company, its funders, and the wider sector. Its purpose is to account for and evaluate a body of work: to document what happened, identify what worked and what did not, offer recommendations, and make learning accessible for others who might replicate or build upon it. While the thesis demands complexity and theoretical depth, the report prioritises clarity and usability. The thesis allows for uncertainty and unresolved questions, but the report is expected to conclude, synthesise, and recommend. Writing across both formats simultaneously involved a continual negotiation of what Schön (1983) describes as the 'swampy lowlands of professional practice: the messy,

indeterminate, value-laden problems that cannot be resolved simply through the application of established theory and technique' (Schön, 1983, p. 42). Schön's distinction between reflectionin-action, 'thinking in the midst of doing', and reflection-on-action, 'returning to and analysing experience after the event', proved helpful in managing the dual roles of practitioner-reporter and academic-theorist (Schön, 1983, pp. 54–69). In the report, I mainly operated in the register of reflection-in-action: responding to the practical unfolding of the project, making sense of events as they occurred. In the thesis, I engaged in deeper reflection-on-action: stepping back, theorising, and interrogating the assumptions embedded in what I had witnessed and participated in.

For three years I was embedded within Mind the Gap's team in Bradford, not as an external evaluator dropping in periodically to conduct interviews and disappear, but as a genuine presence within the company. I worked in the office alongside staff teams, attended meetings, participated in conversations about strategy, programming, and the day-to-day challenges and politics of running a learning disability Arts organisation. I built relationships. I learned how the company functioned: its internal dynamics, its institutional culture, the tensions between artistic ambition and funding realities, the ways decisions were made and by whom. Bourdieu's notion of habitus, 'the set of durable dispositions, perceptions, and practices that agents develop through sustained participation in a field' (Bourdieu, 1993, pp. 72–77), helps to explain. You cannot understand a habitus from the outside; it has to be felt and inhabited over time. Extended presence within the company allowed me to absorb not just the explicit policies and stated values of Mind the Gap, but the implicit logics of how it operated: the unwritten rules, the habits of mind, the unspoken assumptions about what mattered and why. This is what Merton (1972) might recognise as the distinctive knowledge available to the insider, the access that comes not from methodology alone, but from sustained membership and belonging within a community of practice.

Being embedded also opened doors that would otherwise have remained closed. Through my role within Mind the Gap, I was able to participate in the Erasmus+ Ogmius project, a collaboration between Mind the Gap, Compagnie de l'Oiseau-Mouche in Roubaix, France, and Moomsteatern in Malmö, Sweden (Crossing the Line, 2021; Moomsteatern, 2020). Meeting artists and practitioners from these organisations, all leaders in the field of working with Learning Disabled Artists, was one of the most enriching aspects of this research journey. It provided a comparative perspective that deepened my understanding of Mind the Gap's practice by situating it within an international context, enabling me to identify what makes the

company's approach unique and to recognise shared challenges across the field, regardless of national setting. In Bourdieusian terms, this international exposure broadened my own field of vision, granting me access to various field-positions and the forms of capital that different organisations have amassed through diverse histories and contexts.

And yet embeddedness is not without its complications. If proximity is the great gift of this kind of research, it is also its great challenge. The question of impartiality: who has it, whether it is even possible, and what it would mean in a context like this, is something I would continually return to. Merton was among the first to theorise this tension formally, arguing that 'both insiders and outsiders carry structural advantages and structural blind spots: the insider's intimate familiarity can generate deep understanding, while simultaneously producing what he called the "error of parochialism" - a failure to see the shape of the thing one is standing inside' (Merton, 1972, p. 30). Corbin Dwyer and Buckle (2009) have written about the 'space between' that embedded researchers inhabit, the refusal of a neat insider/outsider binary in favour of an acknowledgement of the researcher as occupying a position of 'partial membership' within the communities and organisations they study (Corbin Dwyer and Buckle, 2009, p. 55). This framing is more honest than the false dichotomy of complete immersion versus complete detachment, and it captures an important aspect of the structural liminality of the funded doctoral researcher embedded in a company. I was neither a permanent member of staff, with all the institutional identification and loyalty that implies, nor a fully external observer, with the distance that position would afford. I was, in Corbin Dwyer and Buckle's terms, 'somewhere in between' and that in-betweenness was both analytically productive and relationally complex.

Haraway's concept of the 'partial perspective' (Haraway, 1988). is useful here too. Rather than treating the researcher's situatedness as a problem to be overcome, Haraway argues that partiality is the very condition of rigorous, accountable knowledge production. What Haraway calls the 'god trick' (1988, p. 581), the pretence of seeing from everywhere and nowhere simultaneously, is not only epistemologically untenable; it is ethically irresponsible, because it obscures the power relations through which knowledge is produced. My embeddedness within Mind the Gap was always a partial perspective, shaped by my particular position within the organisation: a temporary fixture, a funded researcher, someone who was welcomed but also occupied a structurally distinct role. This partiality is not a weakness; it is what made certain things visible that would otherwise have remained unseen. For me, this created a specific and sometimes uncomfortable dynamic. As a temporary fixture within the company,

I sometimes saw things that the company had not seen in itself, patterns, tensions, contradictions between aspiration and actuality, because I was close enough to observe them but positioned differently enough to notice them. This is what Schön identifies as the practitioner's capacity to surface what he calls 'tacit knowing in practice' (1983, p. 61), the knowledge embedded in habitual action that practitioners often cannot articulate precisely because it is so deeply naturalised. The role of the embedded researcher, in this sense, is partly to make that tacit knowledge visible: to name what is being done without being said.

The question of what to do with those observations was one I returned to repeatedly throughout the research. When the lens of the researcher reflects back something an organisation is not ready, or not willing, to acknowledge about itself, the ethical and relational dimensions of the work become acutely pressured. The organisation that funded this PhD held a particular kind of power over the research, not in the crude sense of instructing me what to say or suppressing findings. A number of structural conditions were in place that actively guarded against such direct interference: the research was registered through a university with independent supervisory oversight; an ethics committee reviewed and approved the study design; and the terms of the PhD preserved my right to publish findings without an organisational veto. These are not incidental procedural details but substantive protections, what the literature on research integrity describes as the conditions necessary for investigators to remain independent of sponsors throughout study design, data analysis, and writing (Redberg, cited in National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2023). The more ambient, structural form of power is harder to name and harder to resist. It operates in the way Bourdieu (1993) would recognise: economic dependency shapes the conditions of knowledge production, even when it does not directly determine its content. The researcher who relies on an organisation for access and funding does not need to be told what to find; the field itself exerts its own gravitational pull.

Nor is my position as ally a neutral one, and it would be disingenuous to pretend otherwise. The allyship framework I have drawn on explicitly acknowledges that allies carry their own desires: to support, to amplify, to advocate (Hadley, 2020; Srdanovic, 2025). These commitments are not correctives to bias; they *are* a form of partiality, one I hold openly. But that partiality also introduces its own ethical tensions. There is a real question about whether it is ethical, or epistemically legitimate, to identify and publicise institutional failings from a position of structural embeddedness, particularly when doing so could damage the very communities and organisations one is attempting to support (Smyth and Holian, 2008;

Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2005). The insider researcher who publishes under their own name inevitably identifies the institution, and the people within it, regardless of formal anonymisation (Smyth and Holian, 2008). These are not hypothetical concerns; they were live ethical questions throughout the fieldwork. I tried to navigate them through rigorous reflexivity. Reflexivity here, as Haraway intended with her concept of situated knowledge, is not a methodological add-on; it is a practice and an ethics: a daily commitment to asking whose interests this research serves, what I am bringing to the analytical process from my own position and values, and where my closeness to the subject might be distorting rather than illuminating what I see. bell hooks' insistence that the margin can be a 'site of resistance as well as a site of deprivation' is relevant here too (hooks, 1990, p. 341). This does not resolve the contradictions of embeddedness; it would be dishonest to suggest that it does. What I hope is that it makes those contradictions productive. The tensions between proximity and distance, between advocacy and critique, between the researcher and the funded researcher, between the thesis and the report, become part of the data.

1.3b The Non-Disabled Researcher

Let's address the elephant in the room: what does it mean for me, a non-disabled researcher, to be writing about the lives and artistry of learning disabled people? This question is not merely procedural, but I would argue, the most politically charged dimension of this entire project, and one that disability scholars have been wrestling with, often contentiously, for decades.

Disability research has historically been done to disabled people rather than with or by them (Barnes, 1992; Stone and Priestley, 1996). The dominant paradigms of positivist and interpretivist research cast disabled people as objects to be observed and theorised about, constructing the non-disabled academic as the expert and 'knower' (Stone and Priestley, 1996, p. 700) whose authority rests precisely on a certain kind of distance from lived experience.
This is the paradigm that the emancipatory disability research movement, crystallised in the disability rights slogan 'Nothing About Us Without Us' (Brydon, 2025), set out to dismantle. As Barnes argued, the task of emancipatory research is 'the systematic demystification of the structures and processes which create disability' (1992, p. 122), and that cannot be accomplished if those structures are reproduced within the research process itself.

I do not have a learning disability. I did not grow up in a family with direct experience of learning disability. I have not spent a career working in learning disability services. These are

not minor biographical footnotes; they are facts that shape what I can see, what I might misread, and where my analysis may carry the residue of assumptions I have not yet interrogated. As Walmsley writes in her landmark account of the non-disabled researcher's role in inclusive learning disability research, the very act of researching this field requires 'more transparency about the role in order to highlight the challenges of working inclusively... the real contribution of people with learning difficulties to research, and the training/support implications of working inclusively.' (2003, p. 1). This section is my attempt at that transparency.

The concept of the 'parachute researcher', sometimes called helicopter research, describes a pattern of research conduct in which an investigator descends into a community, extracts data or experience, and departs without meaningfully returning anything to the people they researched or being accountable to their concerns (Odeny, 2022). The term has its origins in critiques of global health research, where researchers from wealthy countries would conduct studies in lower-income settings without local collaboration or community benefit. The question I had to ask myself, honestly and early, was: Am I at risk of being this kind of researcher? I came to Mind the Gap without deep roots in the learning Disability Arts sector. I was not known to the community. I had not built a track record of advocacy or collaboration within this specific field. Stone and Priestley identified the dangers clearly: non-disabled researchers who work within the dominant paradigm cast themselves as experts whose authority is maintained by keeping disabled people in the position of passive objects of knowledge – '"sources" whose meaning becomes "material" for someone else's career' (Stone & Priestly, 1996, p. 703). This is not the research I wanted to produce. But wanting not to reproduce a dynamic is not the same as having escaped it. What partially complicated the risk of parachute research was the nature of my specific embeddedness. Three years within the company is not parachuting. It is the opposite: a sustained, relational, slow accumulation of understanding that resists the extractive logic of the short-term research visit. And yet embeddedness does not automatically dissolve the structural power differential between a nondisabled researcher and the Learning Disabled Artists whose work and lives form the substance of this research.

Johnston and Murton (2019) propose the concept of the 'privileged (non)disabled self' to describe how researchers, even those who work within critical disability frameworks and who experience marginalisation along other axes, carry forms of ableist privilege that shape their assumptions. Ableism is not simply a set of consciously held prejudices; it is 'a structure of

thought, embedded in language, in methodology, in the habits of academic writing - in the very categories through which we are trained to make sense of the world' (Bergkamp, 2022). Garland-Thomson's concept of the 'normate' is useful here: the unmarked standard of the body and mind against which difference is measured, and which the dominant culture naturalises to the point of invisibility. As a non-disabled researcher, I am in many respects the normate - the one for whom most systems, including the systems of academic knowledge production, were designed. The autoethnographic account by Björnsdóttir (2018) of a non-disabled researcher discovering her own ableist preconceptions in the field is instructive - her paper documents with uncomfortable precision how assumptions about competence, communication, and value were embedded in her analytical process before she had examined them, made visible only through sustained encounter and the willingness to be challenged.

This is why, throughout this research, I have tried to treat my own analytical instincts as data. When I found myself drawn to a particular interpretation, I tried to ask which assumptions were enabling it. When I felt certain about something, I tried to ask whose certainty it was, and whose experience it potentially excluded. To give one example: early in the analysis, I noticed I kept gravitating towards the stories that demonstrated creative agency, the moments where Learning Disabled Artists pushed back. And I had to stop and ask myself why those were the ones I was reaching for. The honest answer was that I needed them to be there. My own commitments to the field and my belief in what learning Disability Arts can do meant I was, at least in part, looking for evidence to confirm what I already wanted to say. That realisation did not make those stories less true or less important, but it did mean I had to go back to the people I was researching with and make more room for the harder, messier accounts: the frustration, the tokenism that went unresisted. This was and is uncomfortable work, and rarely produced clean, confident conclusions; in fact, much of the time, it opened up more questions, which gave me the drive to go back to those with learning disabilities I was researching with.

The relationship between researcher and participant is never power-neutral, but in the context of disability research, the hierarchy is particularly overdetermined. I arrived with institutional authority, the university name, while the Artist arrives as an individual whose capacity, credibility, and even ability to consent have historically been questioned or overridden (Fricker, 2007). The emancipatory paradigm's response to this history was to argue for a fundamental reversal of the social relations of research production: 'research should be accountable to disabled people, controlled by them where possible, and evaluated by the extent

to which it advances their emancipation rather than the careers of non-disabled researchers' (Stone and Priestley, 1996, p. 712). My own view, developed through and alongside this research, is that the question is not whether non-disabled researchers should be involved, but how that involvement is structured: who controls the research agenda, who benefits from its findings, and whose interpretive authority takes precedence when there is a disagreement.

The inclusive research framework developed by Walmsley and Johnson (2003) offers one response to these questions, arguing that the non-disabled researcher's role is not to replace or speak for learning disabled researchers, but to act as a facilitator, advocate, and ally: someone who uses their institutional access and academic skills in service of an agenda that is genuinely shared. This framing resonates with my own experience within this research, however, the language of allyship carries its own risks: it can become a way of claiming ethical credibility without fundamentally altering the distribution of power (Kossek et al., 2024). The ally who positions themselves as the person who 'gives voice' to marginalised communities is still, at some level, the one holding the microphone. McDonald et al. (2023), in their 'call-in' for allyship and anti-ableism in intellectual disability research, make a distinction that is useful here: 'the difference between allyship as performance and allyship as practice. Performative allyship - citing the right theorists, using the correct language, positioning oneself on the right side of political debates - does not, in itself, change the relations of power within a research project. Genuine allyship, by contrast, is structural and longitudinal.' (McDonald et al., 2023, p. 398). Instead they propose four commitments that move allyship from aspiration to practice: first, learning from and nurturing long-term, mutual relationships with people with learning disabilities; second, amplifying the voices of people with learning disabilities in institutional structures that influence research; third, infusing anti-ableist frameworks into the design and conduct of research; and fourth, embodying a career-long commitment to disability rights, reflexive practice, and growth. Crucially, none of these commitments can be fulfilled in a single project or thesis, but they have given me a way to pursue a research career committed to continuing the advocacy and allyship for Learning Disabled Artists that began within this PhD.

The self-advocacy movement's foundational principle, 'Nothing About Us Without Us', sharpens this further. The point is not merely that disabled people should be consulted or included as participants, but that they should have genuine power over the agendas, designs, and outputs of research that concerns them. As one Artist articulated it: 'who knows our lives better than us?' (Daniel Foulds, Artist Interview, 2021). The question cuts directly to the

epistemological heart of the matter. There are forms of knowledge about the experience of being a Learning Disabled Artist that I cannot access because they arise from a lived experience that is not mine. Pittaway et al. (2010) frame this as the 'stop stealing our stories' problem: the pattern whereby researchers extract the experiential knowledge of marginalised communities, transform it into academic capital, and return nothing. What is also at stake in the 'giving voice' metaphor is a misunderstanding of what voice means. The metaphor implies that marginalised people are voiceless and require someone else to speak on their behalf, rather than being denied the resources and institutional access that would enable their voices to reach wider audiences. The non-disabled researcher's role, properly understood, is not to provide a voice but to challenge and work within the structural conditions that prevent learning disabled people's voices from being heard on their own terms. Dalmau and Guðjónsdóttir (2020), in their duoethnographic exploration of disability allyship across identity positions, describe this as the practice of 'structural allyship': the ongoing, uncomfortable, self-interrogating work of recognising how one's own institutional position can be used not to speak for others, but to create the conditions in which others are resourced to speak for themselves.
This is the model I have tried, but with the humility of someone who is still learning what it means to work alongside, rather than on behalf of, Learning Disabled Artists and their communities.

None of this should be read as an anxiety spiral about positionality that ultimately produces research more interested in the researcher's conscience than in the community being researched. As mentioned above, I did not grow up with family members with learning disabilities. I did not have direct professional experience in this field before my PhD. But I did grow up in learning disability spaces. As a child, I spent significant parts of my school holidays in a learning disability supported living house, due to my family members working there. I learned to ride horses at a Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA) stables because it was affordable and available to my family. These are not credentials in any formal sense. They are, however, formative experiences that shaped something important: I did not learn to see learning disabled people as other in the way that dominant cultural scripts tend to produce. The 'othering' dynamic, the construction of disability as strange, as outside, as something that needs to be approached with special frameworks and managed affect, is one that is learned through particular kinds of cultural socialisation (Björnsdóttir, 2018; Arndt et al., 2015). But it is also one that is produced and reproduced at a societal level, through media representation, institutional separation, and the architecture of public life, in ways that no individual biography can entirely escape (Garland-Thomson, 2002; Hughes and Paterson, 1997). My early

socialisation ran partly against this current, and I think that matters, but I hold it with appropriate caution. The non-disabled researcher who claims unmediated access to the experiences of disabled people, however well-intentioned or biographically grounded, risks reproducing precisely the kind of epistemic overreach that this research is committed to challenging.

I also came to this research with experience of working alongside other marginalised groups: refugees and asylum seekers, people in prison, children with adverse childhood experiences, in contexts where arts practice was being used as a site of community and advocacy. This does not make me an expert in learning disability, and I want to be clear that I am not claiming a transferable expertise here. What it did give me was a recognition that marginalisation takes many forms, that the structural conditions of exclusion have common architectures even when their specific content differs, and that arts practice has a particular and irreplaceable role in the lives of people whose stories are not being told by the mainstream. I came to learning Disability Arts not as a stranger to social justice work, but as someone for whom that work had already become a primary ethical and creative commitment.

1.4 Relational Change in the Arts Sector

The specific impetus for this research came from Mind the Gap's Staging Change & Engage project, a four-year initiative designed to work with learning disabled people who had not previously engaged with the arts, whilst simultaneously partnering with venues and cultural organisations across the UK that were committed to improving their access and inclusion provisions. The venues involved in this collaborative project spanned the country: Northern Stage (Newcastle), Leeds Playhouse (Leeds), Square Chapel (Halifax), Z-arts (Salford), The Albany (London), and Gulbenkian Arts Centre (Canterbury). Each of these venues brought different approaches, resources, and institutional contexts, yet shared a common recognition that genuine inclusion required not superficial tokenism but systemic change. The Staging Change & Engage project had three core outcomes:

1. For venues to value learning disabled-led work and ensure their activities are genuinely accessible.

2. Learning Disabled Artists to develop the skills, knowledge, and confidence to be active and vocal leaders within the cultural sector.

3. The development of a sustained network of venues, arts organisations, and Learning Disabled Artists collaboratively championing and advocating for better access and broader diversity across the arts.

This research period coincided with a moment of genuine excitement and possibility within the arts sector. In February 2020, Battersea Arts Centre launched as the world's first truly Relaxed Venue (British Arts Council, 2020), radically embedding access and inclusivity into every aspect of their operations. Working from a social model of disability framework, Battersea's team, in co-creation with Jess Thom of Touretteshero, designed an approach that systematically identified and dismantled barriers facing people with learning disabilities and autism. This extended beyond relaxed performances to encompass relaxed booking systems, accessible pricing structures, community building initiatives, and genuine representation of disabled people on their stages. The launch of this model sent ripples through the UK arts sector, with many venues and organisations - including those involved in Staging Change & Engage - beginning to ask whether they, too, could embed such practices and what best practice might look like (Hughes, 2025).

However, this period of possibility was immediately shadowed by a crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically disrupted performing arts venues, forcing closures that prevented not only public performances but rehearsals, community gatherings, and the relational work that underpins much learning Disability Arts practice. As Michaela O'Sullivan from Square Chapel (Halifax) described the experience: 'Imagine that you are now an arts centre without a physical building. How do you access those communities? How do you keep relationships? And how do you keep creating engaging content and attempt to continue collaboration with the public?' (O'Sullivan, 2021). Whilst closure created space for venues to plan and build new accesscentred processes, it had a devastating impact on the learning disabled community specifically. Learning disabled people were instructed to shield before any other population for their safety; they were the last to be told it was safe to return to normal activity; and critically, they were not offered vaccinations alongside other groups with compromised immune systems (Mencap, 2020). This differential treatment exposed once again how quickly people with learning disabilities are rendered invisible and unprotected within mainstream policy, and how one label can obscure differences between a group of people who each have nuances and differences in their diagnosis. When venues began reopening in 2022, many Learning Disabled Artists and participants were fearful of returning. Government guidance for

working with vulnerable adults was inadequate and failed to address the nuanced realities of learning disability support. Natalie Kyrkos, Learning Disabilities Programme Manager at Leeds Playhouse, reflected on the impact on the Buzz programme, a structured creative arts course for young people with learning disabilities and autism:

> The pandemic has had no impact on some individuals, and huge impacts on others. Some people adapted to digital offers, and some people didn't. Some people were ready to come back to the building when we reopened, some people still haven't returned. It has taken over six months since reopening to get all young people back into the routine of coming and engaging with Buzz - but some people still are not here, and some people are unrecognisable.
>
> (Natalie Kyrkos, Leeds Playhouse Interview, 2022)

Amidst this unprecedented crisis, however, important research and documentation of learning disabled experiences were also happening. The Creative Doodle Book project, funded by UKRI as part of the COVID-19 Rapid Response call, involved delivering participatory arts practice to 20 organisations across the UK that work with people with learning disabilities and autism. As part of this project, practitioners and participants were interviewed to collect their COVID19 stories. Matthew Reason, the lead researcher, noted that this process created 'a space in which to connect, to escape, and a rare opportunity to feel listened to' (Reason, 2021). The research process that underpinned the whole research methodology (including the Staging Change & Engage Project) similarly created sustained time and space for long-term engagement with Learning Disabled Artists, examining their lived experiences of support systems, the venues and organisations they engage with, the power dynamics within these relationships, and their preferred models of employment and representation.

The period covered by this research, from the early promise of Battersea's Relaxed Venue launch through the disruptive impact of the pandemic and into the slow rebuilding that followed, represents both a crucial and an optimistic moment. There is clear momentum towards more inclusive arts practice. Evidence of this includes the growing visibility of Learning Disabled Artists in mainstream media. George Webster, for example, became the first CBeebies presenter with Down Syndrome, a symbolic but also tangible shift in representation. However, representation is only beginning to move away from tokenism towards something more egalitarian and genuinely valuing. This thesis aims to document and amplify the voices of Learning Disabled Artists currently working in the cultural sector, to situate their

experiences and insights within appropriate theoretical frameworks, and to share models of good practice in interdependence, leadership, and employment that other venues and organisations can learn from and adapt.

1.5 Overview of the Thesis

This thesis differs from the evaluation of the Staging Change & Engage project in both scope and purpose. While the evaluation focused specifically on analysing the outcomes and impact of the Staging Change & Engage programme run by Mind the Gap, its findings now form one element of a broader academic exploration. The thesis extends beyond this single project to examine the identities and leadership of Learning Disabled Artists across multiple organisations and contexts. This thesis investigates five interconnected research questions:

- What is a Learning Disabled Artist?
- How does learning disability shape and affect artistic identity?
- What is the significance of independence and interdependence in relation to Learning Disabled Artists and creative practice?
- What are the models and structures that enable success for Learning Disabled Artists?
- What is learning disability-led practice, and how does it connect to employability, meaningful access, and leadership?

The methodology employed throughout this research is participatory and ethnographic, grounded in principles of accessible research practice and will be fully explored in Chapter 4. Deep hanging out (Gertz, 1998), life narrative interviews (Atkinson, 2011), and reflective discussion were used to ensure that the voices, perspectives, and expertise of Learning Disabled Artists were genuinely centred rather than extracted. This approach also meant returning consistently to participants, sharing interpretations of the data, and creating opportunities for artists to correct, agree with, elaborate on, or challenge the researcher's analysis. This commitment to participatory methodology reflects both an ethical position and an epistemological stance: that learning disabled people are the experts on their own experiences and that genuine understanding requires their active involvement in knowledgemaking.

Importantly, the research quickly revealed the impossibility of separating the personal from the professional in learning Disability Arts work. At the outset, the intention was to focus narrowly on how learning disability affected artists' professional lives within the arts sector,

maintaining a clear boundary between personal and professional identity. However, as Alison Colborne's statement at the opening of this chapter makes clear, this separation is not feasible. Autism or learning disability is not a compartment of identity that can be cordoned off; it is integral to how a person understands themselves, moves through the world, and creates. Moreover, learning Disability Arts organisations work holistically with artists, attending to their personal wellbeing, supported living arrangements, transport, health support, and financial guidance as preconditions for their artistic practice and professional development. This holistic approach reflects an understanding that art-making and artistic identity cannot be divorced from the material and relational conditions of people's lives. The research was also shaped by a deliberate commitment to centring the histories of learning disability and learning Disability Arts. For too long, the arts sector has had a fragmented or incomplete understanding of its own disability history. By recovering and foregrounding the theoretical and activist work of disability pioneers like Vic Finkelstein, and by documenting the contemporary work of Learning Disabled Artists, this thesis aims to create a more complete historical record whilst also drawing connections between past and present struggles for representation and power.

Subsequent chapters develop these themes and questions in depth. Chapter 2 traces the intellectual and political history of learning disability, exploring medical and social models, social constructionist perspectives, critical disability theory, and crip theory. This chapter situates itself in relation to the social model of disability, establishing that disability does not reside within individuals as a deficit but rather emerges through social transactions and arrangements. It goes beyond this, challenging some of the limitations of the social model when applied to learning disability. It explores how disabled people's self-advocacy movements have generated new theories and epistemologies, including the insight that choosing to self-define as a person with learning disabilities is a social practice with profound implications for identity.

Chapter 3 examines current literature around learning disability theatre, providing a historical overview of key debates and practices that have influenced this thesis, whilst also investigating leadership models within the Disability Arts sector that might transform the cultural sector more broadly.

Chapter 4 outlines the thesis's methodology and ethical frameworks in detail, contextualising the participatory approach used with Learning Disabled Artists, the ethnographic and life

narrative interview methods, and reflecting critically on the challenges and productive tensions of qualitative research involving people with learning disabilities.

The four subsequent substantive chapters present the primary findings and theoretical contributions. Chapter 5, Identity, investigates what it means to use and claim the term learning disability, examining the history of the term, its critical ambivalences, and how artists are redefining it in their own practice. This chapter centres on Artists' perspectives and lived experiences as it explores the social construction of learning disability identity.

Chapter 6, Interdependence, interrogates society's expectation that people with learning disabilities should strive for independence, and proposes that interdependence is a more honest and functional description not only for learning Disability Arts but for the wider arts sector generally. This chapter analyses traditional power structures, explores the daily interdependencies we all rely on, and theorises more ethical and sustainable relationship structures, drawing on examples from practice.

Chapter 7, Leadership, investigates what learning disability-led practice actually means in practice, explores leadership roles and models within Disability Arts, and proposes new frameworks for leadership that ensure learning disabled voices are genuinely included and heard rather than tokenised.

The concluding chapter reflects on the future of Disability Arts and the arts sector, synthesising key insights from the thesis and considering potential applications. It also revisits Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, exploring how cultural value and worth might be redefined to recognise and elevate the contributions of people with learning disabilities.

1.6 Definition of Terms

Terminology and language around learning disability and neurodiversity are complex, evolving, and contested - in part because medical and social understandings of disability are in constant flux, but also because different individuals prefer different language reflecting their own relationship to identity and politics. For clarity within this thesis, the following key terms are defined as they are used in this writing.

Learning Disabled Artist / Artist with a Learning Disability - An individual who identifies with having a learning disability and/or autism and practices professionally as an artist, specifically within the field of performance. This thesis uses both identity-first language (learning disabled) and person-first language (artist with a learning disability), depending on context and individual preference, following the lead of the people being discussed.

Learning Disability and/or Autism - An umbrella term encompassing a range of different conditions and neurodivergences. Contemporary usage increasingly includes the suffix 'and/or autism' as standard practice, recognising autism as a distinct neurodiversity that is often comorbid with learning disability but can also exist independently.

MTG Artist - An individual currently employed in a paid position at Mind the Gap Theatre Company, whether in performing, touring, or creating work.

Learning Disability Theatre - A distinct field of cultural practice dedicated to working with people with learning disabilities to create professional, diverse, and high quality artistic work.

Relaxed - Spaces, performances, and services designed with the access needs of disabled and neurodivergent individuals and communities at their centre, committed to continuously reevaluating norms, adapting systems, and changing practices in response to actual access needs rather than assumptions.

Support Worker - A paid professional whose primary role is to provide practical, emotional, or personal support to a person with a disability. Within learning disability theatre contexts, support workers may assist with communication, regulation, mobility, or daily living needs. Importantly, this role is not inherently artistic.

Creative Enabler - A practitioner who supports Learning Disabled Artists to develop, express, and realise artistic ideas without directing or overriding creative agency. Creative enablers may facilitate access to tools, structures, rehearsal processes, or communication methods, but do not assume ownership of artistic outcomes.

Co-Creation - A collaborative creative process in which artistic work is developed through shared authorship between Learning Disabled Artists and non-disabled collaborators.

Cocreation, as used in this thesis, resists extractive or tokenistic participation and instead emphasises long-term relationships, negotiated power, and mutual creative risk.

Access - The practical, relational, and political work required to ensure disabled people can participate fully in artistic processes and cultural life. Access is understood not as an 'add-on' or accommodation, but as a foundational artistic and ethical practice that shapes aesthetics, timelines, and modes of working.

Reasonable Adjustments - Legally mandated changes to environments, processes, or expectations intended to remove barriers for disabled people. While rooted in equality legislation, this thesis understands reasonable adjustments as a minimum standard, rather than a sufficient condition for meaningful inclusion in artistic practice.

Crip Time - A concept describing non-linear, flexible, and disability-led experiences of time. Crip time challenges normative productivity, rehearsal schedules, and institutional deadlines, recognising that access, rest, and care shape how creative labour is experienced and valued.

Personal Independence Payment (PIP) - A UK government welfare benefit intended to support disabled people with the additional costs associated with disability.

Authorship - The recognition of who creates, owns, and is credited for artistic work. In learning disability theatre, authorship is a contested and political concept, particularly where access support, and collaboration intersect.

Chapter 2: Histories of Learning Disability

This chapter explores a range of ideas and theories surrounding learning disability, moving through perspectives such as the social and medical models, the social constructionist approach, critical disability theory, crip theory, and the concept of an ableist society. At its core, the chapter argues that disability does not reside within individuals but emerges through social transactions and institutional arrangements. This framing critically examines how knowledge around learning disability has tended to be generated not primarily for the benefit of people with learning disabilities themselves, but often to support the needs of professionals in academic, medical, or social service contexts.

Interwoven with this critique is a discussion of identity and the significance of self-advocacy, particularly how individuals with learning disabilities navigate and assert their identities within these structures. Crip theory, which bridges queer theory and critical disability studies, serves as a useful lens for understanding the complexities of identity formation and resistance (McRuer, 2006). While the experience of impairment is real and embodied, the categorisation of someone as a person with a learning disability is shown to be a social practice, shaped by the kinds of interactions and expectations that frame their lives.

Finally, the chapter situates these theoretical debates within a historical context of oppression, arguing that this legacy is essential to understanding the position of Learning Disabled Artists today: how their identities are formed, how their work is received, and how they negotiate ongoing power structures in cultural and institutional settings.

2.1 Historical Models and the Foundations of Discrimination

To fully understand how people with learning disabilities are perceived and treated in contemporary society, it is essential to begin with the historical models that have shaped public and institutional attitudes. This section opens the chapter by mapping out foundational frameworks which, although dated in origin, continue to echo in current practices and perceptions. These models reflect broader societal fears, values, and attempts to categorise and manage difference, often resulting in marginalisation.

Importantly, the first model discussed, Thompson's 'threat to society' model, should not be mistaken for the more progressive 'social model of disability.' While the names may appear similar, they represent fundamentally different ideas. The 'threat to society' model reflects a historical fear-driven response, not a rights-based or emancipatory framework. Discrimination and the weight of oppression are intricately woven into the fabric of how learning disabilities are experienced. Thompson (1997) suggests 'a four-part model that can be used to inform institutional and societal views and provide an understanding of how people with learning disabilities are viewed' (Thompson, 1997, p. 151). These four models include the threat to society model, the medical model, the subnormality model, and the special needs model:

- Threat to Society Model
  In the early 20th century, society harboured deep apprehension regarding disabilities, perceiving them as deviations from cultural norms. This fear resulted in the confinement of individuals with learning disabilities to specialised institutions, as they were seen as a danger to the societal fabric.
- Medical Model
  This social fear paved the way for the medical model, which sought to regulate and contain behaviours deemed abnormal through scientific and clinical means.
- Subnormality Model
  Thompson emphasises how this model assessed individuals based on medical impairments and academic capabilities, reinforcing hierarchies and shaping negative societal perceptions of those with learning disabilities.
- Special Needs Model
  Aimed at societal integration, this model focuses on identifying and responding to individuals' specific needs. However, it can inadvertently highlight differences and hinder inclusion by reinforcing the idea that those with learning disabilities must be 'fixed' or accommodated as exceptions.

Thompson concludes that all four models share a common consequence:

> What all these models have in common is a tendency to marginalise and disempower, to a greater or lesser extent, people with a medical impairment.
>
> (Thompson, 1997, p. 152)

To appreciate the extent and complexity of the discrimination faced by people with learning disabilities in modern Britain, we must begin with these historical lenses. They help us trace how entrenched beliefs have informed discriminatory practices, institutional policies, and the conceptual frameworks used by professionals today. While this chapter draws primarily on the history and policy context of the United Kingdom, it situates this within a broader international framework where relevant. Throughout specific historical periods, individuals with learning disabilities have been subjected to sustained oppression and dehumanisation. During the Middle Ages, they were frequently cast as moral or spiritual deviants, with some associated with witchcraft or demonic possession (Goodey, 2011). In early modern Europe, theological and superstitious interpretations prevailed, and prominent figures such as Martin Luther are historically noted for making disturbing suggestions about the eradication of people perceived as 'soulless' or 'defective' (Trent, 1994).

Until the early 17th century, support for disabled individuals typically came from religious institutions through charitable acts, often shaped more by pity than by rights-based thinking. A significant policy shift occurred with the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601, which formalised the state's role in supporting the 'deserving poor' (Borsay, 2005), including those with impairments, though this often reinforced hierarchical and moralistic attitudes about who was worthy of aid. By the 18th and 19th centuries, the focus shifted increasingly toward institutionalisation. This was not simply about care but about control, as people with severe impairments were removed from public view and placed into asylums and workhouses (Scull, 1984). The underlying ideologies of this era were shaped by what might be termed egocentric philosophies: intellectual traditions that prioritised the rational, autonomous individual as the ideal citizen. Within disability studies, scholars have subsequently critiqued this Enlightenment humanism for its narrow and exclusionary definitions of personhood, arguing that such frameworks render those who do not conform to these norms invisible, expendable, or outside the category of the fully human (Goodley, 2014; Shildrick, 2002).

The publication of Darwin's On the Origin of Species (1859) marked a turning point, as evolutionary theory was misappropriated by proponents of Social Darwinism. This

pseudoscientific framework laid the foundation for the eugenics movement, which sought to ‘improve’ the human race by preventing those deemed genetically ‘inferior’, including people with learning disabilities, from reproducing (Bhimiani, 2021). Eugenicists in Britain, such as Francis Galton, falsely linked disability with criminality, poverty, and moral decline (Galton, 1904). These myths were systematically challenged by Barnes (1991) in Disabled People in Britain and Discrimination, who exposed the discriminatory logic underlying such ideologies. The extreme consequences of eugenic thinking were most horrifyingly realised during the Nazi regime’s Aktion T4 programme, which led to the murder of over 200,000 disabled individuals across Europe (Burleigh, 1994). The Holocaust represents one of the most brutal expressions of state-sanctioned ableism and marks a critical moment in disability history. The revelations of the Holocaust had a significant, if gradual, effect on disability policy and public consciousness in the United Kingdom. As Historic England documents, ‘in reaction to Nazi abuses, the pre-war eugenicist theories which had argued for the isolation and sterilisation of people with disabilities became increasingly reviled’ (Historic England, 2023), contributing to a postwar shift in British political discourse away from explicitly eugenic frameworks. The legacy of T4 therefore served a dual function in the British context: it delegitimised the most extreme expressions of ableist ideology while leaving intact many of the structural and attitudinal conditions that had enabled them.

Following World War II, public and political attitudes gradually shifted towards integration and community support. The move toward community-based services - particularly from the 1960s onward represented an attempt to deinstitutionalise care and reintegrate individuals with learning disabilities into everyday society. However, these services were often framed through dominant medical paradigms and operated within paternalistic models of care that continued to define people by their impairments rather than empower them (Walmsley & Johnson, 2003; Chappell, 1998). Critics have argued that while these reforms improved conditions, they did not necessarily dismantle the power dynamics or social attitudes that marginalised disabled people (Beresford, 1996).

This historical overview illustrates, albeit briefly, the persistent and evolving nature of discrimination against people with learning disabilities in Britain. Though many overtly oppressive practices have been dismantled, more covert and structural forms of ableism remain embedded in institutions, policy, and cultural attitudes - issues that will be examined in more depth throughout this chapter.

2.2 Disability Politics

Since the international disabled people's movement in the 1960s, the traditional medical explanations for the economic and social deficiencies faced by disabled people have gradually shifted to more socio/political explanations: often referred to as the social model of disability. As discussed below, the social model centres on environmental and cultural factors as the primary cause of the marginalisation of people with disabilities – this thesis explores the systematic exclusion of people with learning disabilities from employment in the arts sector, this chapter explores in depth the relationship between learning disability theories, work, and politics. Learning disabled people face significant disadvantages in the current labour market, shaped by dominant economic values and policy frameworks in the UK. As Barnes (2000: 445) notes, these frameworks are underpinned by neoliberal ideals such as the pursuit of profit, the primacy of waged labour, and competition between individual workers. These priorities, reflected in government employment policy, employer practices, and broader cultural narratives about productivity and independence, often exclude those who do not conform to normative expectations of work and efficiency, and therefore, according to Tom Shakespeare, makes disabled people redundant within society due to them not contributing to the capitalist society we live in (Shakespeare, 2020). This failure to value people with disabilities highlights the significance of an alternative disability culture, which celebrates a positive disabled identity and consciousness.

The relationship between culture and society is an important theoretical debate that has an influence on the treatment of people with learning disabilities. In Marxist theory, the ownership and control of the means of production are central to understanding how dominant ideologies shape culture (Marx & Engels, 1845). In the 1960s, Marxism was reformulated and revived through the work of Antonio Gramsci. His analysis of capitalist domination stressed not only the significance of coercion but also 'the achievement of 'hegemony' - by 'willing consent' - through the dominant group's direction of the production and consumption of cultural activities' (Barnes, 2001, p. 516). For disability studies, this is a crucial insight: it suggests that the marginalisation of disabled people is not maintained purely through law, medicine, or institutional force, but is reproduced through culture itself and the stories told about disability and the images circulated. Raymond Williams extended this framework in the 1980s through his development of cultural materialism, dismissing the notion of an allenveloping, monolithic culture and exploring the relative autonomy between the dominant culture and the economy, society, and polity (Williams, 1986) instead. If culture is not simply a passive reflection of dominant economic or social structures, then it becomes a site where resistance is genuinely

possible. Disabled people's cultural production is not merely a reaction to oppression; it can actively challenge and seek to transform the hegemonic understandings that sustain it. Culture, in Williams' terms, is both a product of social conditions and a force capable of acting upon them.

This emphasis on the social and cultural dimensions of difference relates to the more recent theories of Stuart Hall on cultural politics. Hall refers to a shift 'from a struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself' (Hall, 1988, pp. 27–28). For disability culture, this distinction is politically significant: it marks a move away from simply demanding that disabled people be *included* within existing cultural frameworks, just asking to be seen, towards a more fundamental challenge to *how* disability is constructed. Hall's framework illuminates what is at stake in disabled people's cultural practice. In the continuing campaign against the marginalisation and subordination of disabled people, there is an emerging conflict over identity and competing interpretations of what it means to be a disabled person within the disabled community.

> Hall suggests that in the continuing campaign against the marginalisation and subordination of disabled people, there is an emerging conflict over identity and competing interpretations of what it means to be a disabled person within the imagined disabled community. The political struggle assumes new forms that are manifested in the arena of cultural representation.
>
> (Barnes, 2001: 217)

People with disabilities are set apart from the ordinary and end up othered by society and the values it holds, including ‘characterising disability in industrial capitalist societies as a personal tragedy’ (Hunt, 1966: 146). This creates a struggle for people with disabilities to replace existing oppressive representations with others that reflect their own experiences and values. For those with learning disabilities, it presents an opportunity to overwrite the views which have been carried from generation to generation and dominate the history of learning disabilities with new ones. Foucault’s studies of social institutions offer insights highly relevant to how people with learning disabilities have been and continue to be viewed in our society (Foucault, 1975). Firstly, his notion of ‘the norm’ is central, describing how people with learning disabilities are viewed too often in terms of loss or deficit in relation to an idealised idea of what normal is. This tension is reflected directly in arts practice, and particularly in casting. Call-outs for performers with learning disabilities frequently produce a

double bind: individuals are told they are either 'too disabled' or do not 'look disabled enough' (Paul Wilshaw, Artist Interview, 2021). This is not simply a matter of individual casting directors making inconsistent decisions. It is, as Foucault's concept of the 'norm' helps us understand, a structural phenomenon. The norm does not describe what people *are*; it produces a standard against which people are measured and found lacking (Foucault, 1977). In the context of casting, the normative image of disability has not emerged from disabled experience but has been constructed over decades of cultural representation, producing a narrow, often visual and stereotyped template of what a disabled person is supposed to look like, behave like, and be capable of.

The casting director, typically neurotypical and non-disabled, occupies a position of normative power. When casting a non-disabled character, a learning disabled performer may be read as 'too disabled' to inhabit that role convincingly; when casting a disabled character, the same performer may not match the cultural script of disability that the director unconsciously carries. In either case, the learning disabled person is measured against a norm they did not author and cannot meet. This is not incidental: it is a structural reproduction of what Foucault identifies as normalising judgement, in which institutional power continuously sorts, ranks, and excludes against an invisible standard (Foucault, 1977). This has consequences that extend beyond individual casting decisions. When learning disabled people are consistently positioned as failing to meet the norm, this shapes expectations of what leadership in the arts is possible for them. If the dominant cultural narrative constructs learning disabled people as subjects of representation rather than agents of it, then the prospect of a learning disabled casting director, artistic director, or creative leader becomes, in effect, unthinkable within that framework. Yet it is precisely in these leadership roles that the normative frameworks themselves could be challenged and reshaped. A learning disabled casting director doesn't just make different decisions, they bring an entirely different set of cultures, lived knowledges, and definitions of what disability looks like and what disabled people can do.

For Foucault, the 'norm' is all-pervading and describes what is typical and how this ought to be. It is what we are all measured against by others and ourselves, including through social institutions. School examinations, medical examinations, and psychiatric tests are all examples of methods that establish how normal individuals are defined. So, Foucault states that an exam is measured in quantitative terms and hierarchies in terms of value, the abilities, the level, the 'nature' of individuals. It introduces, through this 'value-giving' measure, the constraint of conformity that must be achieved (Foucault, 1991: 183). As will be explored in the following

chapters, many individuals at Mind the Gap describe their experience of examinations and how results changed the direction of their lives away from their acquaintances, who continued life down the normal route. They became classified, whether that was learning disabled, special, or difficult, and everything they did was compared to that of the norm. This reflects the individualising effect that Foucault highlights in which an individual is made into a describable, analysable object and introduced to a range of 'normalising technologies.'

Licia Carlson explores some of the tensions that have existed in the early descriptions of 'people with learning disabilities', a term which only started to be used in the 1980s. Carlson identifies the label of learning disability as inherently heterogeneous, unstable, and prone to generating generalisations. 'Perhaps it is precisely because of, not in spite of, its heterogeneity, instability, ability to generate prototype effects and its place within various constellations of power that it [the label of learning disability] survived for so long' (Carlson, 2010: 101). Carlson reminds us that people with learning disabilities are not a homogeneous group and do not all have the same experiences, a point explored further in the thesis under the Identity Chapter (5), which focuses on Learning Disabled Artists across the UK. Foucault's notion of individualisation offers a way to understand how people with learning disabilities are judged in relation to an idealised concept of self-sufficiency and independence. Carlson adopts a Foucauldian perspective to explore how learning disabilities have been understood and discussed. She maps the ways in which developments within institutions for the 'feebleminded' changed notions of idiocy, feeblemindedness and learning disability and how they have been constructed, named, understood, and treated:

> The various instruments and techniques that were applied to the individuals within these facilities (called schools, asylums, institutions) generated new typologies and classification schemes from which the 'idiot', 'imbecile', and 'moral imbecile' emerged as distinct kinds. With the birth of mental testing in the early twentieth century, the understanding of 'feeblemindedness' changed again, and the 'moron' emerged in connection with this new way of gathering and organising knowledge.
>
> (Carlson, 2010: 22)

Thus, while attitudes and beliefs about people with learning disabilities have made significant progress in a positive direction within the UK (and the majority of Europe), such as the closure of institutions, negative preconceptions are still deep-rooted and embedded within society, consequently affecting employment and services. Although traditional models of institutional

care have eventually been replaced by models of community care and social inclusion, there are still many barriers that impact the employment of people with learning disabilities, and still a fight for fair representation and inclusion within the arts sector. This chapter continues to present different models for overcoming these barriers, their benefits, and associated issues, concluding with the approach this research has taken.

2.3 The Social Model of Disability

The social model of disability is one of the most well-known and influential theories in disability discourse. It challenges the traditional medical model by shifting the focus away from individual impairments and placing responsibility on society for creating disabling environments. As Goodley explains,

> Society created disablement and is the arbiter of disciplinary powers that (re)produce a pathological understanding of different bodies and minds.
>
> (Goodley, 2001: 210)

From this perspective, disability arises not from impairment itself but from the social and physical barriers that exclude and marginalise. Therefore, disabled activists argue for social change in which both disabled and non-disabled people must take part. A widely cited example of the social model in practice is when a wheelchair user cannot access a building because it only has stairs; the problem is not the individual's impairment but the lack of an accessible ramp, which society has failed to provide. This example has been powerful in disability politics and Disability Arts, because it clearly shifts attention away from the body of the disabled person and towards the environments, policies and attitudes that restrict participation.

However, this model does not fully account for the experiences of all disabled people, particularly those with learning disabilities. It is much harder to point to a single, obvious ramp or staircase when considering the barriers faced by people labelled as having learning difficulties; instead, barriers are often diffuse and embedded in education systems, communication norms, legal frameworks, and deeply held assumptions about intelligence and competence. As a result, even when organisations and policies claim to follow the social model, people with learning disabilities are still frequently understood as having something *wrong* in their minds that is individual and fixed. Simone Aspis highlights this gap, stating: 'Learning difficulties remain tacitly conceived of as a biological deficit' (Aspis, 2019). Here,

Aspis is pointing out that, beneath the social-model language, learning difficulty is still routinely treated as an internal cognitive flaw to be managed or corrected, rather than as a product of exclusionary practices and structures. Aspis's critique highlights the deeper marginalisation experienced by people with learning difficulties, who are often overlooked in both policy and theory. This marginalisation is also visible in current debates about identity. In particular, there is a growing tension between people who identify as learning disabled and those who identify with the neurodiverse community. While neurodiversity frameworks have usefully challenged purely deficit-based accounts of autism, ADHD and specific learning difficulties, they can sometimes centre people who are able to speak, advocate and present their difference as a source of strength. Many people with more profound or complex learning disabilities do not easily fit this celebratory narrative and may feel that their experiences of dependency, intensive support needs and state control are not fully recognised. This contributes to a sense of isolation and lack of recognition, as Goodley notes: 'Closed in, isolated and confined by a mental impairment devoid of meaning and history' (Goodley, 2001: 211). Goodley's phrase captures how learning disabled people are often treated as if their 'mental impairment' were simply a clinical fact, stripped of social and political history, and as if they were primarily passive bodies to be cared for rather than agents with their own desires, relationships and forms of knowledge.

These theoretical issues are lived realities for Learning Disabled Artists. At Mind the Gap, many artists understand the social model and can apply it when thinking about others' physical impairments: they can, for example, readily identify how steps, narrow doors or inaccessible information disable wheelchair users or d/Deaf artists. However, they often find it more difficult to apply the social model to themselves and their own lived experiences. When artists talk about needing more time to learn lines, intensive support with reading or money, or facing constant doubts about their capacity to make decisions, it becomes less clear where 'impairment' ends and 'barrier' begins. This difficulty in naming and locating barriers reflects the very problems raised by Aspis and Goodley: current versions of the social model have not yet fully grappled with the ways that learning disability is constructed, governed and lived, leaving Learning Disabled Artists caught between deficit-based understandings of mind and an incomplete social theory of disability. As Anna Gray, a Mind the Gap artist, reflects:

> If someone has a visual impairment, it is not their fault. A theatre could make sure they have braille or audio for them. For learning disability, everyone is different so I don't know what we could do.

(Anna Gray, Artist Interview, 2020)

This raises a crucial question: is the social model of disability a viable way of knowing and understanding all forms of disability, particularly the heterogeneous and often contested category of learning disability? Rather than rejecting the model, I want to ask how far it can stretch to encompass experiences that are not easily mapped onto ramps, steps and other physical barriers. The example above suggests that, while the social model remains powerful and necessary, it does not always fully capture the complexities of cognitive and intellectual impairments, in which the most pervasive obstacles are attitudinal, relational, and institutional rather than simply environmental or architectural.

The social model has been hugely important to the British disability movement. It provided a political strategy focused on barrier removal: if people with impairments are disabled by society, then the goal must be to dismantle those disabling barriers. As Tom Shakespeare explains, 'Rather than pursuing a strategy of medical cure, or rehabilitation, it is better to pursue a strategy of social change, perhaps even the total transformation of society' (Shakespeare, 2002: 5). For many people with learning disabilities, however, the 'social change' required is less about installing lifts or widening doorways and more about challenging deep-seated assumptions about intelligence, capacity and dependence. In this context, the primary adjustment is not physical but attitudinal: it is people, practices and expectations that need to change if learning disabled people are to be recognised as full participants in social and cultural life.

Replacing the medical model was a liberating shift. It enabled people to see that they were not the problem - society was. Much like feminist consciousness-raising or coming out in the LGBTQ+ movement, this realisation allowed disabled people to reconceptualise themselves and their place in society: 'They became empowered to mobilise, organise, and work for equal citizenship' (Shakespeare, 2002: 5). Yet, Shakespeare now argues that the very simplicity that made the social model so successful has become its main limitation. It's clear that the binary between impairment and disabling barriers has hardened into an ideology that can be difficult to challenge. As a result, it leaves little room for nuance, complexity, or internal critique. This concern is echoed by other writers such as Liz Crow, who criticises the model for failing to account for personal experiences of pain and limitation, which are often part of living with impairments (Crow, 2013). Similarly, Carol Thomas has extended the model by proposing a

new materialist approach, focusing on impairment effects, 'those direct, embodied impacts that the social model tends to overlook' (Thomas, 2019: 1040).

These critical voices have not always been welcomed within disability studies, particularly when they challenge the traditional social model. Yet, they point to areas of missing practice, especially for those whose impairments involve fluctuating or invisible needs, such as many people with learning disabilities. Ultimately, Tom Shakespeare concludes that 'The social model has now outlived its usefulness... it is time to put the whole thing to one side and start again' (Shakespeare, 2002: 9). While that may be a provocative claim, it opens the door for developing more inclusive, flexible, and responsive models, ones that acknowledge both the structural barriers imposed by society and the lived, embodied realities of impairment in all its diverse forms.

The main issue with the social model of disability is the tendency to deny difference – that an impairment does not cause difference in someone's life - whether pain, tiredness, burnout, etc. When we say 'people are disabled by society, not by their bodies', we are rejecting difference, which becomes an issue because to ignore the implications of impairments means to create an idealistic theory. Similarly, the women's movement in the 1970s sometimes rejected the role of the body in explaining oppression – to pretend there is no difference is to ignore a major part of biographies: 'Feminist theory needs to take into account not only the way in which our biology is interpreted, but also the very real ways in which biology does in practice affect our lives' (Birke, 1986: 47). Shakespeare argues that the priority should be social change and barrier removal, signalling towards a bio-psycho-social model: 'yet there is no reason why appropriate action on impairment, and even various forms of impairment prevention, cannot co-exist with action to remove disabling environments and practices. People are disabled both by social barriers and by their bodies. This is straightforward and uncontroversial.' (Shakespeare, 2002: 15).

Corker and French argue 'not only can sensory conditions include pain but pain itself is generated through the interplay of physiological, psychological, and social-cultural factors' (Corker & French, 1998: 6). Impairment is often the cause of disability, but disability may also exacerbate impairment. The issue with the social model of disability is its binary, naive distinctions. Referring to the previous example, if building entrances have only steps, this is a disadvantage for wheelchair users; include a ramp. If there is no sign language interpreter, deaf people are excluded; hire an interpreter. However, removing some environmental obstacles for

one person with an impairment can create obstacles for another person with another impairment, because some impairments are not generated by the environment but by medical factors, such as pain. However, much investment commitment and energy are devoted to making the world barrier-free and work accessible, there will always be individuals who cannot work due to their impairment.

> If someone has an impairment which causes constant pain, how can the social environment be implicated? If someone has a significant intellectual limitation, how can society be altered to make this irrelevant to employment opportunities, for example? Does mainstream sport disable impaired athletes by imposing oppressive criteria – such as being able to run to play football? Some of these examples may seem ridiculous. But they point to the problem of pushing the social model to its implications, and highlight a flaw in the whole conception.
>
> (Shakespeare, 2002: 18)

We can see this through the experience of Paul Wilshaw, Assistant Producer at Mind the Gap, and the discussion of his denial of the physical. Although Paul uses the social model within his own life, including writing access riders for employers which explain what they can do to ensure he can work to his full potential, he does agree that the social model does not take into consideration learning disabilities as much as it does physical, including the independence, autonomy, and confidence to be able to communicate your own needs which are not just medical diagnosis. He also explains how changes using the social model for learning disabilities are not a complete fix: 'If you include a ramp for wheelchair access you have solved the barrier, however if I tell you that I take longer to process information so please give me time – this is not a complete solve and can cause frustration because I am still not working/functioning to the normal standard' (Paul Wilshaw, Arist Interview, 2022). Paul also discusses how he denies his own body, and therefore, people/employers/organisations don't have the opportunity to put anything in place. 'My cerebral palsy means that after a long day, my legs might cramp and I might be in a lot of pain, but I will not share this or express this. I deny the pain I have in my body and find my own ways of continuing to work because it is hidden; people can't necessarily see my impairment and the pain. I could ask for access without stairs, a comfortable seat, taxis for transport, a shorter working day, but because I don't look like I need that support… I want to continue that image' (Paul Wilshaw, Arist Interview, 2022). Carol Thomas offers a useful framework for understanding how disability operates both

socially and experientially. In Times Change, but Things Remain the Same, she distinguishes between two key concepts that underpin her social-relational approach:

> Disablism: refers to the social imposition of avoidable restriction on the life activities, aspirations, and psycho-emotional well-being of people categorised as 'impaired' by those deemed 'normal'. Disablism is social-relational in character and constitutes a form of social oppression in contemporary society, alongside sexism, racism, ageism and homophobia.
>
> (Thomas, 2010: 37)

> Impairment effects: the direct and unavoidable impacts which 'impairments' (physical, sensory, intellectual, emotional) have on individuals' embodied functioning in the social world.
>
> (Thomas, 2012: 211)

Shakespeare believes that the social model of disability can work in context if it can break out of the rules of logic it has traditionally sat in, principles that deny the body and social barriers together can be the cause of disablement:

> We believe that an adequate social theory of disability would include all the dimensions of disabled people's experiences: bodily, psychological, cultural, social, political, rather than claiming that disability is either medical or social.
>
> (Shakespeare & Erickson, 2000).

The social model also shows its limitations for people with learning disabilities due to its heavy commitment to self-representation and self-determination. This becomes problematic due to the limitations on some individuals' capacity for purposive agency, and can leave many individuals with learning disabilities out of the conversation. This is again caused by the social model theorists seeing disability and impairment as two separate phenomena. This thesis has used the social model of disability throughout the research, including making adjustments to ensure research participation was possible for all involved. However, there is an acknowledgement of seeing impairment separately and that this sometimes means that no environmental change can help if it is the body experiencing pain/limitations/boundaries.

The debate around the social model of disability is central to this thesis and connects directly to Chapter 7 on Interdependence. The social model of disability shifts the focus away from the individual and instead frames disability as arising from environmental and societal barriers that restrict opportunity and success. However, recognising and understanding impairment remains integral, particularly in the context of interdependent support and an artist's success, highlighting the need to consider both structural barriers and embodied experiences. There needs to be an understanding of disability within the arts sector to empathetically discuss working schedules, support in space, payment methods and limitations of an individual, because there will be limitations that no changes in an environment will be able to fix. To work interdependently, we must have the knowledge and honesty to discuss access needs with the social model and impairment effects in mind.

2.4 Social Constructivism

This part of the chapter investigates the differences between the formal diagnosis of a learning disability and self-diagnosis, and how these two forms of identity resemble or differ, through the lens of social constructivism. The social aspect of social constructionism holds that personal status and identity are constructed through human relationships and interactions. It is people who label other people. During the 1960s, autism was a psychiatric condition that affected a few people; currently, more and more people are claiming the autistic identity due to the rise of both self-diagnosis and formal diagnosis. In the 1960s, it was thought that autism was caused by cold, unresponsive mothering (Bettleheim, 1967). Today, the discourse around autism is that it is a neurobiological condition. As knowledge has developed, the terminology has also changed from one condition called autism, to a variety and range of impairments called the autism spectrum disorder and more recently, neurodivergence.

One of the central ideas of the social constructionist perspective is that language serves different purposes. There is such a large collection of terminology, including intellectual disability (used mainly in Scotland, the US and Australia), learning difficulties, special needs and neurodivergent. Much of the terminology around learning disability is no longer used due to its negative connotations and the weight of the language, including the word spastic, which derives from Latin via Greek spastikos, meaning drawing in, tugging, or shaking uncontrollably. The word was used in medical environments, and Scope was formally known as The Spastics Society, but as Valerie Lang, a member of the Spastics Society's Executive Council in the 1990s, says: 'I felt that we could not afford to stay with the name we had. The name spastic was a playground term of abuse. Children would shout to each other "you big

spastic" every time someone was clumsy or even if they just disagreed with them' (Lang, 2014). Much of the way we think about learning disability is guided by the terminology that is used rather than the people themselves, and the knowledge we have about learning disability has been written by people without learning disabilities, observing, rather than those with lived experience. Social constructionism is a process of critical engagement, questioning ideas, concepts and theories that appear to reflect the things that we all know about learning disabilities and the people who - the idea is that knowledge is constantly changing.

The language we use has consequences because it influences how we act towards people, things, and ideas (Atherton & Crickmore, 2011:5). Social constructivism is about understanding the consequences of ideas and concepts for people with learning disabilities. The importance of language can be seen in the ongoing discussion about the use of 'people first' or 'identity first' language. Social constructivism asks that we be aware that learning disability is not located within people with labels, but in their relationships with people, organisations, procedures, practices, events, places, and ideas where the concept of learning disability is constructed. This is an identity a person acquires, and as previously discussed, the identity of learning disabled, like any other identity, is a product of interactions. Critical constructivism argues that you cannot create an identity alone, only through social transactions. This means that a person with learning disabilities can become disabled by the organisation and social relationships they are in, something that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7:
Interdependence.

More recently, there has been a debate within the learning disabled community on whether to use person-first language or identity-first language when describing a person who has a learning disability. Person-first language prioritises the individual over their diagnosis (person with a learning disability), while identity-first language prioritises the diagnosis (learning disabled person). Identity-first language conveys a disability as being a permanent and important part of a person's identity, many artists at Mind the Gap saw their disabilities as being a fundamental part of who they are: 'I have got a learning disability. I am proud to say I have a learning disability. It is what makes me, me.' (Liam Bairstow, MTG Artist, 2020).
However, there are also some drawbacks to using identity-first language, such as people thinking that a person's disability completely defines who they are - and this is especially problematic when some people's views on learning disability are solely based on negative stereotypes, as discussed previously in this chapter. Person-first language reinforces that

people with learning disabilities are human beings, it tries to re-centre society's views on people with learning disabilities, ensuring they are treated with the same respect as people without disabilities: 'I am a person first – if I use person with a learning disability I hope they see me before they presume things about my disability' (Paul Wilshaw, Artist Interview, 2019). The semantics of disability language is a sensitive topic. Critics of person-first language imply its use can be detrimental to the cultural identity of people with learning disabilities, and promote the use of identity-first language, which acknowledges that a disability is respectfully entwined with one's identity. Throughout this thesis, I have chosen to use person-first language when referring to people with learning disabilities and identity-first language when referring to Learning Disabled Artists. This is how most participants in the research wanted to be identified – they agreed their disability is so entwined in who they are as an artist and how they make work, but on a personal level, they want to be acknowledged as a person first.

The identity created through institutions, whether through medical intervention, education, or the professional environment, is socially constructed by the environment and how we respond to it. Although we can be influenced by environmental factors, we have essential identities regardless of the context or situation, such as our gender identity, however ',identities are intelligible only within a complex web of social relations and shared activity' (Gergen, 1990). In the social constructivist view:

> The experience of self exists in the ongoing interchange with others […] The self continually creates itself through narratives that include other people who are reciprocally woven into these narratives […] This conception of self is at odds with the skin-bound container with fixed contents.
>
> (Freedman & Combs, 1996: 17)

Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble* (1990) that identity is not a pre-existing inner essence that we simply reveal to the world, but is instead 'performatively constituted', brought into being through repeated acts, gestures and expressions that are witnessed, recognised and ratified by others. On this account, there is 'no identity behind the expressions' (Butler, 1990, p. 33); identity *is* the performance. Just as we might ask, *'If a tree falls in a forest and there is no one around to hear it, does it make a sound?'*, we can apply the same logic to self-identity: if someone identifies as shy, can they *be* shy without the presence of other people to witness the performance? The relevance of certain identities within specific contexts further highlights the situated and relational nature of personal identity, for example: being perceived as a leader

in a workplace, as a caregiver within a family, or as an activist in political spaces. Therefore, the construction of learning disability depends on interactions with people, places and activities. In Chapter 5 on Identity, the thesis explores the relationship to the environment of Mind the Gap, a learning disabled theatre company, and how being associated with the company guarantees your identity as learning disabled, but also how the environment forces interaction between individuals who identify as learning disabled, and how accidental hierarchy is created between those with and without learning disabilities. However, each individual in the building has some relationship to learning disability: 'the problem is the problem, and rather than being the problem, each person has a relationship with the problem' (Freedman & Combs, 1996: 47).

Although learning disabilities can be medically diagnosed, many individuals are now choosing to self-identify, especially within the autistic community. Several factors may account for this: the lengthy NHS diagnostic pathway, the systemic underdiagnosis of autism in women and girls, and the increasing legitimacy afforded to self-identification as a form of autonomy that resists overly narrow diagnostic frameworks. The individual self-diagnosing is informed of their own behaviours and symptoms and can self-identify as autistic / learning disabled without having to perform learning disability in front of a medical practitioner to receive a formal diagnosis. For example, many Mind the Gap Artists have to attend PIP (Personal Independence Payment) assessments, and many have expressed how they feel they have to perform a learning disability:

> The assessors do not have to work with people with learning disabilities and therefore they don't know the nuances of the day-to-day, they expect us to perform as their ideal of learning disability. I used to find myself tripping up. Acting like it was my worst day for pain, and misunderstanding and lack of communication, plus some.
>
> (Daniel Foulds, Artist Interview, 2020)

This then opens the question: can an individual have a learning disability on their own? If we separate the impairment from learning disability, is it possible for an individual to have an impairment but have to perform a learning disability, dependent on the environment, interaction and activities around them?

2.5 Critical Disability Theory

Critical disability theory is a theoretical framework for the study of disability issues. It centres disability as it compares societal norms and values with their actualisation in the daily lives of disabled people. This includes Hosking's explanation of seven different elements of critical disability theory: models of disability, multidimensionality, valuing diversity, rights, voices of disability, language, and transformative politics (Hosking, 2008). Expanding on the social model of disability, critical disability theory adopts a version of the social model based on the principles that:

> (1) disability is a social construct, not the inevitable consequence of impairment, (2) disability is best characterised as a complex interrelationship between impairment, individual response to impairment, and the social environment, and (3) the social disadvantage experienced by disabled people is caused by the physical, institutional and attitudinal environment which fails to meet the needs of people who do not match the social expectation of normalcy.
>
> (Hosking, 2008: 7)

It is a synthesis of the social and medical model, which the World Health Organisation calls 'the biopsychosocial model' (WHO, 2002). This approach balances the contributions of impairment, personal responses to impairment and the barriers imposed by the social environment to the concept of disability. This is a theory that MTG Associate Artist Paul Wilshaw considers particularly relevant to people with learning disabilities, but he questions its accessibility because of the information's dissemination, its intellectual density, and the absence of a clear, emotionally resonant narrative that connects to lived experience. As he puts it, 'It sounds like a great plan, but again it feels like people without learning disabilities are coming up with these ideas and not sharing them in a way that is accessible. It means that I cannot put these ideas into practice with my own lived experience' (Paul Wilshaw, Artist Interview, 2022). This makes me reflect on the process of debate with a variety of people with learning disabilities, all living with different conditions and how access to the theories about disability is limited and not suitable for a large portion of the community. However, I argue that those individuals who live critical disability theory through their everyday negotiations with ableist structures do not necessarily need to articulate it in formal, academic terms. Rather, they may hold a deeply embodied, phenomenological understanding of its core insights, expressing this through stories, creative practice, relationships, or other non-verbal modes of communication that exceed conventional theoretical language. Critical disability

theory explores concepts of personal independence and interdependence, the social construction of non-disabled as well as disability, 'the concept of normalcy, fundamental values of individual dignity and respect in democratic societies, and issues at the intersection of disability with class, gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and other socially constructed categories' (Devlin & Pothier, 2005: 2). Arguably the theory is best used when applied alongside, and expanding on the social model - with non-disabled individuals adapting their behaviours. Hoskin also explores the concept of multi-dimensionality, emphasising that identities are not unitary but are composed of multiple, intersecting social positions, such as gender, race, sexuality, class, and disability, that shape how individuals are perceived and treated within society. This aligns with Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality, which argues that systems of oppression, like racism, sexism, ableism, and homophobia, do not operate independently but intersect to produce unique experiences of marginalisation.

This multidimensional view of identity underpins what is known as identity jurisprudence: a legal and political framework that emerges from identity politics, which recognises that social identities are not merely personal but also political. It challenges the supposed neutrality of law by highlighting how legislation often reflects dominant identities while failing to account for the lived realities of those at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression. For example, in the context of critical disability studies and crip theory, the experience of a queer, Learning Disabled Artist cannot be understood through a single-axis framework (e.g., disability or queerness alone). Instead, their identity must be understood as a complex configuration shaped by overlapping structures of exclusion, resistance, and creativity. A multidimensional approach is essential to account for the way these artists navigate both normative cultural spaces and systems that often fail to accommodate them.

This thesis explores identity further in Chapter 6 and discusses the danger of defining a group's identity, which can exclude potential members, force members to conform to a group ideology, and make diversity within groups disappear. This can be seen at Mind the Gap studios because learning disability becomes the dominant identity when individuals join a learning disabled theatre company, many other aspects of their identities become subservient or lost, both in their creativity and within conversation, this includes racial diversity, gender identity, etc. Hoskin introduces multidimensionality theory as an 'integral element of critical disability theory both to avoid the pitfalls of exclusion and conformity, which identity politics tend to perpetrate, and to reflect the reality that disabled people are a diverse and variable population

within any particular social structure who are also members of all other social classifications' (Hoskin, 2008: 9). This part of the theory allows for intersectionality to be asserted, and for exploration of how singular or multiple identities can impact on treatment from society – and how learning disability can also create identities that are oppressed. Many people are not born with learning disabilities or may not receive a diagnosis until adulthood. This means that, while they may experience impairment, they may not have encountered the same long-term social attitudes, institutional barriers, or identity-based exclusions faced by those diagnosed from birth. As a result, they may unknowingly hold a degree of privilege over individuals who have been identified as disabled for most or all of their lives.

These reflections emerge from qualitative conversations, workshops, and creative processes within learning Disability Arts communities, particularly in spaces like MTG, where artists are supported in critically exploring their own identities. Within these settings, questions of diagnosis, visibility, and comparative experience often surface organically, revealing the complex internal hierarchies that can exist even within marginalised groups. It is rarely discussed openly, but I have observed that individuals within learning disability communities can sometimes position themselves in relation to others through perceived levels of impairment or support needs - for example, expressing thoughts such as 'I have X, but that's not as bad as
Y' or 'I have autism, but you wouldn't know, unlike X who also has autism.'
These nuanced and sometimes uncomfortable dynamics are echoed in the reflective words of Daniel Foulds, a Mind the Gap Associate Artist, who articulates the identity tension that can arise from not fitting neatly into either disabled or non-disabled categories:

> I find it difficult to know who I am with my identity because I have multiple [identities], many of which disadvantage me, and some that dominate who I am even though I don't want them to. If I identify with my learning disability I feel uncomfortable because I'm not as disabled as other people with the same diagnosis, but if I identify with peers at work without disability, I am uncomfortable because I know I am not working in the same way they are.
>
> (Daniel Foulds, Artist Interviews, 2020)

This example powerfully illustrates how identity is not just externally imposed, but also internally negotiated, often in ways shaped by access to diagnosis, support, and social recognition. With the recognition that each person interacts with others on a 'number of potential axes of subordination and domination' (Hoskins, 2008: 11), intersectionality has

evolved into a multidimensional framework, one that encompasses multiple interconnected memberships that individuals have as they go about their daily lives. In principle, this leads to a greater valuing of individual diversity, though in reality, such recognition remains uneven and often contested. Like the argument about acknowledging difference in the social model of disability, in critical disability theory, being identified, and identifying, as a disabled person is central to understanding yourself, your position within society and your knowledge of the world you live in. The theory recognises difference and welcomes it – because keeping it invisible only perpetuates the rejection and marginalisation of a characteristic. Openly talking about differences gives more opportunities for rights to be passed, which can be embraced as an indispensable tool to advance the equality claims of disabled people and to promote their full integration into all aspects of society, whilst continuing to value and welcome the diversity that people with disabilities bring to communities. However, these rights need to be what people with disabilities want. Traditionally, the voices of learning disabled people have been suppressed, due to the preconception of inability and dependency.

> When the disabled voice says what the able-bodied perspective wants to hear, it is here; when it says something the able-bodied perspective does not want to hear, it can simply be dismissed as the inappropriate response of a person who has developed an unhealthy response to the impairment.
>
> (Titchkosky, 2003: 162)

The stories of people with lived experiences of disability should be held as expertise; as Simone Aspis says, 'being disabled has given me a critical insight into what needs to be done to create a more humane and inclusive community' (Aspis, 2019). In this thesis, I seek to amplify the voices of people with learning disabilities and use their lived experiences in the creative arts sector as expertise and a foundation for generating debate and discussion.

A significant area of debate centres on language and its role in shaping how disability is understood, as well as how people with learning disabilities are positioned in society, particularly through the terminology used to describe or label them. This is also experienced by people who have a learning disability themselves:

> I find it hard as someone with a learning disability to know what I can say and what I can't say – and what might offend someone. Terminology is constantly shifting and changing so I think people stop talking about it which doesn't help either.

(Paul Wilshaw, Artist Interview, 2021)

Language is inherently political and carries a lot of weight - for example, the reclaiming of words used with negative connotations, such as the LGBTQ+ community reclaiming the word queer. In a related but distinct move, from the 1970s and 1980s UK disabled activists deliberately adopted and popularised terms such as *disabled people* and *the disabled people's movement* to mark disability as a shared political identity grounded in the social model, rather than an individual medical problem. More recently, sociologist Judy Singer (1998) coined the term neurodiversity, which can be divided into two categories: neurotypical and neurodivergent. Neurodiversity sought to frame these differences as ones that are not inherently bad or a problem, such as traditionally framing normal as good, and anything else as not normal, but instead, treating them more neutrally and highlighting the many ways that neurodivergence can be beneficial. This shift in terminology was highly celebrated by the autistic and neurodivergent community (Heyworth 2021); however, for those who didn't identify within this category, the term learning disabled still holds negative connotations.

Many people with learning disabilities feel excluded from complex and shifting terminology, and some find it inaccessible to say, understand and talk about. Artists from Mind the Gap also believe that the neurodivergent movement has created unrealistic expectations when it comes to autism and learning disabilities. Often, popular representations only show success stories and milder forms of disability to the public, including through TV programmes such as The Good Doctor (The Good Doctor, 2017–present), the story of a young, autistic surgical resident who has no social / communication skills but is an incredibly talented medical practitioner. A further example is Sia's controversial film Music (2021), which perpetuated harmful narratives about autistic and learning disabled people, most notably through its stereotypical and inaccurate portrayal of autism and the inclusion of a traumatic prone restraint scene. This scene, widely condemned by disability advocates, depicts the use of physical restraint on a non-verbal autistic character - a practice that has been linked to real-world trauma, injury, and even death in educational and care settings (National Autistic Society, 2021). By portraying restraint as a calming or appropriate response, the film risks normalising abusive practices and reinforcing misconceptions that people with learning disabilities are inherently disruptive or in need of control. There are many more examples of autism now being represented within mainstream media, but many people with lived experience do not think these reflect the reality of living with a disability, and may fetishise disability.

Finally, Max Horkheimer distinguished critical disability theory from traditional models of disability, particularly the medical model, through his insistence that theory must be both explanatory and normative ensuring links between theory and practice: ‘Its goal is not theory for the joy of theorisation, or even improved understanding and explanation; it is theorization in the pursuit of empowerment and substantive, not just formal, equality’ (Horkheimer, 2002). Critical Disability Theory provides a theoretical basis, as explored above, for different policy responses to disability, policies of inclusion, equality and autonomy (Hosking, 2008; Pothier and Devlin, 2006). In Chapter 8, I draw on CDT within the leadership findings to interrogate the traditional lack of learning disabled voices in decision-making, where I use CDT’s commitment to privileging the voices and stories of disabled people, and to using those voices to challenge negative cultural attitudes toward disability (Hosking, 2008; Goodley, 2013).

2.6 Crip Theory

McRuer introduced 'crip theory' in the 1990s and elaborated on it further in his work Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability (2006). He views crip theory as a subset of queer identity, challenging the normative concept of able-bodiedness. It involves claiming a disability identity while simultaneously contesting and questioning that identity. McRuer believes in reclaiming a negative term to assert a non-normative status and challenge prevailing power structures. He draws parallels between disability and queerness, asserting that the systems producing disability and queerness are interconnected. McRuer contends that crip theory doesn't seek to replace disability studies but rather maintains a similar contestatory relationship to disability studies as queer theory has with LGBT studies. This theory doesn't aim to erase disability identity but challenges its conventional understanding.

Following the publication of Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability in 2006, crip theory has developed across a range of discourses. Sami Schalk uses ‘crip’ to think about disidentifying with established minority identity categories, drawing on José Esteban Muñoz’s notion of disidentification as a tactic that neither fully rejects nor fully embraces available identities, but instead works on them in order to transform them. In this sense, disidentifying is not the opposite of coalition; it is a way of building coalitions that acknowledge uneven power and difference rather than pretending to a smooth, shared identity. By strategically disidentifying with, or claiming identities beyond, one’s own, crip theory aims to link disability to other marginalised identities and to open up space for people whose experiences do not fit neatly into existing labels. Schalk argues that crip theory allows disability studies to intersect with other minority identity discourses, emphasising that ‘crip’ is not only about disabled

identity but also functions as a marker for coalition against normative ideas of personhood, capacity and value.

Bernice Johnson Reagon similarly reflects on the process of coalition building, asserting that forming coalitions across difference is both necessary and terrifying:

> necessary, in that in order to create political change we need to recognise the interrelations among different issues and identities; terrifying, in that we often are working with people unlike us, people who might frame the issues in different ways or to different effects, people who come from different perspectives or with different histories, people who might challenge our founding assumptions
>
> (Kafer, 2013: 151)

Although in *Coalition Politics: Turning the Century* (1983) Reagon never identifies herself as disabled, the essay can be read as a narrative of inaccessibility and disability. Alison Kafer explicitly reads Reagon's essay as a 'crip text,' raising questions such as 'what can disability studies and disability movements learn from our own exclusions?' (Kafer, 2013, p. 151). In this context, *our* refers not only to disabled scholars and activists but also to a wider range of bodies and movements, including those usually positioned as non-disabled who participate in producing and sustaining these exclusions. This then means that the subject of disability studies is not just in bodies but also in minds, and in bodies surviving inaccessible spaces. Kafer also explores crip theory as a site for fluidity and intersectionality in *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013). She suggests that 'to claim crip critically is to recognise the ethical, epistemic, and political responsibilities behind such claims; deconstructing the binary between disabled and ablebodied/able-minded requires more attention to how different bodies/minds are treated differently, not less' (Kafer, 2013: 13). Her use of crip theory is as an imaginative tool, intended to construct a future able to find disability desirable, creating a work not dependent on dis/ability - a 'better future' (Kafer, 2013: 14). Kafer's understanding of crip functions very similarly to queer, and her discussions around the intersectionality of identity ensures reclaiming of slurs as a politically generative act.

On the other hand, Carrie Sandahl seeks to replace disability studies with crip theory: 'If I had my druthers, I would replace the term disability studies with crip theory or crip studies to represent its radical edge' (Sandahl, 2003: 53). Sandahl similarly wants to mirror the queer desire to reclaim derogatory terminology. In queer politics, terms like 'queer' have been taken

up by some LGBTQ+ people as a way of transforming an insult into a badge of pride and resistance. In an analogous way, Sandahl and Schalk describe 'crip' as shorthand for 'cripple', a word historically used to demean disabled people, which has been re-appropriated within some disability communities as an intra-group term of empowerment and solidarity (Schalk, 2013). From this perspective, the shock and discomfort attached to the word are deliberately harnessed to name disability on uncompromisingly political terms, rather than on the more palatable, normalising terms preferred by non-disabled audiences.

However, the politics of reclamation are far from straightforward, particularly for people with learning disabilities. Not everyone experiences "crip" as empowering, and some find its history of violence and mockery impossible to separate from its contemporary, politicised uses. Debates around comedian Rosie Jones's attempt to reclaim the term 'retard' (Channel 4, 2023) illustrate this tension: while some view such reclamation as a way of confronting ableist language head-on, many learning disabled people and their allies have objected that the word remains a live weapon in schools, workplaces and online abuse, and that its use in public culture can reinforce, rather than undo, harm. In this context, the derogatory nature of terms like 'crip' or 'retard' cannot simply be dismissed as insignificant; any potential gains in autonomy or visibility for some disabled and learning disabled people have to be weighed against the ongoing pain and exclusion these words continue to carry for others.

Mark Sherry complicates this further, discussing how the language and politics of disability identity are also taken up by people usually understood as 'non-disabled': 'Those who do choose the term crip as an identity tend to be privileged people because it is a fashionable term among disability studies academics' (Sherry, 2013). He argues that the term crip does not focus on the lived experiences of poor and working-class disabled people; instead, it masks enormous embodied, classed, gendered, sexualised, and racialised privilege inherently embedded in the act of reclaiming a derogatory term (Sherry, 2013). In Disability Hate Crimes: Does Anyone Really Hate Disabled People? (2010) Sherry argues that crip theory emphasises the crippled body instead of embracing the many nuances of disability experience, such as learning disability and neurodiversity, because they do not immediately register as visible, significant disabilities, something similarly felt by artists and students at Mind the Gap who have felt left out of disability studies/movements due to not being the stereotypical image of disabled to society, especially if their impairment is hidden. This thesis uses crip theory to redefine and reimagine disabled identities through the lived experiences of artists involved in this research. This includes challenging and presenting alternative futures, making visible what

has been invisible and opening up a space where disability can be re-imagined and realised. In Chapter 6, Identity, Crip Theory is also referred to in discussions about Artists' own ableism and 'disabled normal'.

2.7 Ableist Society

Ableism is a set of beliefs, processes and practices that produce a particular understanding of an individual in relation to others and their environment. It means that if we live in an ableist society, more value is placed on certain abilities, such as productivity and competitiveness, than on empathy, compassion, and kindness. Ableism then becomes an open door for other 'isms' such as racism, sexism, ageism, etc. and can be identified by three different forms: biological structure-based, cognition-based, and social structure-based (Wolbring, 2008). Ableism against disabled people reflects society's preference for normative abilities, leading to discrimination against those impaired or less able. This is supported socially by 'the medical, deficiency, impairment categorisation of disabled people' (Wolbring, 2008). Ableism then focuses on fixing an individual or preventing more people from being born with an impairment, rather than embracing and accommodating.

Ableism can be most easily witnessed through an action that discriminates against or demeans individuals who belong to the disabled community: for example, Donald Trump imitating a disabled reporter in 2015. However, Rebekah Harding argues that because learning disabilities are not always visible, ableist voices tend not to target individuals until a formal diagnosis.

> Upon hearing that the friend, the student, the child they had known for years happened to have a learning disability, my neurotypical peers immediately treated me differently. Friends who had accepted the little quirks that come along with my ADD/ADHD as personality traits began expressing their annoyance more openly than ever before and teacher began speaking to me like a child.
>
> (Harding, 2017)

Due to limited representation of the learning disabled community, society is conditioned to think of disabled people as a category of deficit, and then are conflicted when introduced to someone who doesn't fit their typical standard of disabled. This then creates a response that they feel is appropriate to the treatment of someone with a learning disability – most of the time, these actions are demeaning and offensive, but without the malicious intention of the offender. Paul Wishaw explains: 'People say you don't look disabled which they presume is a

compliment, then I have to justify my disability to them just because it doesn't fit in with their idea of what disability looks like' (Paul Wilshaw, Artist Interview, 2021). The act of doubting a diagnosis is ableism.

As James Cherney argues, recognising ableism requires a shift, as it is so pervasive that it is difficult to identify until you begin to interrogate the assumptions of a well-intentioned individual and the presumption of a well-intentioned society. Ableism is regarded as 'natural', normalised, and necessary within our current society. 'Consider a set of stairs. An ableist culture thinks little of stairs or even sees them as elegant architectural devices – especially those grand marble masterpieces that elevate buildings of buildings. But disability rights activists see stairs as a discriminatory apparatus - a "no crips allowed" sign that only those aware of ableism can read' (Cherney, 2012: 4).

Ableism is one of the most embedded 'isms' within society, and, according to some MTG Artists, it acts as a key enabler for other forms of oppression: 'When people see me, they immediately see a person with a learning disability; they do not see a woman or a black woman. I lose my other identities but still get treated differently' (Charlotte Jones, Artist Interview, 2022). It operates at an institutional level when assumptions that disability equals being less-able shape policies and practices around employment and progression for people with learning disabilities. Ableism also manifests in social interactions, often described as interpersonal ableism. Within Mind the Gap, this was visible in the ways some artists and friends compared one another's impairments and created informal hierarchies of disability based on diagnosis and perceived barriers. Ableism can be internalised, when individuals absorb negative societal messages about disability and apply them to themselves, for example viewing access adjustments as a special privilege or inconvenience rather than as a right.

I believe the most commonly used form of ableism is the language used. Ableist language and colloquialisms function like any other slang term: people repeat them because they've heard others say them, a mimicry that on its face suggests that any denigration is unintentional.

> It's possible for individuals to be truly unconscious of these biases within themselves, and unaware of the ableism couched in their own everyday sayings. But the fact is, discussions about the negative effect of a word such as "dumb" – a term originally denoting a deaf person who did not use speech, but which now functions as slang for

> something brutish, uninteresting or of low intelligence – have been happening in deaf and disabled circles for centuries.
>
> (Nović, 2021)

Society is full of ableist examples, such as the physical barriers explored above, but also through the language used by individuals and organisations, and inaccessible design not only in physical architecture but also in technology, such as websites that use inaccessible language and no text enlargement features. Further examples extend to education discrimination, employment discrimination and barriers to healthcare, and to the most conscious extreme, eugenics. This way of thinking impacts everyone: rising unemployment, rising poverty, and unnecessary institutionalisation. Given how ingrained ableism is in our society, rooting it out and dismantling ableist structures is a difficult task - however, as with other isms, individuals can make a difference: 'Dismantling disablist structures doesn't start with language, but building a world without them requires that we change our language' (Hale, 2021).

Anti-ableism aims to actively dismantle ableism. One starting point is recognising ableist norms and structures, and working to undo those inequities in everyday life and institutions: 'It hurts all of us when we de-humanise ways of being and construct them wholly in the negative' (Hale, 2021). Language is ever-changing; therefore, this thesis has sought to eliminate ableist language from its vocabulary and to use the words of those with lived experience. It is understood that terminology changes are ongoing, and some vocabulary may become outdated, however, this research has built a more inclusive vocabulary through the process of listening to those with lived experience, asking questions and avoiding assumptions – in the hope that the thesis is actively anti-ableist.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter has shown how perceptions and beliefs regarding individuals with learning disabilities have evolved over time, consequently influencing the design and provision of services for this community. Embedded discrimination against people with learning disabilities, and people with learning disabilities' internalised discrimination, has informed the development of critical thinking and activism about learning disabilities, with the intention of creating equity for people with learning disabilities. However, I believe it is extremely important to continue to acknowledge disability as an entwined piece of an individual's identity, which, if ignored, can have detrimental impacts on the support of an individual.

Disability studies and the Disability Arts sector take the social model of disability as their dominant theory. However, I believe that our concept of learning disability should reflect both the reality of impairment and the reality of social discrimination. Currently in the UK, ableism is widespread due to political cuts to public service spending, and with the rise of right-wing politics and the reduction of social care in the UK, exclusion has widened. People with learning disabilities are still seen as 'other', and any ontology which emphasises ableism and normality continues to oppress, as does any epistemology based on authority and conformity. However, as I discuss in Chapter 8 on leadership, many people with learning disabilities have had to navigate and internalise a dominant view of themselves that is produced through these same norms of authority and conformity. This raises a central question: how can we reorient this dominant worldview without simply reproducing new forms of othering, whether of learning disabled people or of those usually positioned as 'non-disabled'?

Chapter 3: Learning Disability Theatres

Theatre has long been used as a weapon against oppression and as a tool for transformation. As Matt Hargrave notes, 'Disability Arts is […] the cultural weapon' (Hargrave, 2015: 27), a sentiment that resonates strongly in the work of Augusto Boal. Central to Boal's practice is the idea that "in transforming, we are transformed" (Boal, 1974). This reflects his belief that enacting change, particularly through participatory theatre, not only impacts the world but also transforms the people involved. Theatre, in this context, becomes more than representation; it becomes a form of action, empowering individuals to confront and reshape the social structures around them. This chapter explores how such ideas have influenced the history and development of learning disability theatre in the UK, particularly from the 1980s onwards. It traces how theatre has provided Learning Disabled Artists with a platform not only for selfexpression, but also for engagement with broader political and cultural discourses. In doing so, the chapter establishes a historical and theoretical foundation for understanding how learning disabled theatre has emerged as a space of resistance, visibility, and identity formation.

Boal's approach has been particularly resonant for learning disability theatre because it recognises that human beings are in constant transformation. Participation in theatre becomes a vehicle for self-exploration, exploration of identity, and collective transformation. Boal considered his own work as 'unfinished' (Boal, 1976), while Paulo Freire described education as 'durable' (Freire, 1976: 152) - both suggesting that transformation is never complete but

always evolving. This idea of ongoing transformation is deeply relevant to the artists and companies discussed in this chapter. Through theatre, learning disabled performers challenge dominant narratives about what it means to be 'learning disabled'. They explore identity on their own terms and, increasingly, claim roles as professional artists and cultural leaders.

While this chapter focuses on the historical development of learning disability theatre, it also lays the groundwork for a wider argument explored throughout this thesis: that, through their artistic practice, Learning Disabled Artists are not only transforming themselves but also contributing to a broader redefinition of learning disability in society. Their work challenges static identities and reframes what it means to create, to perform, and to lead from a position that has long been marginalised. As discussed in the previous chapter, the label of learning disability has been historically perceived as negative and still holds a notion of deficit. However, within the phrase 'Learning Disability Theatres,' the phrase seeks to describe difference and diversity. Firstly, the chapter offers a brief historical overview, contextualising key debates and issues within Learning Disability Theatre in the UK. The chapter then investigates non-traditional leadership models and discusses the current issues faced by learning disability theatres, including questions of audience and quality.

Learning Disability Theatres in the UK are varied and wide-ranging, comprising of a small number of high-profile companies with national and international reputations including Mind the Gap (Bradford), Access All Areas (London) and Hijinx (Cardiff); several semi-professional companies such as Lawnmowers (Newcastle), Confidance (Canterbury) and DIY Theatre (Salford); and numerous community-based organisations. Each organisation has different aims and goals, over the past two years, high-profile companies have increased their focus on leadership and learning disabled-led practice, including through Mind the Gap's Staging Change & Engage project (2018-2021) and Access All Areas' Transforming Leadership (20212022). Like Sue Caudle, I have chosen to use the term Learning Disability Theatres whilst 'critically examining the norms this term sets up in relation to theatre made by performing with learning disabilities' (Caudle, 2017).

3.1 Disability Arts Movement

In his book Theatres of Learning Disability: Good, Bad or Plain Ugly (2015) Matt Hargrave eloquently explains:

> Disability Arts is: an art practice that addresses the oppression of the disabled person; a mechanism for self-advocacy and self-governance; the cultural vanguard of the social model of disability; the cultural weapon to be wielded against the twin oppressions of mainstream cultural and therapeutically aligned art; and a component in the struggle towards emancipation for disabled people.
>
> (Hargrave, 2015, p. 27)

It is important to acknowledge that a disability artist is different from an artist with a disability. The Disability Arts movement began in the 1970s as a challenge to the negative representation of disability and built on the capacity of art to 'mobilise disabled people into action' (Hevey, 1991). Being a disability artist means identifying with an emancipatory social movement - creating expression forums and allowing disabled people to come together on their own accord, rather than being herded to a day centre, hospital or the yearly panto (Hargrave, 2015, p. 27). By contrast, an artist with a disability may simply wish to make art without explicitly aligning themselves with the disability rights movement, even though their disability remains an inescapable part of their identity and shapes how their work is made and received.

The Disability Art Movement emerged in the late 1970s and brought together activists, artists, and creatives to campaign for the civil rights of disabled people, fighting against marginalisation in the arts and cultural sector. The movement contributed to social change, leading to the passing of the Disability Discrimination Act in 1995. Disability Arts remains extremely active today, encompassing theatre, live art, dance, visual art, music, literature, digital practice, film and combined arts produced and led by disabled people across the UK (Sutherland, 2016). The sector is supported nationally through Arts Council England's (ACE) ten-year *Let's Create* strategy (2020–2030), which names disabled people as a key priority group, and through dedicated commissioning programmes such as Unlimited, described as the world's largest Disability Arts commissioning programme, which between 2013 and 2022 awarded over £4.9 million to more than 460 disabled artists, with work reaching over 5 million people globally. Key organisations are geographically spread, including Graeae Theatre Company (London), Mind the Gap (Bradford), Access All Areas (East London), Birds of Paradise Theatre Company (Scotland), Taking Flight Theatre Company (Wales), Blue Apple Theatre (Hampshire), and Disability Arts Online, which acts as a national digital platform. Yet the sector faces significant structural inequalities. Only 7% of National Portfolio Organisation workforces identify as disabled, despite disabled people making up 23% of the working-age UK population, and of 281 NPOs in the North, only 10 meet ACE's definition of 'disabled-led'

(ACE, 2025). Disabled artists are also disproportionately affected by financial precarity: during the cost-of-living crisis, 9% more disabled than non-disabled artists reported significant drops in income from their arts practice.

During the research I used a participatory research method developed through informal conversations and creative exercises with Learning Disabled Artists to create identity pie charts. Together, we constructed visual pie charts to explore the different aspects of their identities - such as family, profession, disability, religion, friendships, gender, and hobbies. Each participant was invited to divide their 'identity pie' according to what felt most significant in their life at that moment. As we chatted during the process, artists were able to articulate which aspects of their identity felt central, marginal, or shifting.

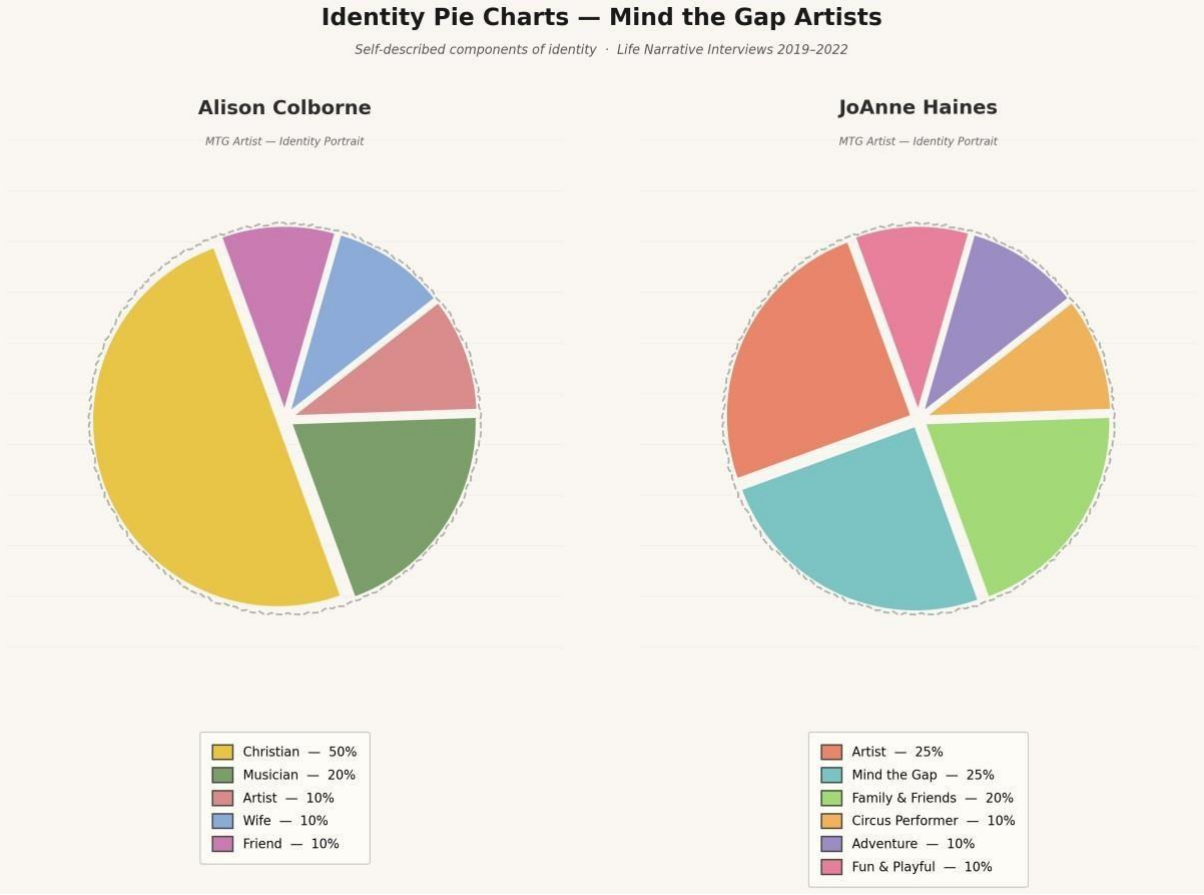

Figure 1: Identity Pie Charts (JoAnne & Alison)

During this exercise, none of the Artists at Mind the Gap included their learning disability without direct prompting, and when asked about learning disability as an identity, distanced themselves using third-person pronouns: 'they might struggle with understanding or speaking. They might need more time' (Anna Gray, Artist Interview, 2019). Impairment is personal, and

nobody's experience is the same, even more so for people with learning disabilities. Although diagnosis can be the same, symptoms for impairments can exhibit significant variability among individuals, dependent on personal circumstances such as close relationships with birth parents, experience of the foster system, mainstream or specialist school. The services a person engages with can create extremely different lived experiences. As discussed in the previous chapter regarding the social model of disability, there is a huge variation in the understanding of disability. If you have a learning disability, among learning disabled people, there are different understandings of the political placement of learning disabled groups, individuals and how society treats them. There are also variations in individuals' acknowledgement of how this affects them, as explored with Mind the Gap Artists in Chapter 5: Identity.

Gosling (2006), writing as Artistic Director of Together!, a Disability Arts and Human Rights festival, and as artist-in-residence at the National Disability Arts Collection and Archive, was concerned with defining what Disability Arts are, and critically, what they are not. He observed that images of impairment are largely invisible in mainstream culture, and where they do appear, they are typically framed within the medical model and produced by non-disabled makers. From this position, Gosling makes a strong and explicitly political claim: 'Disability Arts is NOT art that is controlled by non-disabled people' (Gosling, 2006). He argues that 'disabled artists make work about our personal experience of impairment, ' which is inherently political. It is political because the work is challenging the invisibility of impairment, and it is political because the work is under the direct control of disabled people' (Gosling, 2006).

This commitment to disabled control of the work is, however, significantly complicated in the context of learning disabilities, and this complication sits at the heart of one of the central tensions this research grapples with. Every Learning Disabled Artist I worked with during this research who was actively creating work had a producer who worked closely with them: developing an idea, navigating inaccessible funding applications, managing budgets, and making the practical decisions that turn a creative vision into a funded project. These are not peripheral roles. They are structurally necessary because the systems through which the arts are resourced and distributed were not designed with Learning Disabled Artists in mind (Hadley, 2020; Solvang, 2012). And yet the concentration of those functions in the hands of a nondisabled collaborator raises a question that cannot be set aside: at what point does necessary support become a form of control? When artistic and practical decision-making are so closely intertwined, when the producer who applies for the funding is also the person who

shapes how the idea is framed in that application, the boundary between facilitation and authorship becomes genuinely difficult to locate.

This is primarily why the Learning Disability Theatres movement grew out of Community Care and Applied Theatre, as this is where people with learning disabilities were located. The activists went to them to advocate, listen, and campaign using art - both as a form of activism and to help create more visibility and representation for people with learning disabilities. Some companies I discuss below are evidently making Disability Arts; however, it is important to question how the movement currently creates polemic work, exploring the binaries of identity, and focusing on disability when many artists involved in this research expressed being tired of using their arts to discuss disability, and instead wanting to just create work. As discussed above, each artist has multiple identities as part of their lived experience, and may wish to create about their intersectionality and relationships with the world – something that was explored in A Little Space (Mind the Gap, 2019), which was a devised piece of work in collaboration with Gecko about five people in an apartment block, exploring connection and disconnection. In this thesis, I argue that by embracing diverse approaches to leadership and interdependence, artists with learning disabilities are better equipped to explore new aspects of their identity and create Disability Art. I suggest that Disability Art need not necessarily be defined by activist subject matter, but by the multiple layers of identity and experience Disability Artists bring to their work.

3.2 Learning Disability Theatre Contexts

The 1980s were a period of significant change for people with learning disabilities in the UK. Key reforms included the 1981 Education Act, which paved the way for learning disabled children to be educated in mainstream schools; the extension of voting rights to many people with learning disabilities in 1981; the founding of People First in 1984 as a self-advocacy organisation; and the 1988 Disabled Persons Act. At the same time, long-stay institutions began to close, and the White Paper Caring for People (1989) set out principles for a shift towards community care later consolidated in the NHS and Community Care Act. These changes altered both the everyday lives of learning disabled people and the policy landscape within which new artistic practices emerged. This period also saw the growth of the Learning Disability Theatres movement. Dave Calvert identifies Mind the Gap, Strathcona, Lung Ha, The Lawnmowers and Heart ‘n Soul as ‘among a wave of companies in the 1980s…to adopt the social model and extend the concern with identity politics to people with learning

disabilities' (Calvert, 2015). Many of these organisations arose from a community arts ethos that had developed in the UK since the 1960s. As Calvert writes, developments in arts funding in the 1990s contributed to the growth of Learning Disability Theatres. Arts Council England shifted its funding priorities from capital development to promoting access and participation, with Mind the Gap and Strathcona receiving funding. Calvert identifies a second wave of companies that emerged in the late 1990s, including The Shysters, Full Body and the Voice, No Limits and Blue Apple. As

Hargrave discusses, this emergence of Learning Disability Theatres was influenced by the complex combination of social, economic and political factors within the shifting political context as 'New Labour's cultural policy made explicitly the social job that art should do: to become a weapon against social exclusion; theatre and learning disability benefitted as art became both a cultural symbol of and a practical tool with which to tackle, social inequality' (Hargrave, 2015). The Community Arts Movement questioned the role of art in society and promoted cultural democracy to empower people who had been excluded from artistic production. As the Shelton Trust put it, 'The ideas that constitute cultural democracy both enable and depend upon direct participation, and take as their aim the building and sustenance of a society in which people are free to come together to produce, distribute and receive the cultures they choose' (Shelton Trust, 1986: 40). For people with learning disabilities, many of whom had spent decades in institutions, community arts offered rare opportunities to acquire new skills and express ideas and experiences through performance. Here, Hargrave reflects on the need that was building for artistic outlets that were not conceived as therapeutic:

> What linked the artists, and the patient was that they were outsiders, but with one important distinction: the artist was in the hospital by choice, the patient by force. At the time the only way that learning disabled people could engage with theatre was as a therapy. This felt inadequate. I became fascinated with how to use theatre as a means of raising the voice of learning disabled people.
>
> (Wheeler, 2015, Foreword)

At this time of a wider turn towards socially and politically engaged artistic practice, the introduction of Community Care in the early 1980s moved many learning disabled people from institutional settings into their own homes. As Dave Calvert notes, 'Long stay hospitals were virtually obsolete, previously incarcerated people with learning disabilities were returning to their communities and the Care in the Community Act was on the horizon'

(Calvert, 2009: 75). After decades of segregation and very limited access to cultural life, the shift to community care created new openings for learning disabled people to participate in, and shape, creative work. Within this changing context, Disability Arts emerged from the work of a small number of disabled artists and disabled-led organisations, offering an alternative to negative, deficitbased images of disability in popular culture. Vasey encapsulates this approach:

> In a nutshell, Disability Arts is simply the creative expression by disabled people of what it is to be a disabled person. This expression, which usually aims to create change can be undertaken on a professional or amateur/voluntary basis: what's important is that it is by disabled people about being disabled.
>
> (Vasey, 1991)

Disability Arts has become a vehicle for social change, enabling people with learning disabilities to transform how they see themselves and participate in the disabled people's movement in creative and inclusive ways. Pino Frumiento from Heart 'n Soul explains: 'Some of the people watching us are disabled people, and they'll be thinking 'I wish I could do that'. We're teaching people how to be strong, and it's important that they can create their own stuff' (Cameron, 2007). Here, performance is not merely entertainment; it is a means of building confidence, visibility and a sense of collective possibility. Swain and French argue that Disability Arts also carries a distinctive theoretical and political charge through what they term the 'affirmative model'. Whereas the social model of disability focuses on identifying and removing external barriers, the affirmative model emphasises disabled people positively affirming both their disability and impairment as valued aspects of identity. They write: 'Embracing an affirmative model, disabled individuals assert a positive identity, not only in being disabled but also in being impaired. In affirming a positive identity of being impaired, disabled people are actively repudiating the dominant value of normality' (Swain, French, 2010: 578). Disability Arts, including learning disability theatre, becomes one of the principal locations where such affirmative identities are created, rehearsed and shared, particularly for those who have historically been represented only through tragedy, burden and lack.

Swain and French's affirmative model emerges directly from disability culture and the Disability Arts movement, as an intervention in debates about the adequacy of the social model in accounting for lived experiences of impairment. In their original article in *Disability & Society*, they describe it as 'a non-tragic view of disability and impairment which encompasses

positive social identities, both individual and collective, for disabled people grounded in the benefits of lifestyle and life experience of being impaired and disabled' (Swain and French, 2000, p. 569). Rather than positioning impairment as a regrettable medical fact and disability as a purely social imposition, the affirmative model insists that both disability and impairment can be actively affirmed as valued elements of identity, in conscious rejection of the dominant imperative towards normality. It is, in this sense, an everyday ethical and aesthetic practice as much as a theoretical position: a way of narrating and inhabiting disabled life that refuses tragedy and pity and instead centres pride, pleasure, and the gains of disability.

At first glance, this might appear to echo what is often described as the biopsychosocial model, particularly as it is articulated in the World Health Organisation's International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) as a model that integrates biological, psychological and social dimensions of functioning and disability. In its most benign, textbook form, the biopsychosocial model presents disability as emerging from interactions between a person's health condition, personal factors and environmental barriers, and on the surface, this holistic language can sound compatible with an affirmative, multi-layered understanding of disabled life. However, critical disability scholars have shown that when deployed in UK welfare and rehabilitation policy, the biopsychosocial model has tended to re-individualise responsibility for disability, emphasising personal attitude, motivation and 'effort' over structural conditions, and sliding towards a form of victim-blaming (Shakespeare, Watson and Abu Alghaib, 2017, pp. 22–23). In their critique of Waddell and Aylward's influential version of the model, Shakespeare et al. argue that whatever holistic potential Engel's original conception might have had 'has been eclipsed' by the way it has been taken up to justify welfare reforms and restrictions on entitlement (Shakespeare, Watson and Abu Alghaib, 2017, p. 36).

Holding these two models against each other clarifies what is at stake for this thesis. Both the affirmative model and the biopsychosocial model reject a narrow, purely medical account of disability, but they do so from very different perspectives and towards very different political ends. The biopsychosocial model, particularly in its Waddell–Aylward form, is mainly a technocratic framework for managing populations, used to support specific regimes of assessment, rehabilitation, and benefit reform. The affirmative model, by contrast, emerges from disabled people's own cultural production and everyday meaning-making; it is a tool for re-evaluating impaired embodiment and for addressing the limitations of the social model by explicitly embracing impairment as part of a positive disabled identity (Swain and French,

2000, pp. 569–570). Where the biopsychosocial model risks psychologising and individualising disability, the affirmative model explicitly targets the cultural and emotional dimensions of oppression, the routine othering, pity, and enforced normality that frame disabled lives, and offers a way of inhabiting disability that is simultaneously social, political, and deeply personal. For Learning Disabled Artists, whose work is often pulled into the realm of therapeutic or rehabilitative agendas, this distinction matters: an affirmative framing of disability and impairment can support creative practices that acknowledge pain and constraint without being organised around cure, recovery, or the restoration of normality.

Stereotypical images of disability and impairment can be challenged directly by disabled performers. In Daughters of Fortune (Mind the Gap, 2016–2020), learning disabled performers explored learning disabled parenthood across four productions, complicating dominant assumptions about capacity, responsibility and risk. In MADHOUSE re:exit (Access All Areas, 2018), performers revisited the history and lingering legacy of institutionalisation, inviting audiences to confront continuing forms of control and segregation. These examples highlight the transformative potential of performance to reframe learning disability; they will be examined in greater depth in the sections on Research Contexts and Collaborations below.

Beyond individual productions, Disability Arts practices have influenced thinking about knowledge, power and collaboration. Leslie Roman's analysis of The Unruly Salon, a Disability Arts, culture and scholarship series at the University of British Columbia, illustrates this. Roman describes how disabled and non-disabled academics and artists came together to 'negotiate and share a third space' (Roman, 2009) in which to perform, watch and discuss work. In this space, boundaries between artist and academic, disabled and non-disabled, were deliberately blurred, supporting a politics of 'speaking with' rather than 'speaking for'. Roman argues that disability art can 'speak truth to power' (2009, p. 8) by producing counter-truths that challenge dominant, non-disabled representations (2009, p. 1), and suggests that it can evolve:

> …from art that happens to be by people with disabilities to art that comes from the experiences of an unruly mind-body politic of people with impairments that claims to be part of a socially transformative body politic and stakes out multiple spaces for doing so, working for our vision of social justice as disabled citizens.
>
> (Roman, 2009, pp. 8–9)

These ideas resonate strongly with the aims of the research presented in this thesis. In claiming artistic identities, artists from Mind the Gap contest clinically defined, deficit notions of learning disability and assert themselves as cultural producers and co-researchers.

Before professional theatre companies routinely used artistic methods for advocacy and social justice, much learning disability theatre developed within therapeutic or advocacy frameworks. In such contexts, theatre offered a space for company members to offer one another practical and emotional support and to explore experiences that were difficult to articulate in conventional, verbal forms. Michelle Moore and Dan Goodley, in a report commissioned by Salford and Trafford Local Authorities, argue that these groups can offer individuals new identities not dictated by societal preconceptions. They note that "dramatic actions are immensely accessible, enabling quick comprehension and reaction, whereas words are often difficult, slippery things that fail to capture thoughts, experiences, aims and ambitions" (Barnes, 1996). This recognition of theatre as a communicative and identityforming medium laid important groundwork for the later development of professional learning disability theatre companies, which build on these therapeutic and advocacy roots while also claiming space within wider artistic and political fields.

Recent scholarship on learning disabled theatre has increasingly moved away from understanding performance primarily through the frameworks of therapy, participation or social inclusion. Instead, scholars have examined how theatre produces alternative understandings of embodiment, care, collaboration and voice. This work is important because it positions learning disabled theatre as a complex artistic and political field in which questions of representation are inseparable from questions of power: who is able to perform, who determines the terms of collaboration, whose knowledge is recognised, and how learning disabled artists are positioned within cultural institutions. Hickey-Moody (2009), Calvert (2020) and McCaffrey (2023) are particularly significant in developing these debates.

Anna Hickey-Moody's *Unimaginable Bodies: Intellectual Disability, Performance and Becomings* (2009) offers a philosophical and performance-based account of how theatre and dance can challenge fixed understandings of intellectual disability. Drawing on Deleuzian theories of becoming, Hickey-Moody argues that performance can produce new ways of imagining bodies, identities and relations. Rather than treating the intellectually disabled body as a stable object defined by limitation or deficit, her analysis understands bodies as relational, affective and continually formed through movement, encounter and performance. The

significance of this approach is that it shifts attention away from the question of whether disabled performers can be integrated into existing artistic norms. Instead, it asks how performance might generate different artistic and social possibilities altogether.

A particularly important concept in Hickey-Moody's work is reverse integration. Conventional models of integration generally assume that people with intellectual disabilities should enter and adapt to existing non-disabled social and cultural environments. Reverse integration challenges this direction of movement. It places the practices, rhythms and modes of communication of intellectually disabled performers at the centre, requiring non-disabled collaborators to adapt instead. In this model, non-disabled people are not positioned as the unmarked norm into which disabled performers must assimilate. Rather, the norms of performance are reconfigured through the presence and creative authority of disabled artists. Reverse integration therefore offers a significant challenge to the idea that inclusion consists simply of incorporating disabled people into established structures without changing those structures themselves.

Hickey-Moody's emphasis on becoming also complicates fixed distinctions between disabled and non-disabled bodies. Integrated performance is not presented as a neutral meeting between two pre-existing groups. It is a relational process in which all participants may be changed through their encounters with one another. This perspective is valuable for learning disabled theatre because it enables artistic collaboration to be understood as a process of transformation rather than as the delivery of support by non-disabled practitioners to disabled performers. It also challenges assumptions that learning disabled artists should be understood primarily through their diagnosis, encouraging attention to the unpredictable and generative qualities of performance.

Dave Calvert's chapter, 'Convivial Theatre: Care and Debility in Collaborations between NonDisabled and Learning-Disabled Theatre Makers' (2020), develops related questions through the concepts of care, debility and conviviality. Calvert examines collaborations between nondisabled and learning-disabled theatre-makers, with particular attention to *Disabled Theater*, produced by Theater HORA and Jérôme Bel, and *Contained*, produced by Mind the Gap and directed by Alan Lyddiard. His analysis considers how care becomes visible within theatrical collaboration and how performances can create shared situations in which relationships between performer, director, collaborator and audience are unsettled. Rather than treating care as an external support mechanism, Calvert positions it as a central part of the

social, ethical and aesthetic conditions through which theatre is made. The concept of conviviality is useful because it emphasises the shared and relational nature of theatrical activity. It suggests that theatre can create forms of togetherness in which difference is not erased but encountered through collaboration. Calvert's discussion of care also challenges the assumption that dependency is opposed to artistic professionalism. In learning disabled theatre, care may be necessary for communication, movement, emotional regulation, organisation and participation, but its presence does not diminish the artistic value of the work. Instead, care can reveal the extent to which all theatre-making is dependent upon networks of people, resources and relationships, even when such dependencies remain less visible within mainstream theatre.

At the same time, Calvert does not present care as automatically liberating. Care takes place within unequal social and institutional relations and may reproduce paternalism if learning disabled artists are positioned primarily as recipients of support. The relationship between care and control is therefore a central concern. Support may enable an artist to participate, but it may also influence how their ideas are interpreted, organised or presented. Calvert's work consequently draws attention to the ethical complexity of collaborations between non-disabled and learning-disabled theatre-makers. The question is not simply whether care is present, but how it is practised, who controls it, and whether it enables or limits the artistic agency of learning disabled performers.

Tony McCaffrey's *Giving and Taking Voice in Learning Disabled Theatre* (2023) offers a further examination of collaboration, representation and artistic agency. Based on McCaffrey's long-term work with Different Light Theatre in Christchurch, New Zealand, the book considers the ways in which voice is produced, mediated and negotiated within learning disabled theatre. It includes material drawn from performer interviews, theatre-making processes, archival sources and the everyday experiences of the company. The book's central concern is indicated by its title: voice is not simply something that a practitioner can give to a learning disabled performer. It is involved in a more complex process of exchange in which voice may be enabled, interpreted, shaped, amplified or appropriated. The distinction between giving and taking voice is particularly important in the context of a field that has historically been dominated by non-disabled professionals speaking about, representing or making decisions on behalf of disabled people. McCaffrey's work questions the apparently benevolent assumption that non-disabled practitioners can simply provide voice to people who lack it. Learning disabled artists are not without voice; rather, their existing voices may be

disregarded, misunderstood or excluded by dominant cultural and communicative structures. The issue is therefore not only whether learning disabled performers are heard, but under what conditions their contributions are recognised as knowledge and artistic authorship.

McCaffrey also draws attention to the tension between support and artistic autonomy. In learning disabled theatre, non-disabled practitioners may have responsibility for directing, facilitating, interpreting, organising or communicating aspects of the work. These roles can create opportunities for artists to participate and develop, but they can also result in nondisabled collaborators retaining authority over the final form and meaning of the performance. Voice is therefore shaped by institutional structures as well as by interpersonal relationships. The process of collaboration must be understood in relation to who makes decisions, whose interpretation is treated as authoritative and how the contributions of learning disabled performers are credited.

Together, these publications represent an important development in scholarship on learning disabled theatre. Hickey-Moody (2009) provides a theory of reverse integration that challenges the assumption that disabled performers must adapt to non-disabled artistic norms. Calvert (2020) demonstrates how care, dependency and togetherness can become central aesthetic and ethical features of theatrical collaboration, while also recognising the possibility that care may reproduce unequal relations. McCaffrey (2023) complicates the language of voice by examining how learning disabled artists' contributions are enabled and constrained through processes of collaboration, interpretation and representation. Collectively, these writers position learning disabled theatre as a field in which conventional ideas about the body, autonomy, professionalism and authorship are subject to sustained challenge.

3.3 Research Contexts and Collaborations

This section seeks to examine the evolving landscape of Learning Disability Theatres by focusing on two key examples: MADHOUSE re: exit (2018) by Access All Areas and Daughters of Fortune (2016-2019) by Mind the Gap. Through these projects, this section explores how Learning Disabled Artists have challenged stereotypical narratives, reclaimed histories, and created professional, artistically ambitious work that reshapes perceptions of disability within cultural and academic contexts.

I will start by situating the growth of Learning Disability Theatres within a broader historical, social, and political framework, drawing on the contributions of companies such as Mind the

Gap, Access All Areas, and others across the UK and Europe. This section also considers how these companies have developed inclusive creative practices, co-produced research, and leadership opportunities for Learning Disabled Artists. By exploring the methodologies, outcomes, and wider implications of MADHOUSE re: exit and Daughters of Fortune , I will highlight how collaborative, interdisciplinary, and socially engaged approaches have fostered new ways of producing knowledge and driving change within the arts sector.

The origins of MADHOUSE re:exit go to the core of learning disability politics of recent decades, in which people with learning disabilities have been capturing and sharing their histories, representing their identities and experiences across different cultural spaces. Selfadvocacy organisations have charted their histories, telling stories of resistance, strength, and belonging that defy widely held notions of what it means to live life as a person with learning disabilities. Individuals and groups have told their stories using more imaginative and interdisciplinary methods, contesting dominant deficit narratives found in archives and popular discourse. The Open University's Social History of Learning Disability (SHLD) Group, founded in 1994, has undertaken much of this inclusive history comprising of members with and without learning disabilities. However, the group shifted to privileging the interests and experiences of people with learning disabilities as a means of contesting or reappraising knowledge due to people with learning disabilities arguing that the records often 'got it wrong' (Cooper, 2013, p. 24), misrepresenting the facts, or omitting significant aspects about their lives. Mabel Cooper was in the vanguard of this movement to destabilise the dominant discursive practices and portrayals of people with learning disabilities. Cooper was a survivor of a long-stay hospital, an activist, a researcher, and a long-standing member of the SHLD Group. She took steps to reconstruct details of her life through an investigation of archival records – in doing so, she learned about the circumstances of her admittance to institutional care, the words and labels used to describe her, and the categories and systems used to measure her progress.

Cooper requested that the work she began in life story research for people with learning disabilities should continue after her death, so in 2015, the Open University commissioned production company Advocreate to make a film that combines archive footage of Cooper with the fictionalised account of a young man with learning disabilities living in 21st-century London, called No Longer Shut Up (2015). Advocate employed actors from Access All Areas, and throughout the process of filming, actors began questioning the history of institutions, notably 'How come we didn't know all this stuff happened?'. Out of this, Access All Areas

created ‘Madhouse, My House?’ (2015-2018), a programme of inclusive and co-produced research and public engagement activities that included learning disability history workshops, intergenerational interviews, and a museum exhibition. This culminated in ‘MADHOUSE re: exit’ (2018), a large-scale immersive theatre project that confronted the history of institutionalisation of people with learning disabilities and explored its ongoing legacy in the era of community care and supported living.

This exploration of learning disabled issues and history through art has been mirrored by other learning disabled theatre companies in the 21st century, including Mind the Gap. Between 2016 and 2021, Mind the Gap ran their Daughters of Fortune project, which explored learning disability and parenthood. Within the project Mind the Gap, four interconnected projects were produced. Mia (Lee, 2017) was a devised national touring theatre performance featuring a series of non-linear episodic scenes discussing how parents with learning disabilities face struggles against an inflexible system; Anna (Mind The Gap, 2019) was a forum theatre piece specifically created for staff in the health and care sector, recreating real life scenarios about how services intervened during a learning disabled mother’s pregnancy and explores what they could have done better. Zara (2020) was a large-scale piece of outdoor theatre which engaged with a community cast of over one hundred people with learning disabilities to tell a story of a mother having her child taken away from her because of her learning disabilities. Finally, Paige (2021) was a collection of autobiographical experiences of parents with learning disabilities, and how they engaged with services and support.

Daughters of Fortune came out of a conversation between Joyce Nga Yu Lee, Artistic Director of Mind the Gap (2021-2024) and a Mind the Gap Artist whose sister with learning disabilities had become pregnant and had a difficult time with social services regarding wanting to keep her child post-birth. Many of the artists within the company had never questioned whether they wanted to have a child, and what might happen if they did; therefore, similarly to Access All Areas, the research and development for the project was co-led by Learning Disabled Artists, creatives from the company and academics. It allowed people with learning disabilities to question their history, the traditional attitudes of social services, and the injustices within the system. This collaborative approach to making work brings equality within the creating process, but also within wider society: a desire to support more people with learning disabilities to be producers of knowledge and to use that knowledge to help improve people’s lives.

Daughters of Fortune proved to be a turning point in terms of how MTG offered and diversified leadership and employment opportunities for LD Artists. Arising from Daughters of Fortune, Mind the Gap created an internship programme, hiring four people with learning disabilities to work on the project. This was part of their leadership programme, ensuring that people with learning disabilities are part of the process, as well as the performance, and have a say in the company's leadership, both creatively and professionally. Since these internships, one intern has been hired on a permanent contract as the Assistant Producer, and many of the MTG Artists now co-facilitate and co-ordinate Academy and One Day courses, as well as working in the office in administrative roles. The MTG Artists also work as leaders in the sector, attending conferences, co-writing research papers, and standing on advisory boards for national and international entertainment leaders, including BBC, ITV, and Netflix. All individuals with lived experience are supported, guided and encouraged to be the voice, and collective voices of the Disability Arts sector.

3.4 UK Companies within this research

The companies I discuss below are the current learning disabled theatre companies with which I have worked most closely during this research. Although they each have different artistic vocabularies and organisational structures, they all share a commitment to producing work that is professional, aesthetically ambitious, and led by Learning Disabled Artists wherever possible. Mind the Gap, as my main research partner, is the company I worked with most consistently, across training, rehearsals, productions and organisational projects. Around this core partnership sits a wider ring of companies and projects that informed the study in different ways. Access All Areas, for example, was running a leadership programme during the research period and invited me to explore how they train and implement learning disability-led work, both within their own studio and through sector-facing initiatives such as Transforming Leadership. Confidence, as a partner in Mind the Gap's Staging Change and Engage programmes, offered a different lens on leadership and facilitation practices through my work with Artistic Director Jo Frater and Assistant Facilitator Grace Hann. DIY Theatre and Pyramid of Arts functioned as what I describe in the methodology as 'reference companies': organisations I visited periodically to understand alternative models of practice, including DIY's ensemble-based approach and Pyramid's development-team structure in the visual arts.

It is important to note that many other companies across the UK and beyond are currently working in learning disability theatre, and I visited several of them during the project. These

visits are not treated as full case studies, but they do inform the comparative analysis later in the thesis, particularly where I draw contrasts between different approaches to leadership, training and authorship. Mind the Gap's Staging Change project, which focused on creating paid employment for Learning Disabled Artists in a range of production and creative roles, and the associated Engage network provided an important framework for these connections, bringing together UK partners to think collectively about representation, curation and access in mainstream venues. During the research, Mind the Gap also received Erasmus+ funding for the OGMIUS+ programme, through which I spent two weeks working alongside artists from several European companies, one week in France and one in Bradford. That collaboration allowed me to situate the practices described in this thesis within a wider European ecology of learning disability Arts, and I return to these international experiences in my later discussion of leadership, interdependence and the circulation of 'best practice' across borders, which is also attached in the appendices as a best practice report.

Mind the Gap (Bradford)

In 1988, Tim Wheeler and Susan Brown founded Mind the Gap to address the lack of opportunities for people with learning disabilities and/or autism in the arts. Since then, the organisation has worked towards its vision of enabling people with learning disabilities and autism to be part of an arts sector free from discrimination, where individuals are trained, respected, and employed equally. Some Mind the Gap artists regularly feature on mainstream stage and screen. As the company's website states, Mind the Gap has three main areas of activity: training, performance, and leadership (Mind the Gap, 2024).

As well as creating work, Mind the Gap has nurtured creativity and developed skills within its talent development programme:

> Mind the Gap has been running performance-based training courses for people with learning disabilities and autism for over twenty years – and the Academy courses are now considered amongst the most established and internationally recognised training programmes of their kind, including a York St John University level 4 accredited course
>
> (Mind The Gap, 2022)

This course gives students a Certificate in Higher Education in Performing Arts equivalent to the first year of a University degree – the first of its kind in the UK. As Matthew Reason,

Director of the Institute for Social Justice at York St John, explains, 'Through this unique partnership with Mind the Gap, we are able to challenge some of the presumptions about who education is for and who can access higher learning.' (Reason, 2021). All the training is personcentred and offers various ways to learn, with individual needs considered through regular assessment, there is also peer leadership with Mind the Gap's core group of learning disabled and autistic Artists working alongside the Academy, the students, and trainers. The Academy brings in a range of external collaborators, including arts industry leaders, theatre makers, voice coaches and dance teachers, to ensure all students gain a wide range of arts training and a broad understanding of the creative world – and encourages personal and professional development in an environment that is constantly learning and developing.

Mind the Gap aims to create work that is artistically innovative and accessible. The company has evolved in the work they produce: from using traditional scripts under Tim Wheeler, they have gradually shifted towards more verbatim and politically engaged performances, creating shows that directly draw on the life experiences of people with learning disabilities, including autobiographical performances in Contained.

Access All Areas (London)

Access All Areas was formed in 1976 by Elsie Pilbeam as The Rainbow Theatre Group. Between 1976 and 2007, the company devised and performed sixty-three shows until the company re-branded as Access All Areas. The company now creates disruptive theatre and performance by learning disabled and autistic artists in unexpected spaces, fostering intimate moments of interaction between performers and the public. The core Performance Company is made up of sixteen Associate Artists who identify as learning disabled, autistic, or neurodiverse and create new live and digital productions to disrupt misperceptions about the learning disabled and autistic experience, such as Unreal City (2022). The company also hosts Associate Artists who create their own work through the Performance Company, including The Interrogation (Salter, 2022) and The Misfit Analysis (Binchy, 2015)

The company offers training, including their Performance Making Diploma, a Level 2 qualification run in collaboration with the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. The course has been specifically designed for people with learning disabilities and autism to educate students on different contemporary styles of performance and help them consider what work they want to make post-graduation. The course is co-led by an experienced learning disabled tutor and gives 'personalised exit strategies to everyone' (Accsess All Areas, 2023).

The company are leaders within the sector, firstly with their Take Part programmes, which are coled by learning disabled professionals who work extensively in East London, using the arts to improve well-being and mental health, foster inclusion, and give learning disabled peers and neighbours a voice. More recently, the company have run their Transforming Leadership Programme, designed as a coaching opportunity for nine learning disabled leaders to be employed in positions across all aspects of theatre making. This programme was the first of its kind, and not only did it radically transform the leadership potential and presence of learning disabled arts leaders, but also improved organisational accessibility.

Finally, the company offers a range of consultancy across all aspects of theatre-making – from creating accessible auditions to ensuring authentic representation and inclusive front-of-house training. An example of this was Cian Binchy, an Access All Areas Associate Artist, who consulted on The National Theatre's production The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime (Haddon, 2012-2016) to ensure an accurate representation of autism, as will be discussed as a case study in Chapter 7: Leadership.

Confidance (Canterbury)

This account of Confidance draws on the company's published materials and mission statements, as well as my observations and interviews with Artistic Director Jo Frater and Assistant Facilitator Grace Hann. Confidance describe themselves as delivering 'high quality dance work with integrity, creativity and integration at its heart', (Frater & Hann, 2021) making dance and performance with dancers with learning disabilities in schools, community settings and arts venues across East Kent. Their stated vision is 'an empowered and united society where people are paramount, and difference is an asset', and they emphasise a commitment to 'redefin[ing] dance' and 'push[ing] the boundaries of what we consider dance to be and who it is for' (Confidance, 2024). Confidance run community classes for adults, designed to provide ongoing, inclusive dance provision after formal education and to create further opportunities for performance and skills development.

ConfiCo, founded in 2019, is Confidance's professional training company; dancers train one day a week and, in collaboration with Jo Frater and Grace Hann, create contemporary dance works that are performed in theatres, festivals and schools. In company materials, ConfiCo is framed as part of a 'professional pathway', through which dancers develop both performance skills and a sense of themselves as artists within the wider dance sector. Throughout the duration of this PhD, ConfiCo's development has run in parallel with the research, and their

dancers' ongoing explorations of identity, leadership and authorship form a key strand of the analysis in Chapter 6. Finally, Confidance position training and knowledge-sharing as a fourth strand of their work, offering workshops and continuing professional development (CPD) for students, educators, arts organisations and venues, as part of a mission 'to create an integrated society with equity of dance opportunity for all' (Frater & Hann, 2021)

Confidance's practice is explicitly framed as inclusive and person-centred in their public materials, with repeated reference to 'person-centred practice' as a core principle of their training offer. My own observations across sessions and rehearsals support this selfdescription: the company builds sustained relationships with participants, works with people with a wide variety of support needs, and consistently treats dancers not only as service users but as collaborators and co-artists embedded within a wider community of practice (fieldnotes, 2021–2023).

DIY Theatre (Salford)

DIY was one of the second wave of companies that emerged in the late 1990s, formed in 1994. It was originally formed as a collaboration between a day centre and a Salford Local Authority Arts Officer and continues to run today with three main strands of practice. Firstly, there is a company of actors with learning disabilities that creates and tours high-quality devised work. This is the core of DIY's work, with twelve performers with learning disabilities creating an ensemble that devises and develops work such as Ellie's Story (2011) and Don't Call Me Babe!
(2012), which were created for young people with learning disabilities.

Secondly, DIY's Friday Group of leaders with learning disabilities designs, delivers, and evaluates an education and outreach programme comprising projects with young people with learning disabilities and weekly workshops for adults with learning disabilities. Thirdly, DIY delivers Arts Award training and support at all five levels and is one of three organisations nationally delivering Arts Award advisor training to people working with young people with learning disabilities.

Sue Caudle, DIY's Artistic Director, discusses the work the company makes in her PhD thesis (Caudle, 2017): 'DIY have developed from an inward-focused, community-based group concerned to develop drama skills, confidence, group dynamics, and self-esteem, to a semiprofessional company with a strong aesthetic, which undertakes a range of touring and

educational work' (Caudle, 2017, p. 13). DIY has always described itself as member-led, which is evidenced in the Friday Group, but is also run by a voluntary Board, of which over fifty per cent have learning disabilities.

Pyramid of Arts (Leeds)

Pyramid of Arts works with people with learning disabilities in group and one-to-one settings to discover, explore, and enjoy the arts – developing artists to the full extent of their abilities and ambitions. The company work with people with all levels of ability and has specialised sessions for people with profound and multiple learning disabilities. As a member-led group, they work with all forms of art, including painting, drawing, music, dance, theatre, film, photography, and sculpture, depending on members' interests. If individuals want to develop as artists, they are supported with personal tuition in their chosen art form and in their professional development: 'for example, applying for arts funding, putting on solo exhibitions, sharing and selling their work online' (Pyramid of Arts, 2021).

For this research, I particularly focus on Pyramid of Art's Development Teams (D-Teams). Development Teams involve one artist with a learning disability working one-to-one with a non-learning disabled professional artist. The type and length of sessions are entirely tailored to the needs of the individual and vary from one or two hours a week at home to two full days a week at Pyramid. This format allows individuals to work in a free and independent manner creatively ,whilst having access to support from a professional who can help develop CVs, creative portfolios, funding applications and websites for sales.

In Chapter 6: Interdependence I will look at three projects that were developed within DTeams: The Sausage Atlas by Andrew Towse and Anne-Marie Atkinson, Moan Mats by Stephen Harvey and Julie Shackleton, and No One Is You And That Is Your Power by Ria Lake and Jenny Laskowsky.

3.5 European Partners within this research

Between September 2018 and August 2021, Mind the Gap were part of a major international project supported by the European Union's Erasmus+ program. The OGMIUS project was the result of the collaboration between three theatre companies: Mind the Gap, Compagnie de l'Oiseau Mouche and Moomsteatern. All three companies had created and toured work for over thirty years and provided professional training for adults with learning disabilities; therefore, they aimed to work together to better meet the training needs of artists with learning

disabilities. OGMIUS sought to pool their resources and design new evaluation and selfassessment methods to try to reduce the gap between traditional training and those accessible to people with learning disabilities. I was part of the research and evaluation team, helping to develop a good practice guide which highlighted two evaluation tools and a new reflective method trialled during the project: The Creative Doodle Book by Matthew Reason (2022), and the photoelicitation method adopted by John Collier (1957), adapted by me. This allowed me to spend time with both companies and with artists within the companies to also explore their views of identity and leadership, both with the arts sector they worked in, but also their countries.

Compagnie de l'Oiseau Mouche (Roubaix, France)

Founded in 1978, L'Oiseau Mouche is a professional theatre company based in Roubaix, France. Initially, the company did not use text; instead, it explored gesture through performance. But in 1995, the company collaborated with Antonio Vigano, which resulted in three new performances using text and physicality. This changed the way the company worked, and from 2000 text became an integral part of performances, including an adaptation of King Lear. (2016)

Today the company has a team of fifty people, twenty-three of whom are actors with learning disabilities and autism who have created over fifty shows. The company does not have a dedicated director but instead commissions directors from different artistic disciplines to create work with the artists creating a wide variety of performances and giving the opportunity for artists in the company to train in different disciplines and with different people. The company also allows external projects to integrate actors from the company, ensuring the representation of actors with learning disabilities in the performance, but also giving actors the opportunity for learning and additional experience that can then be shared with the rest of the company.

The company also provides training for all actors; however, this is more continuous professional development rather than other training discussed in the UK. At L'Oiseau Mouche you must already have experience and be an actor before you can join. Therefore, these training workshops are opportunities to upskill in three artistic fields: dance, theatre and hybrid arts. These workshops also offer opportunities to research and develop, giving space for interactions between guest artists and actors from L'Oiseau Mouche.

Moomsteatern (Malmö, Sweden)

Moomsteatern is a professional inclusive theatre company founded in 1987 in Malmö, Sweden. The acting company is an integrated company of actors with learning disabilities, employed full-time, and non-disabled freelance actors. The company activity bans all therapeutic and social aims, placing the production of high quality theatre at the heart of the work. They offer continuous in-service training for the actors to learn new skills and keep up with the industry standard. They work with a large variety of directors and producers, bringing in external creatives to work on projects. This decision is democratic, with the actors having the power to decide which projects to implement and which director to hire for the project, meaning that directors and writers have to work around the actors rather than creating something that might not be appropriate for the group's needs.

Moomsteatern strive to be an equal workplace, and there are no healthcare workers or support staff, only creatives who understand the social model of disability and equity needs. The focal point of the company is for the actors to develop their professional skills, to never bend the rules of demanding high artistic quality. They also pay actors with learning disabilities equally to actors without disabilities – I will discuss this further in Chapter 8: Conclusion.

All these companies are currently active, and in one way or another, they are leading Learning Disability Theatres. Throughout the subsequent chapters, you will find quotes, references and sharings from research from all the above companies and the artists they work with. Each company has a different approach, different aims and ethos, different economic and geographic circumstances which are important to consider throughout the discussion – the difference between artists in Bradford or Salford and those in central London or even France and Sweden impacts on the opportunities they may have, the support they may have and the finances they may receive, as well as the intersectionality of identity they may see around them, engage with or talk about.

3.6 Spectatorship and Quality in LD Theatre

Traditionally, much work by learning disabled theatre companies is viewed by a regular audience of family and friends, both of individuals and the company. Learning Disabled Theatres also struggle to get work programmed in mainstream venues due to fears of loss of profit, a lack of audience demand for learning disabled work, and questions of quality. However, with more companies producing and touring professional theatre both nationally and internationally, the aim is to increase audience numbers and audience diversity. This section

considers who attends learning disability theatre and examines how perceptions of artistic quality influence audience engagement and access to mainstream platforms.

In 2007, disability artist and advocate Mat Fraser wrote an article titled Disability Arse. Whilst he acknowledged the safe and supportive environment that the Disability Arts circuit provided, Fraser said, 'some of what passes as disability art should never have been allowed on stage' (Fraser, 2007: 5), opening up conversations around the quality of work by disabled artists:

> Please let me be clear what I mean: I really love any disabled person having a go at performance, I love material that will only be interesting to the Disability Arts insiders' crew, and I will always support people's attempt to have a go, as long as it IS only for the Disability Arts insiders. However, I know of no other group that so allow untalented people onto a public stage to entertain and indulge their inability to perform. And I don't think it's healthy, sorry. Why am I so harsh? Because dammit, 'they' – the normal people, the mainstream, the mis-understanders of what we do – all think we're crap. 'They' think that what we do isn't arts at all but is in fact angelic therapy to calm our traumatised bodies and minds from the torture of impairment, etc, etc, etc. Watching crap people be shit on stage is only going to reinforce that view!'
>
> (Fraser, 2007: 5-6)

Performances of disability raise questions in relation to quality and spectatorship in complex ways, including 'the nature of gaze, empathy across difference, social constructions of disability, and the politics of programming' (Reason, 2019, p. 164). On one hand, Fraser is potentially correct in saying that the Disability Arts and Learning Disabled Theatres have been comfortable for too long in commissioning and sharing work on a low quality by disabled artists to a public audience for the assurance that people with disabilities are being seen and are represented and stage and screen; the sector is arguably still caught in the applied / therapeutic model of performance rather than output quality. However, regardless of how much effort is put into the creation of high-quality material, there is still a barrier in the way audiences view actors on stage with learning disabilities. Jennifer Goddard explores the relationships within learning disability theatres and how 'it is not just about the performance of disability as processes of performing and valuing the processes of signification in performance of the subject in process that are important' (Goddard, 2019, p. 111). This understanding of spectatorship explores how disabled artists draw awareness to the spectators' habitual responses in any given space and 'how their habitual ways of seeing, imaging, and

imagining disability are complicit in the Western cultural compulsion to define the disabled body, by and large, excluded from the public sphere'. (Goddard, 2015, p. 238)

Matthew Reason investigates whether there is a distinct aesthetic invited by learning disabled theatre in his chapter, Ways of Watching: Five Aesthetics of Learning Disability Theatre (Reason, 2018). He argues that there is no single aesthetic of learning disabled theatre, but rather a set of recurring 'ways of watching that audiences adopt' (Reason, 2018, p. 163). Reason identifies five positions: an aesthetics of no difference, in which spectators insist on looking 'beyond' disability and claim to see only universal humanity; an aesthetics of radical difference, in which disability is foregrounded as marked Otherness; an aesthetics of identification, where audiences find points of connection or recognition across difference; an aesthetics of authenticity and presence, which values perceived sincerity, vulnerability or 'realness' in disabled performers; and postdramatic aesthetics, which focus less on character and plot and more on the sensory and formal qualities of the performance event (Reason, 2018, pp. 164–168).

Reason shows how these different aesthetics can be 'activated by particular directorial intentions' (Reason, 2018, p. 169). In some companies, such as Lung Ha, the stated aim is to override difference: 'the thing is I don't think about my actors as disabled. I don't see the disabilities anymore. I see the actors behind the disability' (Oller, cited in Reason, 2018, p. 170), encouraging an aesthetics of no difference or universal humanity. In others, such as Mind the Gap, there is an explicit framing of difference and diversity, with Tim Wheeler observing: 'There's a sense of Otherness, and there's a sense of wanting to see into and understand the world of others, yourself through others… There's a sense of reflection and reflexivity in terms of who we are' (Wheeler, cited in Reason, 2018, p. 171).

Reason's typology helps to illuminate why a non-disabled audience member might feel unsettled if, for example, Juliet in a production of *Romeo and Juliet* is played by an actress with Down Syndrome. Rather than simply 'seeing past' disability, spectators are likely to oscillate between aesthetics: some may strive for no difference, insisting that the casting changes nothing; others may experience radical difference, focusing on disability as an incongruous or 'unfitting' presence within a canonical love story; still others may find themselves pulled towards identification or authenticity, reading the actress's embodiment as bringing a new kind of vulnerability or risk to familiar scenes. In each case, the love story, the characters and their relationships acquire additional layers of meaning, around consent,

sexuality, care, protection and social prejudice, which can make certain moments feel charged or uncomfortable, especially for spectators with little prior experience of seeing learning disabled actors cast in romantic or sexually active roles.

The parallels to race in casting are illuminating to this discussion. In a similar format to colourblind casting, in which casting directors put together ensembles without taking an actor's race or ethnicity into account, if we cast characters who traditionally are not written to be learning disabled with actors who are visibly learning disabled, we must acknowledge the history and culture of that identity. Similarly, to learning disabled actors, black actors have faced discrimination during casting due to racism and colourism operating in the theatre and acting industries. Colour-blind casting is underpinned by the notion 'that hiring decisions are premised on talent and not whether a person has the "right look"' (Young, 2013, p. 58), and has been successful in providing opportunities for Black actors such as Don Warrington playing King Lear at the Royal Exchange (Manchester) in April 2016, however the contemporary narrative of not seeing skin colour makes it difficult for minorities to report actual experiences of discrimination, and for employers to recognise that bias operates within their organisation. Blindness to colour and disability provides a defence and justification for discrimination, and in turn, stereotypes and biases that subconsciously impact casting decisions filter through to audiences. Therefore, we must also acknowledge the difference in performance where applicable; as Lisa M. Anderson argues, 'to assume that we can watch a theatrical production and ignore the racial identities of the actors on stage is to assume the impossible' (Anderson, 2006, p. 91). In Hargrave's conclusion to Theatres of Learning Disability, he discusses the proper actor, interrogating Alan Clay's (MTG Artist) role as Benny in Boo (2010), a stage-play reimagining of Harper Lee's 'To Kill A Mockingbird' (1960). Hargrave discusses the tensions that underly professionalisation – and the historical role of rehabilitation, curing idiocy through learning and 'mastery of the will' (Sharon l, 2006, p. 115):

> Training Alan Clay to improve his speech – to make it more proper – might be viewed negatively as a normalising process. Yet as Emma Gee remarked, "Alan has a tendency to run words together […] that makes the distinguishing of words difficult. He drops into vocal habits […] a slur to his voice that can create an odd sounding drawl" (Gee, 2009-10).
>
> (Hargrave, 2015, p. 224)

This is the way that Alan talks; it raises questions about the desirability of trying to get a performer to normalise the way he speaks to make it easier for the audience. Traditionally, vocal training for actors ensures enunciation, fluidity and consistency, perhaps doing the equivalent job in a non-disability context. However, there has been some reporting of difficulty understanding actors and accents in mainstream film, most notably Tom Hardy, who was voted the most difficult actor to understand (Knolle, 2022). Speaking about Hardy's performance, Erik Singer, dialect coach, explained that although Hardy's accent occasionally distracted from the story, it also helped bring his characters to life. 'Through intonation and dedication to his roles, Hardy makes his characters seem believable' (Erik Singer, 2018). Instead of comparing Alan to normal speech from other actors, maybe we should instead question what his voice and speech patterns can bring to a role in a similar manner.

During the timeline of this research, Anna Gray (MTG Artist) was cast in Leeds Playhouse's adaptation of Be My Baby (2019) directed by Jacqui Honess-Martin. The piece, originally written by Amanda Whittington, did not previously have a character with learning disabilities, however, with Grey's presence as Norma, the character has added dimension. Norma is a young girl who has been seduced by a married man and has become pregnant with his child. The character is confused throughout about the relationship and its power structure and insists that he is going to marry her when she leaves the institute, whilst also explaining the same man has been sneaking into the institute to give her pills (we are guided to the conclusion these may be to force an abortion). Grey played the role with ease, and although the text or direction didn't openly discuss the nuances of whether Norma had a learning disability, her performance made clear the ethical issues this character may face.

Similar to Clay, Grey was occasionally difficult to understand, slurring words and sentences into one another, stuttering and having difficulty with some language and terminology. For Hargrave, 'there are objective, qualitative standards: an actor needs to be heard' (Hargrave, 2015, p. 224). However, Amy Leach, Artistic Director of Leeds Playhouse, decided that the words didn't necessarily need to be heard; they just needed to be understood in one way or another. Therefore, she created creative captioning for the production, like closed captioning for the D/deaf audience. Leach decided to integrate captioning into the entire performance. On the set, upstage centre, above the heads of all the actors was a large screen which continuously scrolled the script in time with the actors' speech and movement. It included all the characters' names with their lines and stage directions. This solved two issues: 1) If the audience couldn't quite understand Grey's speech they would still know what was being said and what was

happening by looking at the captioning, and 2) in the event of Grey (or any of the other actors) forgetting their lines or cues, they could glance up at the screen as a prompt, which had the further benefit of making it accessible to deaf audiences.

The performance was well received, with John Murphy from The Stage writing 'Be My Baby is also another fine example of the inclusivity work that Leeds do so well. Anna Gray from learning disability theatre group Mind the Gap, slots into the ensemble effortlessly, and there's some ingenious captioning written in the style of case notes' (Murphy, 2019). The captioning, therefore, assisted in solving what could have become potential issues around quality and clarity for the audience; however, was this just a temporary fix? Gee explains that amendments do occasionally have to be made by writers and directors during the creative process; however, she also explains: 'We hit upon the double barrier that learning disabled people face: assumptions about ability go untested and habitual tropes are reinforced in an attempt to be enabling' (Gee, 2009). As creatives, what is the more ethical way of working to ensure quality of work for a public audience: to attempt to normalise an actor with learning disabilities through continuous professional training, or do we advocate for the ways LD Artists perform and risk mainstream audiences reading learning disabled theatre as lower quality as a result?

Alternatively, is it possible for Learning Disabled Theatre to be of high quality if we do neither and instead lean into the difference of performance? In July 2007, Lloyd Newson (DV8) spoke about disabled performers, arguing that the failure to fully master dance technique risks 'demeaning the art form'. Does this mean that an actor with Down Syndrome might lack the precision to become a professional dancer, and that directors and audiences question the ability of said performer?

There is clear tension between the aesthetics of theatre, which in turn creates arguments of quality. The aesthetic of non-disabled theatre is our norm; we see it regularly - even for nontheatre-goers, the dominant image of theatre features able-bodied performers whose training includes movement and voice to a standard we can all measure. The aesthetic of learning disabled theatres is then automatically measured against this, yet how can this be possible when the aesthetics of learning disability theatres are so varied? There is no singular aesthetic of learning disability; instead, competing forms are created by the nuanced individuality of people's learning disabilities. Instead learning disability theatres are full of uniqueness that needs to be critiqued as its own form, not for process or feel-good-ness, but

through formal, extrinsic, relational, and subjective questions 'disturbs the very idea of theatre [and] also disturbs the act of spectatorship' (Grehan & Eckersall, 2013, p. 17).

3.7 Conclusion

Learning Disability Theatres are still located within a complex, philosophical and political context, in which socially constructed notions of the norm have a negative impact on people with learning disability. As discussed in Chapter 2, the oppression people with learning disabilities have historically faced and continually face cannot be separated from the conversation when discussing Learning Disability Theatres. However, through acknowledging the history, and interrogating the political, we can 'imagine ourselves to be other than we are, to move beyond certain limits, unmasked by these inquiries' (Carlson, 2010: 17). This chapter has explored the companies currently working, the circumstances that created Learning Disability Theatres out of Disability Arts, and the frequently asked questions of quality and who is making the work. The chapter has also explored the emerging possibilities for viewing leadership as shared and inclusive, which will be expanded on within this thesis in Chapter 6: Interdependence and Chapter 7: Leadership – about how we can create new models of support, inclusive practice and leadership within Learning Disability Theatres but also within the cultural sector more broadly, where we have evidenced a lack of diversity in leadership.

It is imperative to acknowledge the complex contexts within Learning Disability Theatres whilst navigating throughout the rest of the thesis, particularly how Carlson expands on Foucault to assert that, while a historical perspective is essential for understanding how discourses and power structures have developed over time, we must not be constrained by this history. Instead, we should use the voices and pioneers of Learning Disability Theatres as a foundation for understanding how theatre practice and research can offer alternatives for performers, theatre-makers, and audiences who are now shaping the future of inclusive theatre. This approach underpins the research methodology used in this thesis, which is grounded in participatory, ethnographic, and creative methods. The following chapter outlines how these methods were used to collaborate with Learning Disabled Artists, ensuring that their voices, experiences, and agency were central to the research process. It details how methods such as life narrative interviews, deep hanging out, photo elicitation, and creative visual activities (like identity pie charts and career timelines) were used to produce a rich, reflective, and accessible body of knowledge. These methods were not only practical responses to accessibility and

inclusion but also epistemological choices that support a research design that values coproduction, lived experience, and representational justice.

Ultimately, this research illustrates how Learning Disabled Artists, through their work and participation in research, are not only shaping the future of inclusive arts but also actively challenging and redefining the meaning and identity of the label 'learning disabled'.

Chapter 4: Methodology & Ethics

This chapter outlines the research paradigm and design adopted for this thesis and situates a participatory approach to working with Learning Disabled Artists. It explains the use of ethnographic methods and life narrative interviews, and considers the methodological and ethical challenges of qualitative research with people with learning disabilities alongside its potential benefits in terms of participation, empowerment and voice. I also reflect on my fieldwork experience, focusing on four key challenges: gaining access, recruiting participants, building trust, and maintaining privacy and confidentiality. A central concern throughout is how qualitative researchers conduct studies with people with learning disabilities, and how my position as a non-disabled researcher shaped both data collection and analysis.

A founding methodological principle was that this research would be undertaken with people with learning disabilities rather than on them. Kiernan (1999), writing about research involving people with learning disabilities, argues that participatory research is both practicable and desirable, moving towards emancipatory research. This commitment is captured in Barton's (1999) key questions: who is this work for, what right do we have to undertake it, and what responsibilities come with it (cited in Tuffrey-Wijne, Bernal & Hollins, 2008: 186). These questions were continually revisited in this project, with answers understood as provisional rather than fixed. This research is not designed as an educational resource for Learning Disabled Artists; rather, it is built from their voices and experiences, and therefore includes an accessible video version so that they can access and recognise themselves within the work. Its primary intended users are organisations, practitioners, funders and researchers working with Learning Disabled Artists, who can draw on the findings to develop new models of support, leadership and inclusive practice.

At the same time, there is a clear power imbalance between the research participants and me: I will gain a doctorate and associated career advantages. I remain uncertain about my 'right' to write this thesis, and recognise that, ideally, artists with learning disabilities would have

greater access to higher education and research opportunities. Given current structural barriers, I understand my role as one of responsibility: to ensure that the voices and perspectives of Learning Disabled Artists are centred. This thesis represents not only my own analysis but is also guided and informed by participants' insights; my task has been to bring those insights into dialogue with the existing literature and to communicate them in accessible formats, including video materials.

Research involving people with learning disabilities is crucial for identifying issues that require attention, informing policy, evaluating programmes and services, and tracking how social and economic change affects disabled people. The importance of such work is reflected in documents such as the Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities (1996) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). Disability research ethics sit within broader human research ethics frameworks, which require that studies be designed and conducted in ways that respect participants' human rights and dignity.

Within this field, the relationship between research and advocacy is both productive and fraught. Research grounded in the experiences of disabled and learning disabled people has been central to exposing structural injustice, challenging deficit-based models and informing policy and practice; it is not 'neutral'. The decision to centre learning disabled actors, to critique medicalised narratives or to foreground Disability Arts is already an advocacy stance. At the same time, research is accountable to norms of rigour, reflexivity and transparency. The tension is not between 'objective research' and 'biased advocacy', but about how to inhabit a politically committed position while remaining open to evidence and critique, including where it unsettles preferred narratives. This tension is particularly acute in the context of learning disabilities. Advocacy has often relied on simplified, rights-based narratives that emphasise autonomy, inclusion and capacity to counter stereotypes of incompetence and dependence, yet research repeatedly reveals situations where support needs are high, decision-making is relational, and desires within families, services, and self-advocacy groups diverge. There is, therefore, a risk that advocacy frameworks, including those within the disability movement itself, marginalise people who do not fit an idealised image of the articulate, independent disabled subject.

My core research value is advocacy, but advocacy pursued through appropriate methodology, valid and transparent analysis, and honest reporting that keeps participants' voices at the

forefront. The UK Research Governance Framework for Health and Social Care (Department of Health, 2005) reflects a shift from doing research on or about populations to doing research with them. It requires researchers to involve relevant individuals or their representative groups in the design, conduct, analysis and reporting of research. In studies involving people with learning disabilities, such engagement can help frame research questions more appropriately, test the validity and acceptability of methods, and support the interpretation of findings. In these ways, participatory approaches not only align with an ethic of inclusion but also enhance the quality and relevance of the research.

4.1 Introduction to the Artists

This research was shaped through close collaboration with a core group of Learning Disabled Artists from Mind the Gap. Their creative contributions, professional insights, and lived experiences were central to both the participatory research design and the analytical direction of this thesis. With their informed consent, and in recognition of their desire to be named and acknowledged, the following brief profiles introduce each artist-researcher and their relationship to the company and this study. These biographies were developed in multiple ways. Some information was drawn from Mind the Gap's own artist biographies on the company website (accessed 2026) to ensure details such as credits and roles were up to date. Additional material emerged from a collaborative exercise during the research, in which we mapped artists' journeys on post-it notes across a glass screen, tracing the shows they had been involved in and identifying what they themselves considered important about their careers and identities.

Alan Clay

Alan, a long-standing artist with Mind the Gap, has played leading roles in major productions including Leave the Light On for Me, Birdie, and The Invite. In 2015, he created Skip Rap, a powerful and semi-autobiographical piece of gig theatre. Alan's work has been central to the company's creative output, and his reflections on identity and self-expression were vital to this research.

Alison Colborne

Since joining Mind the Gap in 2010, Alison has performed in Contained, Mia, ZARA, and most recently Leave the Light On for Me, where she played Iris. In addition to her role as an artist, she also works as a part-time administrator for the company. A talented Grade 8

saxophonist and flute player, Alison brings both administrative insight and creative depth to her practice and contributions to the study.

Anna Gray

Anna joined Mind the Gap in 2014 and is recognised for her role in Mia, including its threeweek run at the 2017 Edinburgh Festival Fringe. She also performed in Be My Baby at Leeds Playhouse in 2019. A passionate dancer and singer, Anna's insights during identityfocused discussions helped highlight the complexities of visibility, diagnosis, and artistic belonging.

Charlotte Jones

Charlotte has been working professionally with Mind the Gap since 2019, with recent projects including Cathy: A Modern, Birdie, and Knotted. She has also received training in audio description and contributed to Front Line 1984/1985, an exhibition exploring Bradford's African Caribbean communities. Charlotte's dual interests in performance and accessibility have brought unique perspectives to her research, as well as her awareness of racial politics and how her identity as a Black woman intersects with her learning disability.

Daniel Foulds

Daniel has been an artist and research assistant at Mind the Gap for many years and currently works as an Associate Artist. He is studying at York St John University and is an established researcher with published work in critical disability studies. His dual role as both artist and scholar makes his contribution to this thesis especially valuable, providing both theoretical insight and insider knowledge of inclusive arts practice.

Howard Davies

Howard has been a longstanding artist with Mind the Gap, performing in productions such as Leave the Light On for Me, ZARA, and Contained. His work reflects a deep connection to the company's history and evolution, and his presence has contributed to group reflections on change and continuity.

Jack Riley

Jack has worked with Mind the Gap since 2016, performing in ZARA and Contained. His involvement in the project provided valuable insights into ensemble work and professional growth within inclusive arts environments.

Jez Colborne

Jez is a celebrated artist, composer, and performer who has worked with Mind the Gap for over
20 years. His credits include Cyrano, Of Mice and Men, Contained, ZARA, and the internationally toured On the Verge. Jez also created acclaimed works such as Gift, Trickster, and Irresistible. In 2004, he won the Eurovision Song Contest for Disabled People. Jez's creativity and leadership are central to the company's artistic legacy and this study.

JoAnne Haines

A performer and facilitator since 2011, JoAnne's credits include Dancing with Colours, Wendy: A Peter Pan Story, Waldo's Circus of Magic and Terror, a little space, ZARA, and The Invite. Her involvement in this research highlights the importance of co-creation, representation, and the emotional labour of performance.

Laura Reed

Laura joined Mind the Gap in 2016 and toured the UK with Mirror Mirror from 2017 to 2019. She co-hosted the YouTube series MTG TV and brings a strong digital presence to her work. Her engagement with social media and interest in developing new platforms for performance provided key insights into contemporary practice.

Liam Bairstow

Liam has been an artist at Mind the Gap since 2014 and has starred in Treasure Island, Contained, and as Sam Hill in ZARA. He is best known for his ongoing role as Alex Warner in ITV's Coronation Street, becoming the first person with Down Syndrome to have a recurring role in a UK soap. A Mencap Ambassador, Liam's career highlights themes of mainstream representation and visibility in this study.

Lorraine Brown

Lorraine joined Mind the Gap in 2018 after appearing in 'Contained'. She has toured nationally with 'a little space' and performed in 'Birdie'. Also a singer and bass guitarist, Lorraine's perspectives on creativity, collaboration, and performance offered valuable insights throughout the research.

Paul Bates

Paul is an alumnus of Mind the Gap, who is now independent of the company. He toured with MTG productions such as Survival Kit and also developed The Kaspar Hauser Experiment with Animikii in 2022.

Paul Wilshaw

Paul started his journey with Mind the Gap through the Making Theatre training course and later interned as Assistant Producer on ZARA in 2019. Now actively involved in advocacy and engagement, Paul hosts the Disability And... podcast and is a passionate supporter of learning disabled representation. Although he did not participate as an artist during this research, his professional advocacy work has shaped the broader context of this study.

4.2 Participatory Methods

The aim of this research is to produce a rich, polyvocal, evocative, and complex account of Disability Arts and artists with learning disabilities. To achieve this dialogical conversation within the thesis, the voices of artists with learning disabilities are not just important but essential. To meet this aim and provide meaningful answers to the research questions, the methodology had to be qualitative and participatory. This thesis addresses the following research questions:

- What is a Learning Disabled Artist?
- How does learning disability affect the identity of artists?
- How does the identity of "artist" affect people with learning disabilities?
- What is the significance of independence or interdependence in relation to Learning Disabled Artists?
- What are the models for success for Learning Disabled Artists?
- What is learning disability–led practice, and how does it link to employability, access, and leadership?

I investigated these questions, in collaboration with the artists and facilitators, through phenomenological enquiry. Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that seeks to understand perspectives as they are lived, defined by experience and context, and in doing so offers a deeper understanding of those perspectives. Key concepts in phenomenology include the natural attitude and the lifeworld. Husserl (1970) describes the natural attitude as the way in which each of us is involved in the lifeworld - our taken-for-granted mode of engaging with the world around us. The lifeworld refers to our awareness of the surrounding world, encompassing everything in it and framed by a broader context. Being in the natural attitude is an effortless, unreflective state. Phenomenological research, however, focuses on exploring

this experience of the lifeworld in its natural state: as Bevan notes, ‘a phenomenological researcher is interested in describing a person’s experience in the way he or she experiences it, and not from some theoretical standpoint’ (Bevan, 2014: 137).

In this thesis, the core purpose of the methodology was to engage directly with artists with learning disabilities and discuss their personal experiences and perspectives. The method reflects Ingold’s definition of anthropology as ‘a practice of observation grounded in participatory dialogue’ (Ingold, 2007: 87). Primarily, the research focuses on individual Learning Disabled Artists and their particular experiences. However, because all artists participating in the research are affiliated with a theatre company or organisation, Mind the Gap, the same methodology also provides insight into its organisational culture and identity. This rootedness in Mind the Gap’s particular culture and ways of working resonates with participatory and action research traditions that conceptualise research as a democratic, collaborative process of knowledge production grounded in practical knowing.

Drawing inspiration from Kelli R. Pearson’s work on using creative methods to address sustainability challenges in communities, particularly how relationships and collaborations are sustained over time, the participatory approach in this study can be understood in four nonlinear phases: (1) exploration, (2) collaborative workshop, (3) execution, and (4) reflection (Pearson, 2022, p. 170). These stages have been adapted to frame the research process, structuring the sequence of engagements with Mind the Gap Artists and providing an overview of each phase and its associated workshops, some of which are explored in more depth later in this chapter.

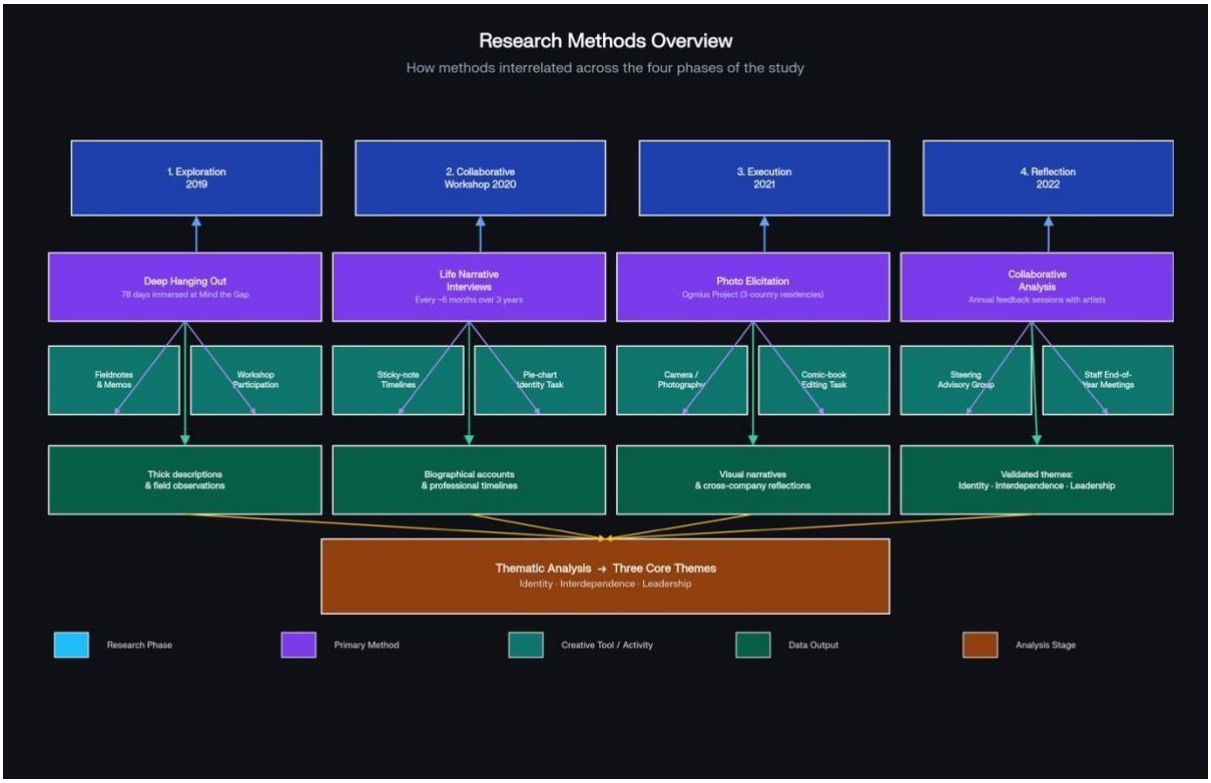

Figure 2: an overview of the four non-linear phases of this research

4.3 Creative Methods

A central rationale for combining participatory and creative research methods was to ensure meaningful engagement in the research process from individuals who have historically been marginalised by academic practices. Written methods, such as questionnaires or formal interviews, would have prohibited many of the artists at Mind the Gap from participating fully. In contrast, creative methods, many of which are non-language-based, opened up communication through preferred modes of expression, allowing a more holistic understanding to develop between participant and researcher. The study therefore employed creative methods such as drawing, creative writing, photography, and workshop-based activities as both datagathering tools and generative spaces for reflection. These methods enabled co-researchers to explore themes of identity, independence and interdependence, leadership, and learning disability–led practice in ways that were accessible, embodied, and artistically grounded. They also aligned with the four non-linear phases of exploration, collaborative workshop, execution, and reflection, each involving distinct constellations of creative practice and dialogue.

As Maxine Greene argues in Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change, ‘participatory involvement with the many forms of art can enable us to see

more in our experience, to hear more on normally unheard frequencies, to become conscious of what daily routines have obscured, what habit and convention have suppressed' (Greene, 2000: 123). In this research, creative methods served this function precisely: they enabled artists to move beyond habitual patterns of interaction and articulate experiences that might otherwise remain obscured, unspoken, or difficult to capture solely through verbal language.

Through these creative processes, co-researchers, specifically Artists from Mind the Gap, were able to temporarily shift from immediate emotional reactions to reflective engagement with their lived realities. McNiff (2013) argues that art-based inquiry creates precisely this kind of pause, a moment in which the 'creative process slows habitual thought and opens space for new ways of knowing and seeing one's own experience' (McNiff, 1998, p. 49; McNiff, 2013, p. 12). The creative activities provided a space in which familiar power dynamics could be questioned and established interpretations of situations and strategies re-evaluated.

4.4 Power Dynamics in Research

The use of participatory and creative methods in research with people with learning disabilities is inherently political. Chris Kiernan captures this political nature in his discussion of qualitative research with people with learning disabilities, noting that although qualitative research aims to ground studies in the experience and views of respondents, it is still the researcher (or funding body) who determines the overall research questions and who gathers, analyses, and interprets the data (Kiernan, 1999). Traditional qualitative research, therefore, tends to reproduce substantial power differentials between the powerful researcher and the less powerful researched, even when it claims to value participants' experiences.

Kiernan traces the challenge to a 'new paradigm' of research emerging from sociology in the early 1970s, which argued that research should be a 'co-operative experiential inquiry,' with research 'subjects' becoming 'co-researchers' (Kiernan, 1999). This shift foregrounds an important question: who should lead and direct research involving people with learning disabilities? The answer is not merely methodological but deeply tied to the politics of disability and the role of disability studies. Swain, Hayman and Gillman (1998) argue that research is never neutral; it is inherently political and can exploit vulnerable groups, reinforcing their marginalisation. Colin Barnes (1996) goes further, suggesting that researchers must take a stand; either they are on the side of disabled people, or they risk contributing to oppression.

Qualitative research offers a distinctive way to access the voices and experiences of groups who may otherwise be overlooked or dismissed in traditional academic spaces. Booth (1996) terms this the ‘excluded voice thesis.’ However, listening alone is not enough. Some researchers continue to retain control over design, analysis, and dissemination even in ostensibly inclusive projects. Self-advocates such as Simone Aspis have called for far greater involvement of disabled people in research into their lives, as reflected in her article, "Researching our own history: who is in charge?" (Aspis, 2000) and in subsequent public interventions, such as her contribution to a DADA event at The Lowry in 2020. This could take the form of participatory research, as suggested by Cocks and Cockram (1995) and Chappell (2000), or move further toward fully emancipatory research controlled by disabled people, as advocated by Zarb (1992).

Jan Walmsley (2004) groups participatory and emancipatory research under the broader term ‘inclusive research,’ while Kiernan notes that the differences between these approaches are often ones of degree rather than kind. For Kiernan, participatory research can be understood as a step toward fully emancipatory research, even though it has clear limits. One of the core challenges is that when researchers only partially ‘give voice,’ there is a risk of leaving people feeling ‘partly included’ (Townson et al., 2004), a state that can feel akin to partial rejection. There are, nonetheless, powerful examples of individuals with learning difficulties leading research, moving from being participants to acting as research leaders, Simone Aspis being one such example. Yet for people with profound disabilities or autism, full control over research is not always practical or possible; intellectual and communication challenges can make sustained, formal research involvement difficult. In this project, creative and participatory methods were used to negotiate these tensions. By foregrounding diverse ways of knowing, expressing, and engaging, the methodology aimed to challenge normative academic hierarchies and affirm lived experience as a legitimate form of knowledge. At the same time, it recognised that power imbalances could not be entirely eliminated and that ongoing critical reflection and practical strategies were required to mitigate their effects.

4.5 Pragmatics of the Research Process

Working participatorily at Mind the Gap was energising and, at times, profoundly uncomfortable. It meant trying to do what Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) describe as “sequential reflection and action, carried out with and by local people rather than on them”, while also acknowledging that the formal power to design, frame and write up the research still sat largely with me as the university-based researcher (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995). Inclusive research

with people with learning disabilities brings these tensions into sharp focus. As Nind and Vinha note, there is no single way to ‘do research inclusively’ (Nind and Vinha, 2014); instead, researchers constantly negotiate how far and in what ways people can and want to be involved, and what counts as meaningful participation in context. This section traces how those negotiations played out pragmatically in this project.

Power imbalances were not an abstract concern; they surfaced in very ordinary moments. In one co-analysis workshop at Mind the Gap, for example, I invited a group of more experienced artists to work with me on anonymised interview transcripts. The session produced rich, critical commentary and unexpected lines of questioning that I would not have generated on my own. However, when I tried to repeat the exercise with a different group, including artists with less reading confidence, the same format quickly became overwhelming. Several participants disengaged, and others echoed whatever the most confident person in the room said. What had looked like a successful participatory method in the first group exposed, in the second, how easily ‘involvement’ can slide into tokenism when tasks do not match people’s preferred ways of communicating (Nind and Vinha, 2014). In response, I redesigned later sessions around shorter extracts, audio playback and more embodied discussion tasks. I also accepted that ‘co-analysis’ would not be evenly distributed across all participants, and that being involved in the research had to look different for different people.

Ethical considerations were similarly lived rather than purely procedural. Informed consent, for instance, could not be treated as a single signed form; it had to be revisited repeatedly as projects, company structures and people’s own circumstances shifted (Kay, 2020; Mockler, 2014). In one rehearsal-room workshop, it became clear that a Learning Disabled Artist was nodding along to the standard consent script without fully grasping what participation involved, largely following their support worker’s cues. In that moment, I stopped the group process, moved to a quieter space, used visual prompts, and invited them to decide again. This example echoes what Lynda Kay describes as the need to ‘pivot the seesaw ' between ethical protection and participatory opportunity when working with people categorised as vulnerable (Kay, 2020).

The practical structure of the project was designed to support, but not fully resolve, these tensions. At Mind the Gap, I collaborated with staff to co-create simple roles and expectations documents for each activity strand, agreeing on responsibilities, decision-making processes for the research, and procedures if participants changed their minds about taking part. These

agreements were discussed in sessions rather than simply filed away, and they were adapted in response to participants' questions. Information sheets and workshop plans were created in Easy Read and visual formats wherever possible, and I informally tested explanations with artists before wider implementation. This process was time-consuming, but it aligned with the inclusive research literature's emphasis on planning, responsiveness, and negotiated practice as essential quality criteria rather than optional extras.

Building trust required a different kind of time. Much of the most important work happened in the margins of rehearsals, in café queues, during minibus rides to gigs - what Geertz (1998) calls 'deep hanging out'. These informal conversations helped me understand how artists were weighing up the risks and benefits of participating: worries that criticism of an organisation might jeopardise future work, anxiety about whether discussing benefits and employment on tape might somehow reach the Department for Work and Pensions, uncertainty about who exactly would hear or read what they said. In response, I stated and restated that participation (or non-participation) would not affect people's standing at Mind the Gap, nor their eligibility for benefits such as PIP or DLA, and I encouraged artists to choose pseudonyms and to decide what level of identification they were comfortable with. This echoes Mockler's (2014) argument that in practitioner and practice-based research, 'everyday ethics' - the ongoing, situational negotiation of trust and confidentiality is as significant as formal ethics approvals.

Participatory work with Learning Disabled Artists also depended on capacity-building. Over the course of the project, I ran workshops on disability history, activism and identity politics, not as neutral information sessions but as spaces where artists could connect their own experiences to broader movements and concepts. Some artists later drew directly on these workshops when framing their own work; others resisted the language of politics altogether, preferring to talk about friendship, fun or professionalism. Both responses were important data. As Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) observe, participatory research is as much about 'personal, professional and political challenges' as it is about generating information, and those challenges do not unfold neatly. In my case, they included recognising when an apparently 'empowering' activity was being experienced as boring, repetitive or irrelevant, and being prepared to change course.

Finally, collaboration here did not mean that every decision was collective or that consensus was always possible. There were moments when artists wanted faster change than the company could realistically deliver, or when staff responsibilities to funders and safeguarding protocols

limited how far workshop content could be pushed. At these points, my role involved making those constraints visible, documenting disagreement, and finding ways to incorporate divergent perspectives into the analysis rather than smoothing them out. Reason and Bradbury's (2008) framing of participatory inquiry as a 'style' or 'orientation' rather than a fixed method was helpful in thinking through this: it allowed me to treat the push-and-pull between ethics, methodology and institutional reality as central to the research story, not as a failure to live up to an ideal (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). In that sense, the 'pragmatics' of this project are not simply a list of techniques; they are the record of how a particular group of people, Learning Disabled Artists, support staff, and one embedded researcher, worked together under specific conditions to make participation possible, and sometimes to acknowledge where it could not be.

4.6 Deep Hanging Out

Prior to adopting *Deep Hanging Out* as a methodological frame, it was important to establish a shared understanding with the Artists and staff at Mind the Gap about my presence in the space. While the term itself was not always used explicitly, the ethical principles underpinning it were communicated and negotiated over time through ongoing conversations, repeated presence, and transparent explanation of my role. I introduced myself as both a researcher and, increasingly, as an associate artist, making clear that I was not present as a detached observer but as someone learning through sustained participation. In this sense, the research was shaped by relational ethics rather than a one-off transactional model of consent, with participants' understanding of my role developing over time rather than being secured at the outset (Geertz, 1998; Cahill, 2015).

This process aligns with approaches to process consent, which treat consent as provisional, responsive, and open to renegotiation throughout the research encounter, rather than as a single fixed event (Child Ethics, 2022). It also reflects a broader commitment to relational accountability, in which the legitimacy of the research depends not only on what is collected but on how trust, reciprocity, and mutual recognition are maintained within the research relationship (McDonald, 2022). For the Artists, my presence was understood less through a methodological label than through practical and interpersonal signs: I was someone who consistently showed up, took part where appropriate, listened carefully, and remained open about why I was there and how the research might circulate beyond the room.

Importantly, this meant that understanding was not assumed but actively co-produced. As the relationships deepened, participants were able to question, refine, or reinterpret my role, and these conversations became part of the ethical fabric of the project. *Deep Hanging Out* therefore operated not simply as immersion, but as an accountable mode of knowledgeproduction in which consent, access, and interpretation remained open to negotiation (Geertz, 1998; Cahill, 2015). In the context of learning disabled people's research, this is especially significant because it resists extractive forms of fieldwork and instead foregrounds ongoing explanation, accessibility, and the right to know, and influence, why the researcher is there (McDonald, 2022).

An example of a method that allowed a more natural development of knowledge-production was Deep Hanging Out (Geertz, 1998). Deep Hanging Out is an anthropological research method of immersing oneself in a cultural, group or social experience on an informal level. As Geertz puts it, it is a mode of 'localised, long-term, close-in, vernacular field research' that depends on 'show[ing] up and hang[ing] out' as an actively involved participant rather than a detached observer, making the ethics and politics of that sustained co-presence central to the knowledge it produces. Within this thesis some of the most poignant insights came from this anthropological research due to its participatory practice of spending extended periods of time within a group. Within this research I spent twelve months in Mind the Gap using the deep hanging out methods – this meant driving to Bradford twice a week to spend from 10am to 3pm with students and artists from Mind the Gap. A typical day consisted of the following:

> 9:30am – Arrive at Mind the Gap. Wait outside the building, with students and artists, until the staff let us all in for the day. A chance to catch up on what we did the night before, did we catch that episode of Coronation Street? Once in, put bags away in locker room and make a brew in the communal kitchen. Quickly learn who has tea and who has coffee, how strong do they like? And do they take sugar? Then sit in All Space (a big, open shared space in the building) chatting with students and artists about their week until staff come and call us into our studio spaces.
>
> 10am – Go into a workshop session with either artists or students. Take part in the workshop, enjoying warmups, ice breakers and improvisational games. Learn about what the curriculum is, hear from students and artists about what they are currently working on.
>
> 11:30am – Breaktime in All Space. Make second brew of the day and enjoy a snack break. Compare snacks, talk about what films people have been to see and how rubbish

they were, what everyone is up to at the weekend, and what the weather looks like it is doing. On reflection, I find these breaks are rarely 'just' breaks: even in the film and weather chat I am registering people's energy and processing what has just happened, and themes from these conversations sometimes reappear in the next phase of the workshop or nudge the plan in a slightly different direction.

11:45am – Another workshop session (sometimes I would rotate: first session with artists, second session with academy students, third session with one day students). Throw my entire body and soul into the space. Move with other bodies and souls in the space. Share in moments of elation. Share in moments of difficulty.

1pm – Lunchtime in All Space with students, artists and a handful of Mind the Gap staff. A calm time to eat lunch, allowing for deeper conversations to occur. Where did we grow up? Who did we grow up with? What do we want to do? Why are we at Mind the Gap? Find out all the details of romantic relationships happening within Mind the Gap.

2pm – Final workshop of the day. Making, creating, playing, with all artists. Working collaboratively within the space. Getting to know each other, how we work, how we communicate.

3pm – End of Day at Mind the Gap. A nice time to sit with those waiting for buses, taxis, or pick-ups. A time to reflect on the day, what might come tomorrow and the day after that, and the day after that…

Over the course of the first year of research I had been deep hanging out at Mind the Gap for 78 days. Sometimes these days were filled with light-hearted conversations about food, theatre, and life. Other times, current affairs would accelerate conversations, and a 1-2-1 chat about the state of Personal Independence Payment (PIP) would quickly turn into a table surrounded by twenty-plus students and artists chipping in their experience of the system. This method allowed us to start to embody and illuminate the phenomenology of lived experiences, to explore the role theatre might play in enabling people to live out their identities in the world (both as artists and individuals), as well as gaining equity of opportunities within the arts sector.

Another important outcome of deep hanging out was the trust gained among participants and the relationships built over the first year. People recognised who I was when I entered the building, knew why I was there, and were more than willing to come and engage in conversation – I became part of the furniture at Mind the Gap, and talking to me became part

of the daily routine for Mind the Gap artists and students. Tim Ingold, British anthropologist, discusses how researchers function most effectively when they work and study with people:

> Immersed with them in an environment of joint activity, they wanted to see things (or hear them, or touch them) in the ways their teachers and companions do. […] anthropology, therefore, does more than furnish us with knowledge about the world […]. It rather educates our perception of the world and opens our eyes and minds to other possibilities of being. The questions we address are philosophical ones; of what it meant to be a human being […] and the balance of freedom or constraint in people's relations with others […], of the connections between language and thought, between words and things […].
>
> (Ingold, 2007: 82-83)

One of the challenges of deep hanging out is the difficulty of evidencing 'data' that emerged. As participants' discussions developed into autobiographical accounts, it became increasingly complex to ensure each participant was represented in their individual voice, whilst also teasing out commonalities amongst everyone – sketching an intersubjective perception of cultural value. These autobiographical accounts became the key to layering my understanding, helping me move from the 'everyday' textural knowledge of people I encountered while embedded in a space dedicated to learning Disability Arts to a more abstract, explicitly articulated insight into learning Disability Arts itself. I didn't want to record and describe these deep hanging out moments as I wanted to ensure I had a relaxed environment for relationship building, and some sessions could run for a couple of hours depending on activity within Mind the Gap. Instead, I tried to accompany any deep hanging out sessions with creative practice – this allowed participants to write or draw whilst we were talking, giving me visual cues to refer to. I also made notes myself throughout the process – this allowed me to track the frequency or importance of certain words or phrases.

This way of working could allow participants to transition from being research participants to being participatory dialogue; however, I believe there was still a power relationship in the deep hanging out. In this case, the Learning Disabled Artists enabled a process of dialectical enquiry- a dialogical exchange where differing perspectives were explored collaboratively to uncover deeper truths and challenge assumptions. Rooted in the philosophical traditions of Plato and Hegel, and further developed in critical pedagogy by Paulo Freire (1970), dialectical enquiry refers to the co-construction of knowledge through reflective, reciprocal dialogue.

Through conversations about their professional backgrounds, interests, artistic habits, and lived experiences of training and employment in the arts, we engaged in a mutual learning process. One of the primary risks was the potential for loss of objectivity. Prolonged immersion and close interpersonal bonds with participants could have led to an over-identification with their perspectives, making it difficult to maintain a critical distance. This could have resulted in 'going native', where the anthropologist adopts the worldview of the studied group to such an extent that their analysis becomes biased or lacks analytical rigour. Furthermore, informal and fluid engagement may have blurred the boundaries between the roles of observer and participant, raising ethical concerns around consent, confidentiality, and the potential for exploitation of personal relationships for academic purposes.

Balancing the immersive nature of deep hanging out with the need for analytical distance was challenging but not impossible. Other researchers using this method, such as Frederic Monneyron (2024) and Gillian Tett (2021), have previously attempted this through reflexivity - critically examining their positionality, biases, and the influence of their presence on the community they study. Reflexive practices, such as maintaining field notes and engaging in discussions with peers, can help researchers retain a distanced perspective while still participating meaningfully in the community's life. However, achieving this balance requires a heightened awareness of power dynamics, as the researcher often holds a privileged position in terms of access to resources or academic authority. The ability to 'hang out' while maintaining analytical detachment includes navigating these complex relational and methodological terrains without compromising either empathy or critical insight.

When conducting research with individuals with learning disabilities, this immersive approach fostered trust, built authentic relationships, and allowed for nuanced understanding. However, it also raised significant concerns about the potential loss of objectivity, as discussed above, a challenge that is particularly pronounced when working with vulnerable populations. One major issue was the risk of over-identification with participants. I occasionally became so emotionally invested in particular relationships that it was difficult to critically analyse certain behaviours or systems, and I sometimes hesitated to probe participants' vulnerabilities, thereby risking a skew toward more positive or palatable findings. While I do not go into specifics here for ethical reasons, I became particularly invested in one artist whose ongoing medical and mental health issues and lack of family support tested my ability to maintain critical distance, such as I hesitated to probe distressing material or critically document exclusionary practices, which meant that certain kinds of organisational tension, ambivalence, and conflict

are less visible in my data than they were in the field. This links with how power dynamics also play a critical role in shaping the researcher-participant relationship and the resulting data.

My position of authority had the potential to lead to an advocacy bias, what Emery et al. (2016) term ‘scholar-advocacy bias’, where findings could emphasise participants' strengths and achievements while neglecting systemic barriers or challenges. Emery defines this as the intentional or unintentional use of research language, methods, and expert status to legitimise advocacy claims, at the cost of misrepresenting findings. Similarly, the concept of ‘researcher allegiance’ (Munder et al., 2013) highlights how researchers sympathetic to a particular position may, consciously or not, produce results that favour that position. In my case, this bias, while well-intentioned, put me at risk of oversimplifying participants' narratives and undermining the nuanced understanding that the methodology seeks to achieve. Additionally, as Gurr et al. (2024) argue, a researcher's own assumptions, including assumptions about disability, may inadvertently shape interactions or interpretations, particularly in cases where non-verbal communication dominates. To counteract these risks, ongoing critical reflexivity about my own positionality (Hammersley & Gomm, 1997) was essential throughout the research process. To mitigate these challenges, I adopted strategies that balanced empathy and analytical rigour. Reflexivity was a critical tool, enabling me to consistently examine my biases, positionality, and the impact of my engagement on the research process. Maintaining detailed field notes and seeking input from peers, Mind the Gap colleagues or supervisors helped identify areas where objectivity might be compromised.

Collaborative analysis was built into the project in two main ways. Once a year, towards the end of each research cycle, I invited all of the Learning Disabled Artists who had taken part in the study that year to a dedicated feedback session at Mind the Gap. In these sessions, we met in the theatre space, and I presented a series of short, accessible statements summarising my emerging themes (for example, ‘Leadership feels shared in rehearsals but not in funding decisions’). Artists positioned themselves along an agree–disagree spectrum in the room, and we then used that physical map as the starting point for group discussion. Staff members took brief notes during these sessions, and I followed up on key points in subsequent one-to-one interviews. We also worked with large sheets of paper, drawing, annotating and re-wording statements together. Although these activities were not recorded as formally as the original artist interviews, they functioned as a kind of participatory member checking: a structured opportunity for artists to confirm, challenge, or complicate my readings of the data, in line with what Kullman and Chudyk (2025) describe as collaborative approaches to member

checking. Alongside this, I held end-of-year meetings with Mind the Gap staff (three across the project, usually in July before the summer break), in which I shared the current state of the analysis and invited critical response. Staff offered contextual information, questioned my interpretations, and occasionally pointed to organisational or sector dynamics I had underplayed. These conversations did not eliminate my influence as the primary analyst, but they provided both artists and staff with structured, recurring opportunities to shape how the findings were framed and understood.

Figure 3: A Conversation between Anna Gray (MTG Artist) and Lauren Hall (PhD Researcher)

Whilst methodologies like deep hanging out provided unparalleled opportunities for understanding the lives of artists with learning disabilities, they required a careful balance between immersion and critical distance. By employing reflexivity, collaboration, and transparency, I navigated the ethical and methodological complexities of this work, ensuring that my findings are both empathetic and as analytically robust as possible. The challenge lies in maintaining this equilibrium, where advocacy and objectivity coexist to produce meaningful and authentic insights.

During deep hanging out, the discussions between me and all research participants developed into autobiographical accounts, which often led to reflections from artists and students that they had never confronted before; some of the key findings emerged organically from these conversations. These discussions then developed into intimate life-narrative interviews. Although these interviews were always part of my original research design, in practice they grew directly out of the ongoing deep hanging out with artists whose biographies are outlined

above: I conducted life-narrative interviews with all MTG artists, meeting each of them approximately every six months over three years (often online during the Covid-19 pandemic), and did not extend this interview series to other participants because I could not be sure of the same sustained access over time.

4.7 Life Narrative Interviews

Life narrative interviews are a powerful qualitative research method that allow researchers to delve into individuals' lived experiences, often revealing rich, context-specific insights that might be missed by more structured methods. Researchers across disciplines, including the arts and disability studies, have used life narrative interviews to explore identity, creativity, and the intersection of professional and personal lives. A study by Maddie Zdeblick (Zdeblick, 2024) explored the professional lives of learning disabled performers in a community theatre setting. By employing life narrative interviews, she captured the performers' personal and professional trajectories, highlighting the unique challenges they faced, such as societal stigma and accessibility barriers. The narratives illuminated how their creative work served not only as a platform for artistic expression but also as a means of advocacy for disability rights. This study emphasised the importance of inclusive practices in the arts and underscored the role of storytelling in fostering societal change.

Life narrative interviews were one of the most predominant methods within this research. The narrative interviews were characterised as unstructured, in-depth tools with specific features that emerge from the life stories of the respondents and are explored in situational context. I chose this type of interview to encourage the interviewee to share an important event in their life and its social context. Based on the idea of reconstructing social events from the point of view of informants, the influence of the interviewer in the narrative should be minimal. In this case, 'we use the everyday communication of telling and listening to stories' (Jovchelovich & Bauer, 2002: 90). It was therefore important to ensure I was using language that did not impose on the research participant, or influence answers, since the method assumes that the perspective of the informant is best revealed when using their spontaneous language. This meant constantly adjusting and adapting to different ways of processing information, not in order to arrive at a single, objective truth but to explore participants' perceptions, emotions, and feelings. For some participants, this meant using verbal communication, mirroring the language of the research participant; for others, non-verbal communication was more successful, including using drawing and creative writing, which had the ability to overcome some of the cognitive and linguistic hurdles academia inherently holds. One of these tasks

included creating a timeline of professional work and training artists had received over their professional lives. To do this, artists had different coloured sticky notes representing training, touring, independent work, and external company work which they could then write (or have annotated) detailed information about those opportunities and who was involved - this was then put in chronological order using an entire room to show the journey of their professional lifetime.

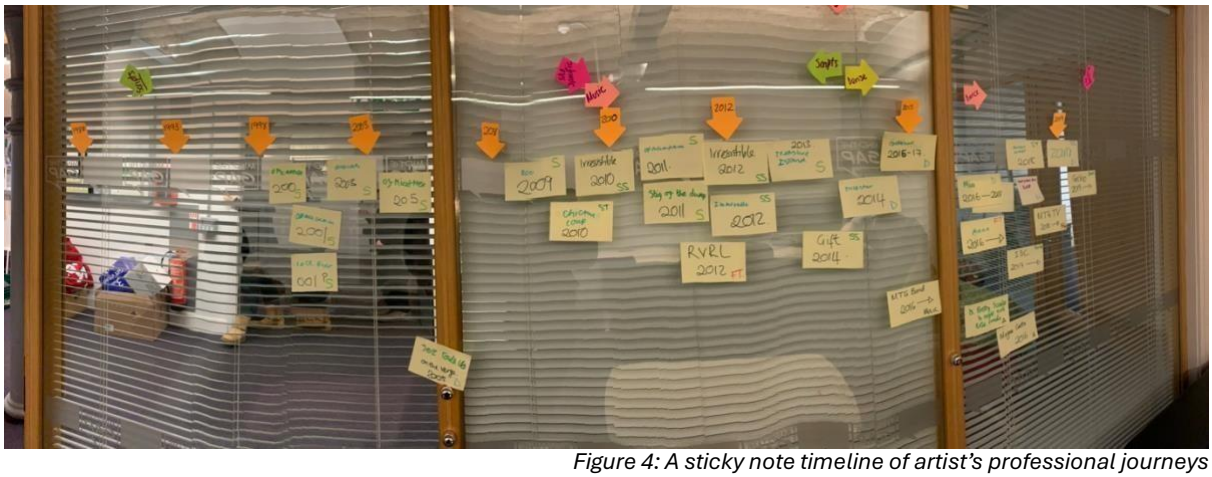

Figure 4: A sticky note timeline of artist's professional journeys

I turned this into an Excel spreadsheet with all the data from all research participants separated into what they had been involved with and what skills they felt they had gained throughout their careers. Each skill category was colour-coded across the sheet so that patterns became visible at a glance, for example, facilitation and workshop-leading skills were shaded blue, performance and devising skills were shaded purple, and leadership/decision-making experiences were shaded yellow. In group discussions, I invited artists to notice which colours appeared most frequently in the row with their name and to use this as a prompt to talk about where they currently felt most confident, and where they might want further opportunities. So, an artist whose row was dominated by purple might say, 'I can really see myself as a performer,' while someone with a lot of yellow cells could begin to identify and name their leadership experience.

This then led on to research participants creating pie charts that broke down the components of their identities, the insights from which are discussed in Chapter 5: Identity. Once again, these conversations were led by research participants through queries around who they were and what their identifying labels were, especially as they were artists at a company specifically for people with learning disabilities. Did this mean they were forced to identify with their learning disability? Using diverse methods to capture data, such as the sticky note timeline

and pie chart creation, allowed for dialogue to flow, with activities being disruptive, creative, intuitive, and reliable.

	Alan Clay	Alison Colborne	Anna Gray	Charlotte Jones	Euan Evans Thirlwell	Howard Davies	Jack Riley	Jez Colborne	JoAnne Haines	Laura Reed	Liam Bairstow	Lorraine Brown	Paul Bates	Zara Mallinson
Upcoming MTG Projects														
Leave the Light on for Me														
ALS Film														
The Little Prince														
Meal One														
Anna Film	FT	FT												FT
MTG Projects														
A Little Space														
Mirror Mirror				O	O	O	O			O				O
ZARA	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O / Aerial	O	O	O	O	O
Mia												understudy	understudy	understudy
Anna	FT	FT	understudy	understudy					FT				FT	FT
Med student roleplay														
NHS Forum piece	FT												FT	FT
Inspirational workshops											F		F	
Supported Work Placement								F	F				F	F
Inclusive Dance Company														
MTG Band														
CONTAINED														
Irresistible								LA						
Chicken Coup	O	O							O		O			O
Real Voices Real Lives	FT	FT / F						FT	FT / F					FT
Trickster														
Gift	O						O	LA	O		O	O	O	O
Immovable	O	O	O		O	O	O	O	O	O	O	O		O
Treasure Island														
Stig of the Dump														
Of Mice and Men														
Other Projects														
Skip Rap	LA													
Colour Full									LA / F					

Figure 5: Excel Spreadsheet of Artist Journey

Reliability was a key focus during interviews, not in the sense of testing whether participants were telling the truth, but in attending to how accounts were shaped by time, place, and organisational context. Within a phenomenological framework, reliability is less about correspondence to an objective past and more about the plausibility and authenticity of participants' meaning-making in the present. In the specific context of Mind the Gap, this meant remaining alert to how organisational power structures and discourses (for example, the limited number of paid Artist roles and repeated messaging about who counts as an artist) might be echoed or reproduced in participants' narratives. If a story has been told to someone many times, it can become a repetition of institutional expectations rather than an articulation of their own understanding. Reflexive attention to these dynamics was therefore essential in

order to distinguish between internalised organisational scripts and participants' lived experience, without dismissing the latter as unreliable or untrue.

An important consideration when using life narrative interviews is that memory is not always reliable. As people, we remember what we can, and some events are deliberately or unconsciously forgotten. In some cases, memories are intentionally suppressed to avoid reliving trauma or emotional pain, while others may be forcefully forgotten due to the negative associations and psychological discomfort they carry. Marco Gemignani explains that 'declarative memory refers to facts about or events of a person's life that can be specifically recalled. […] People learn to tell their stories and, with practice, even difficult memories are easier to access, recall and tell. Memory tends to behave more like a muscle than a storage box' (Gemignani, 2014, p. 128). He goes on to suggest that, just as an expert pianist automatically translates a chord into a sequence of movements, the act of retelling a memory can become a familiar pattern of words that is increasingly detached from the experience itself – 'we can create meaningless words' (Gemignani, 2014, p. 128).

Although I was not searching for an objective truth, what mattered was that participants had space to retell their histories and experiences – their truth as they understood it in that moment. Many of the artists had previously taken part in research projects and training, and it occurred to me that, through rehearsing their stories in similar formats, they risked becoming stuck in those well-worn narratives. For this reason, the life narrative interviews combined open conversation with a set of participatory and creative tasks designed to loosen those grooves. For example, rather than starting with 'tell me your story from the beginning,' I invited participants to map important moments in their artistic lives on large sheets of paper, using drawings, symbols, and keywords, and then choose one or two moments to discuss in more depth. In other interviews, we used objects from rehearsal rooms, photos from past productions, or soundtrack playlists as prompts, asking 'what does this make you remember?' or 'where were you in your life when this happened?' At times, I asked artists to tell a familiar story from someone else's perspective, a collaborator, an audience member, a parent, or to imagine what their younger self might say about their current work. These techniques encouraged a more lateral approach, nudging participants away from a single, practised version of their biography and opening up alternative angles, hesitations and contradictions. In this way, the life narrative interviews became not only a means of collecting data but also a space in which individuals could re-author their stories and explore their identities and subjectivities from different perspectives.

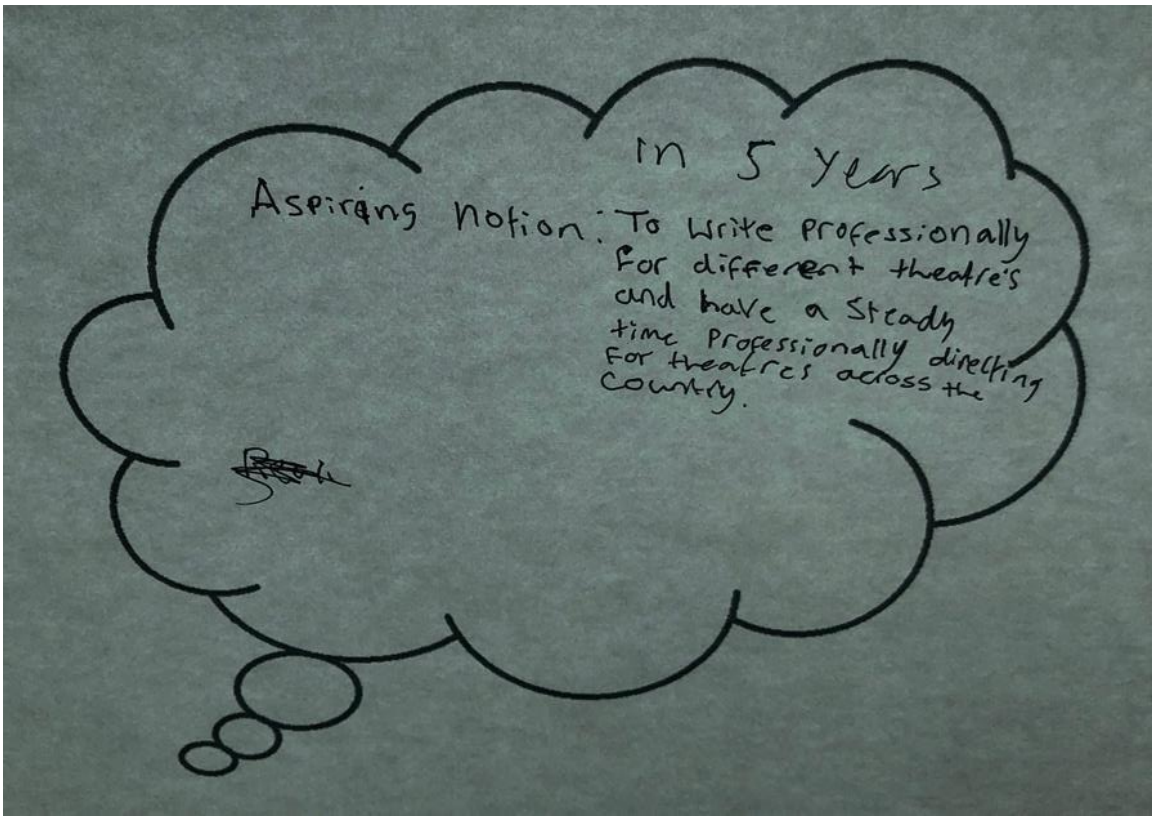

Figure 6: An image of a brainstorming exercise done with a MTG artist about their thoughts, dreams and aspirations.

It reads 'In 5 years, aspiring notion: to write professionally for different theatres and have a steady time professionally directing for theatres across the country.' The narratives were considered representations and interpretations of the world they lived in and therefore should not be judged as true or false; they express the truth of a point of view in a particular time, space, and socio-historic context. We can never access another person's experience directly; we only encounter their representations of it, which we interpret through the particular interactions we have together. What is important is that the present, past and future are articulated so that the person can project experiences and actions for the future, and the past can be reframed to make meaning in the present. The narrative interviews are, therefore, techniques to generate stories and can be analysed in different ways after the capture and transcription of the data. Involved in this process are the verbal and non-verbal elements of language, fundamental to understanding the unspoken, because in the narrative analysis process, I explore not only what is said, but also how it is said. For example, when in a life narrative interview with one participant, it became apparent that their body language had changed, they had closed themselves off, and they became quiet and coy when discussing disability. When asked about whether they were okay, and if they wanted to take a break from

the conversation, they began to talk about the negative connotations learning disability had in all aspects of their life, from family and friends to education and employment. This conversation became pivotal to exploring identity and the closely entwined relationships between personal and professional.

4.8 Photo Elicitation

Photo elicitation was first adopted by photographer and researcher John Collier in 1957 and has become one of the most widely known and frequently used techniques within social science research (Collier, 1957). It is based on the principle of using one or more images in an interview and asking the informant to comment on them (Harper, 2002). Videos, paintings, or any other type of visual representation can also be used (Harper, 2002). The images may be produced by the researcher, or research participants can produce the images and then discuss their meanings and connotations (Bugos et al., 2014; Harper, 2002). A pivotal aspect of this approach is not so much studying the images as analysing how informants respond to them, attributing social and personal meaning and values (Harper, 2002). In photo-elicitation interviewing, the researcher assumes that the images, the meanings we attribute to them, the emotions they arouse in the observer, and the information they elicit, all generate insights that do not necessarily or exclusively correspond to those obtained in verbal inquiry (Harper, 2002). Douglas Harper discusses this in his paper 'Talking about Pictures' (Harper, 2002), explaining how the parts of the brain that process visual information are evolutionarily older than the parts that process verbal information; thus images evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than do words: 'exchanges based on words alone utilize less of the brain's capacity than do exchanges in which the brain is processing images as well as words' (Harper, 2002, p. 13). It is important to stress that images have many potential meanings and interpretations. Each of these different interpretations is like an uncoded messages that needs to be deciphered by each person who has been interviewed. Each use and interpretation describes the specific methods through which we observe and experience the world, mediated by social and cultural institutions (Pink, 2013). It allows us to gain insight into another person's experiences. The activity of observation is inextricably linked to our way of thinking, imagination, memory of past experiences and our ability to combine these elements (Berger, 1972).

Photo-elicitation was used specifically in relation to one project that occurred during the course of this research. This was an Erasmus-funded project titled Ogmius, which was a collaborative

project between Mind the Gap and two other learning disability theatre companies: L'Oiseau Mouche (Roubaix, France) and Moomsteatern (Malmö, Sweden). Photo-elicitation was used to support artists from all three companies to reflect on the residencies they had taken part in, which were hosted in all three countries at each theatre company, to understand what worked well and what each company might be able to learn from through their artists' experiences. Therefore, each artist was given a camera for all residencies. Specifically, the research focused on the Bradford residency. Artists were each given a digital camera and a limit of five photographs they could take with the following prompts:

- Something you experienced that is different to when you are at home.
- A new way of learning something.
- A moment in the workshop that was very difficult.
- A moment in the workshop where you succeeded!
- Someone that you really connected with throughout the week.

Task: Photo Elicitation Task at Mind the Gap, Bradford (2019)

The investigation of these images was then separated into three tasks. Firstly, at the end of the residency all artists had an interview with me to look through their own images and answer:

- What is happening in this picture?
- What do you think that person in the picture was thinking?
- How does this picture make you feel? Why?

Secondly, from these answers, artists worked creatively to edit their images into a comic book style, influenced by Susan Caudle's research with DIY Theatre Company (Caudle, 2017, p. 73). These were then saved and sent back to artists for task three – a group reflective conversation. This conversation happened a couple of weeks after the residency to allow time to process information, thoughts, and feelings and then to discuss questions including:

- Did you recognise that (insert name) was finding this difficult?
- Why do you think they had a good connection? / Why do you think they built such as strong relationship?
- Why is this way of learning different to how we learn?
- Would you continue to try and learn in this way?
- How did it feel when you succeeded at something?
- What is the biggest thing you will take away from the residency in [insert location]?

- What is one thing you would change about the residency in [insert location]?

Photo-elicitation doesn't replace other methods, such as conventional interviews, and can be viewed as an adjunct to such methods, providing additional validity and depth, and offering new viewpoints and opportunities. It is also important to note that this technique does not work for everyone and is not always appropriate due to the time scale of reflection, the preferences of participants and the relationship needed with the researcher. However, through the residencies, we discovered that photo-elicitation not only kept specific memories alive about residencies but also allowed artists with learning disabilities time to process information and revisit moments to reflect later. Secondly, photo-elicitation stimulates artists' abilities to express their practical knowledge through the attribution and association of meanings. In these activities, the artists not only provide information, but they are also asked to describe their perceptions of specific phenomena and the values they attribute to them.

Photo-elicitation can also be a useful technique for breaching the communication impasse between artist and facilitator and/or support if traditional verbal communication is difficult, and to collect information in an alternative way other than just using words. Photo-elicitation can help to promote more relaxed and more aware participation in artist development/performance development, by exploiting the evocative power of images to empower artists to express themselves more freely in producing the snapshots, and secondly, by exploiting the power of images to catalyse informants' exploration and association of meanings and understandings in the discussions about the snapshots. This is what happened at all Ogmius Residencies, when we were able to establish an effective link between the content of the images produced, the artists' understandings, and the topics the project explored, including artists' self-reflection. Since completing the research, photo elicitation has been successfully integrated into Mind the Gap's weekly Artist sessions, where it facilitates deeper discussions surrounding disability and identity. Since the dissemination of this approach through workshops, academic presentations, and published materials, there is evidence of its uptake by other practitioners and organisations, including some of the organisations involved in this research, which I discuss in Chapter 7. Feedback from these engagements indicates that photo elicitation has been adopted or adapted to foster inclusive dialogue and enhance the understanding of participant perspectives.

4.9 Analysis and Interpretation of Data

In this study, the analysis and interpretation of data were guided by thematic analysis, informed by the phenomenological, participatory, and ethnographic approaches outlined earlier. Following Braun and Clarke's understanding of thematic analysis as a flexible method for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across a dataset, I first immersed myself in the material generated through life narrative interviews, creative workshops, and deep hanging out, and then developed an initial set of key categories: identity, interdependence, gatekeepers, training, and professional development of people with learning disabilities. I acknowledge that any act of categorisation carries the risk of oversimplifying or skewing the complexity of participants' lived experiences, particularly when working with diverse and nuanced voices. While such frameworks are analytically useful for organising data, they can also impose predefined structures that filter or constrain interpretive richness. For this reason, the analytic process was explicitly reflexive and iterative: codes and categories were repeatedly revisited, refined, and reworked in dialogue with participants' accounts, so that their perspectives remained central rather than being shaped to fit pre-existing academic or institutional logics. Over time, and through attention to both the frequency and depth with which particular concerns surfaced in interviews and everyday interactions, these broader categories were distilled into three core themes that appeared most important to artists with learning disabilities, myself, and staff within MTG: identity, interdependence, and leadership. From this point, these themes provided the organising structure for constructing a coherent storyline from the data, tracing how artists made sense of their experiences within and against the organisational and cultural contexts that frame their practice.

Storyline is a tool that can be used for theoretical integration, 'a strategy for facilitating integrations, construction, formulation, and presentation of research findings through the production of a coherent grounded theory' (Birks and Mill, 2015: 180). This is the moment in my research when I go back to all participants and feed back my findings to them and explain how I intend to incorporate them into the storyline. Similar to techniques used by Elanor Stannage (2019) whilst working with artists involved in facilitated arts in mental health, I presented themes and any materials to a forum of participants who had been part of those initial action research investigations, who then checked and validated the themes, found new links, and suggested possible relationships between themes. These discussions were then followed by reflections by the participants upon their wider experience of Disability Arts and arts practices in general, and how these related to their experiences during the research study. I then re-examined themes and categories from these discussions, exploring new links and

themes which supported the development of my analysis. This ethical principle of checking back with participants in a process of participant validation was very important to the research. This way, data is not included that the research participants are later uncomfortable with or feel misrepresents them. Stalker (1998) notes that participants with learning disabilities have less power of redress over how their words are used and analysed. This places even greater weight on the 'ethics of representation' (Booth, 1996) in which the researcher needs to be clear whose voice is being communicated in the study.

Another way of gaining multiple perspectives was to employ a steering/advisory group – a group of Mind the Gap artists and students who met quarterly throughout the year to discuss the findings of the research, some of whom hadn't been involved in the data collection process. Of course, a difficulty arises with people with learning disabilities often being required to represent other people with learning disabilities. Therefore, participants had training regarding the roles of advisory groups from Totally Inclusive People and the skills needed, as these are likely to be outside of the experience of many. The benefit to this advisory group was that they fed further ideas into the research which allowed for more focused life narrative interviews.

4.10 Gatekeeping, Access & Consent Processes

Access to independent artists with learning disabilities, independent meaning not working in an ensemble of a company, is extremely difficult; therefore, research participants were easier to access if they were working closely with organisations that work with people with learning disabilities in the arts sector. These companies and organisations could be seen as gatekeepers: 'a person who controls access' (Lewin, 1947): access to organisations to conduct research with staff, students and artists, ensuring gatekeepers understood the research, participants' roles and the potential outcomes of the work, as well as the methodological approaches being used. There was a risk of ethical dilemmas arising when organisations agreed to allow research to take place within their organisation but were coercive in influencing participants' involvement in the research. Similarly, it was important to note that obtaining the gatekeeper's permission did not and should not guarantee cooperation from multiple layers of the organisation and did not overrule individual autonomy to refuse research participation. This meant that it was important for me, as a researcher, to directly ask artists, separately from organisations, if they wanted to participate in the research ensuring they felt comfortable and confident to decline research participation, something that may be more difficult if directly given the opportunity by a staff member.

Another potential threat was the integrity of the research process, as the host organisation may have wished to influence or manipulate the data or request access to raw data. This was a potential risk due to the PhD research being funded by the host organisation: Mind the Gap. To ensure this did not happen, contracts were written at the start of the research project, and boundaries were set, including that no Mind the Gap staff were to choose participants, to witness or support during research interviews/activity, and raw data was not shared with the company. Instead, a yearly meeting was set up with the company's senior leadership team to share findings and the journey of the PhD, like University Annual Reviews. This created distance between the company and the research, limiting the potential for institutional sway. Similarly, to ensure I was not entering the research with a pre-determined hypothesis, I used a methodological approach most closely aligned to a Charmazian conception of grounded theory – having a collective awareness and recognition of the complex, phenomenological and liminal aspects of arts engagement to shape the discussions with artists with learning disabilities. The Charmazian school considers grounded theory as a 'flexible and reflexive process of introspection, intuition and rumination' (Orana, 2002); it reconceptualises ground theory as a 'set of principles and practices, not as prescription' (Charmax, 2006: 9). This approach allowed me to draw reflexively on the literature and acknowledge the inevitability of bringing existing knowledge into empirical research.

4.11 Ethics

Throughout the duration of the project, it was important to be mindful of the various issues that could arise in the context of the research itself. At the start of the research, I attempted to separate learning Disability Arts and learning disability, trying to avoid subjects and conversations from entering the room about personal life and lived experiences that were not within the scope of arts-related. This quickly became an impossible task, as I realised that learning Disability Arts could not exist without wider societal issues creeping into the conversation – art helps to promote social discourse, dialogue and potential social change; art is the mirror society needs to examine itself. As John Berger (1972) argued, 'the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled,' highlighting how art invites us to question accepted ways of seeing the world. Similarly, bell hooks (1995) views art as a site of resistance where marginalised voices can challenge oppressive narratives. In the context of Disability Arts, Petra Kuppers (2003) contends that performance can 'reconfigure the disabled body from an object of pity into a subject of agency and political presence,' offering alternative representations that interrogate social norms. Allowing those conversations to enter the space

meant continuously assessing the needs of the participants: ensuring ongoing consent; handling relationships that develop during the research process; managing unanticipated distressing emotions and unexpected revelations. Ethics were taken into consideration before proceeding with participatory research, including exploring procedural ethics – deeply researching methodologies that might be used, relationships with gatekeepers and possible issues arising.
This research followed Ramcharan and Cutcliffe's (2001) 'ethics in practice' model.

Ethics in practice, as articulated by Ramcharan and Cutcliffe (2001), highlights the need to integrate theoretical ethical principles into the complexities of real-world situations. Their work focuses on how practitioners navigate moral dilemmas and adapt abstract frameworks to fit the nuanced demands of their professional environments. Ethics, they argue, is not a rigid set of rules but a dynamic and context-sensitive process that requires continuous reflection, dialogue, and adaptation. They emphasise that ethical decision-making often involves balancing competing priorities, such as individual autonomy, professional integrity, and the broader societal good.

Collaboration and participatory ethics also feature prominently in their work. Ethical decisionmaking, they argue, is not a solitary process but one that benefits from engaging diverse stakeholders. Involving colleagues and communities in discussions about ethical dilemmas ensures that decisions are informed by multiple perspectives and that they respect the dignity and autonomy of all involved. In research contexts, Ramcharan and Cutcliffe bring particular attention to the importance of reflexivity, encouraging researchers to consistently evaluate the ethical implications of their actions. Issues such as informed consent, participant autonomy, and safeguarding vulnerable populations are central to their approach, with a strong emphasis on transparency and accountability.

Using 'ethics in practice' was particularly suitable for qualitative research where the research design often emerges fully only as the research proceeds, ethics need to be constantly monitored to ensure that the benefit to risk ratio remains on the side of benefit. This meant that every time an ethically important moment arose, the research process must be re-established. More notably, this included:

1. Assuring the ongoing assent or consent status of participants
2. Reminding participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any time

3. Making participants aware of their right to check how they are represented in transcripts / field notes

(Cutcliffe and Ramcharan, 2002)

Due to the research occasionally opening difficult conversations and causing participants to potentially re-live / re-tell distressing moments, the well-being of all research participants was at the centre of the process. This included respecting the dignity of those involved in the research - respecting the freedom to choose to participate or not, their privacy and their confidentiality, as well as facilitating alternative forms of communications and being as accessible and inclusive in research methods. This included preparing easy-read formats of documents for participants, conducting interviews in accessible and safe spaces, taking part in disability awareness training as a researcher, and considering a methodology that would allow participants to respond in alternative ways (including non-verbal responses). Within the National Disability Report (2009), they provide six key principles for good practice in research with people with disabilities:

- Promoting the inclusion and participation of people with disabilities in research and research dissemination
- Ensuring that research is accessible to people with disabilities
- Avoiding harm to research participants
- Ensuring voluntary and informed consent before participation in research
- Understanding and fulfilling relevant legal responsibilities
- Maintaining the highest professional research standards and competencies

(National Disability, 2009: 25)

As discussed above, to ensure good practice in conducting research with people with learning disabilities, I embedded myself with Mind the Gap. This gave me the opportunity to observe practices used within the company, to build relationships with all students, staff, and artists within the company, and to scope out potential research participants. It also allowed me to work with people working within the field of Disability Arts, who also had well-established relationships with students within the company, facilitating introductions and breaking down barriers to communication, as mentioned above regarding deep hanging out.

Active involvement with Mind the Gap, including their collaborative approach to the research and consultation within the research process, helped create a high standard of ethical research.

The knowledge the staff shared was relevant to the research participants and beneficial in ensuring the delivery of meaningful outcomes for the participants, as well as ensuring all research is conducted in a way that is sensitive to the needs of the research participants. It also meant that before research had officially started, all participants were aware of who I was, why I was in the building and were informed of the research. Establishing such a close relationship with Mind the Gap improved the quality of research and aided the recruitment of participants, including opening the other learning disabled companies across the UK.

The life narrative interviews combined life stories and the socio-historical contexts. By this I mean that while the narrative revealed individual experiences and shed light on the identities of individuals (and their own sense of self) they were also constitutive of shared sociohistorical phenomena in which biographies were rooted. The objective of the life narrative interviews was not only to reconstruct the life history of the research participant but to understand the contexts in which those biographies were constructed and the factors that produce change and motivate the actions of those individuals. These interviews, which extended across the lifetime of the research, occasionally brought up sensitive topics and/or traumatic memories. A large percentage of research participants had also experienced mental health difficulties, which carried the risk of harm. Therefore, protocols were put in place as part of the research design to identify signs of stress and to ensure there were Mind the Gap staff available to give appropriate support should the need arise. The content of these interviews also required me to appreciate the social, cultural, and historical experiences of people with learning disabilities, including experiences of exclusion and stigma. Within these interviews, participants shared personal stories which were to be used as evidence within the research. People with learning disabilities are routinely positioned as vulnerable adults within UK policy and safeguarding frameworks (Care Act 2014, s.42), yet as Wiseman and Watson (2022) argue, this vulnerability is not inherent but is produced through oppressive social systems and processes that devalue and marginalise disabled people. However, confidentiality is recommended to protect the person from harm – so what happens when participants want to own and publicise their story?

The tension between institutional ethics protocols and the lived reality of arts-based research is perhaps most sharply felt in the question of naming. Conventional research practice defaults to anonymisation, rooted in well-intentioned principles of protection, yet, as Zong (2025) notes, this same erasure of identity can constitute a form of epistemic injustice, systematically rendering invisible the intellectual and creative contributions of disabled people whose expertise drives the very research being produced. The decision to name the MTG Artists

within this thesis is therefore not a breach of ethical care but a reconception of it. Although under standard ethics frameworks these individuals would most likely be anonymised as vulnerable young people participating in research about their disability, the framing here is categorically different: I am not researching *disability* but *artistry*. The phrase 'Learning Disabled Artist' functions in the same register as 'dance artist,' 'movement artist,' or 'visual artist' - it describes the conditions and context of a practice, not a deficit to be studied. The work these artists make is intrinsically shaped by their learning disabilities, but it belongs to them as artists, and to strip away their names is to strip away their authorship. As Anna Gray put it: 'If you take my name away from what I say you are taking away my words, it could be anyone's words.′ (Anna Gray, Artist Interviews, 2019). This position is supported by emerging scholarship on 'citational justice,' which argues that named attribution, given with informed consent, honours participants' expertise rather than diminishing their protection, and that blanket anonymisation policies can inadvertently perpetuate the very marginalisation they seek to prevent (Zong, 2025). Godfrey-Faussett identifies a parallel tension in participatory research, arguing that when anonymisation decisions are made prior to and on behalf of participants, they become 'a paternalistic act that restricts participants' ownership of their own contributions', reducing co-researchers to mere 'sources of data' (Godfrey-Faussett, 2022, p. 4). Research examining the *I'm Me* project, a creative collaboration exploring learning disabled and autistic artists' understandings of identity, representation and voice, identifies this same tension: that decisions about anonymity and recognition require careful, accessible dialogue with artists themselves, treating choice as an act of agency rather than vulnerability (Reason, Acton and Foulds, 2025). To anonymise an artist's words is not neutrality; it is a curatorial act, and one that historically has been made *for* disabled people rather than *with* them.

4.12 Researcher Identity

As touched upon briefly already in this thesis, it is important to address my own identity as a researcher, especially when researching with people with learning disabilities. Throughout the process of this research, it was made clear from research participants that people with learning disabilities are frequently excluded from active involvement in research, and as a result have questioned research processes and motives. These discussions have influenced how research is undertaken by and with people with learning disabilities, with a call across academia to make learning disability research inclusive. One theoretical framework that informed my approach was the principle of normalisation (Walmsley, 2001), which emphasises the recognition of people with learning disabilities as active contributors to research. This

perspective values their lived experience as a legitimate and essential form of knowledge, positioning them not as subjects to be studied, but as co-creators of insight. The principle of normalisation is instrumental to the provision of human value, which asserts that people with learning disabilities should have a voice in events that affect their lives (Gilbert, 2004). From starting the research, I was determined to not only have the voices of Learning Disabled Artists in the thesis, but to ensure the research was led by the voices of Learning Disabled Artists and their lived experiences, that they 'are active participants, not only as subjects, but also as initiators, doers, writers and disseminators of research' (Walmsley & Johnson, 2003) which embraced the emancipatory and participatory research methods adopted.

It is important to acknowledge that I do not identify as having a learning disability, and therefore, there could be a risk of an imbalance of power. This is where it became important to ensure research gave meaningful involvement to artists with learning disabilities. While participatory research could offer a feasible way for people with learning disabilities to participate, it had the potential to 'uphold the authority of non-disabled research and institutionalise the relative power positions of researchers and the people they study' (Chappell, 1999). Therefore, to make the research truly emancipatory, anthropological processes were used, and access was considered at every moment - including support available, alternative formats and making clear how research will be done, who wants it done and how it will be used. I hope to have broken the pattern of researchers being '…camouflaged by a rhetoric of participation' (Walmsley, 2004) and instead been self-aware of how my presence as researcher can impact the research outcomes – and ensure that whilst my role in an important one that it is vital that people with learning disabilities have a say in the production of knowledge: 'this leads to better research, better data and the chance of real change' (Learning Difficulties Research Team, 2006).

4.13 Conclusion

An approach combining ethnographic and participatory methods has enabled this research to produce rich, nuanced accounts from Learning Disabled Artists about their lived experiences within the arts sector. The ethnographic approach allowed me, as a researcher, to immerse myself in their communities and practices, while the participatory methods ensured that the research process actively included these artists in shaping its direction and outcomes. Their voices guided and enriched the narrative, shaping the interpretation of findings and the structure of this thesis. This collaborative engagement has offered a dialogical and evolving

exploration of the research questions through shared reflection, debate, and creative practices. This chapter has provided a reflective account of my methodological choices, detailing the challenges and strategies involved in conducting qualitative research with people with learning disabilities. These challenges, such as navigating power dynamics, fostering inclusivity, and maintaining ethical integrity, are deeply contextual, informed by my personal experiences and the unique dynamics of the field. While such research is undoubtedly complex, this project demonstrates that it is both achievable and vital. The synthesis of existing literature and firsthand insights from participants underscores the evolving landscape of disability-inclusive research, highlighting how practical, political, and ethical considerations intersect at every stage of the research process.

In the next few chapters, the voices of the Learning Disabled Artists will serve as the foundation of the thesis, providing evidence for findings and shaping the narrative of each chapter. Their experiences will be foregrounded, not as supplementary data but as central contributions that challenge traditional academic hierarchies. In particular, their reflections will illuminate themes of identity, interdependence, and leadership, offering critical insights into what it means to be a Learning Disabled Artist. These narratives will be presented through diverse forms, including verbatim accounts, creative outputs, and thematic analyses, to honour the richness and complexity of their perspectives.

By incorporating their voices in this way, the thesis seeks to move beyond simply amplifying experiences to positioning Learning Disabled Artists as co-constructors of knowledge. This aligns with the commitment to participatory and emancipatory research principles, acknowledging the value of lived experience in generating insights that are both authentic and transformative. Through this approach, the thesis aims to contribute to a broader understanding of the barriers and opportunities within the arts sector while advocating for systemic change that ensures equitable representation and leadership pathways for Learning Disabled Artists. Ultimately, this chapter sets the stage for an inclusive and reflective examination of the intersections between learning disability and artistic practice.

Chapter 5: Identity

This chapter explores the complex and evolving nature of identity as experienced by Learning Disabled Artists working with Mind the Gap. Rather than treating identity as a fixed or purely theoretical construct, the chapter foregrounds the lived narratives of MTG artists, using their reflections to examine how identity is shaped, negotiated, and sometimes resisted through both social categories and personal experience.

Participants at MTG consistently reflected on what it means to be labelled as a person with a learning disability, and how that label intersects, often uneasily, with their self-concept as artists. For some, like Paul Bates, the diagnosis of autism felt like a barrier: 'It made everyone around me change, but I didn't feel any different.' (Paul Bates, Artist Interview, 2019). For others, like Alison, identity was complicated by social assumptions: 'People presume my traits are just because of my disability… they forget I'm also a musician, a churchgoer, and a human being.' (Alison Colborne, Artist Interview, 2019). These voices highlight identity as both socially ascribed and personally felt, a duality captured by James Fearon (1999), who argues that identity can be understood both as a social category governed by external labels and norms, and as a personal investment in attributes that are socially meaningful. Erik Erikson (1959) similarly defines identity as 'a fundamental organising principle' that evolves over the lifespan, constructed through experience, crisis, and reflection.

This chapter aims to develop a deeper understanding of identity by weaving together psychological and sociological theories with the testimony of MTG artists. In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of work that challenges reductive or pathologising understandings of learning disability, instead presenting a textured, relational, and agentic model of identity. Central to this analysis is the belief that art is not simply a medium for expression, but a critical site where identity is performed, contested, and reimagined. By emphasising an agentic model, the thesis foregrounds Learning Disabled Artists as active decision-makers who use creative practice to negotiate labels, relationships, and expectations, rather than as passive recipients of care or support. This is important both politically and methodologically, because it disrupts dominant narratives of inherent vulnerability and deficit

and recognises how artists mobilise artistic work to claim authority over how disability is seen, felt, and understood in public space.

5.1 Social Identity Theory

When Paul, an artist with Mind the Gap, described being sent to a special school, he recalled a moment of dislocation: 'I didn't feel like I belonged there. The people around me would scratch and bite, and I was scared. But I knew they didn't mean to hurt me. I just wanted to help them.' (Paul Bates, Artist Interviews, 2019). This moment captures the emotional and social complexity of identifying as a learning disabled person. While Paul was externally categorised under this label, he did not identify with it internally - at least not in the way it was socially constructed around him. His story, like those of many other MTG participants, offers a powerful entry point into Social Identity Theory (SIT) and the broader philosophical questions of identity.

Social Identity Theory (SIT), formulated in the 1970s by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, explains how individuals derive part of their self-concept from group memberships. Group identification involves three key processes: social categorisation, social identification, and social comparison. These mechanisms help explain how people understand themselves and others - but also how groups can become rigid, stereotyped, and emotionally charged. For learning disabled individuals, whose group membership is often medically defined and socially stigmatised, these processes can produce tension between assigned identity and felt identity. Paul's discomfort with being placed in a learning disabled setting reflects a broader phenomenon known within SIT as intragroup differentiation: individuals navigating internal hierarchies within a categorised group. In MTG interviews, several artists spoke about perceived differences between diagnostic groups. For example, one participant noted: 'They said I had a gift for music. I didn't feel like some of the others with different disabilities. I thought I had more to offer.' (Jez Colbourne, Artist Interview, 2019). This aligns with SIT's idea that group members seek positive distinctiveness, even within their own category. While this can affirm personal identity, it also reveals how internalised hierarchies can replicate stigma within marginalised communities.

Other MTG Artists expressed identity disidentification, in which their internal self-concept clashed with the external label of 'learning disabled'. One artist said: 'I tick 'prefer not to say' when it asks if I have a disability. I don't want to talk about it. It makes me sad.' (Anna Gray, Artist Interview, 2019). This resistance highlights the emotional cost of being categorised, and

the fluid nature of identity, especially under stigmatising conditions. In this context, Social Identity Theory helps illuminate the strategies individuals use to navigate, reject, or redefine group affiliations. These experiences also echo older philosophical ideas about autonomy and identity, particularly from the 18th-century Enlightenment. Immanuel Kant's 1784 essay An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment? frames maturity as the courage to use one's own understanding without the guidance of others, captured in his famous imperative Sapere aude - 'Dare to know!' For Kant, autonomy is the foundation of personhood, a condition in which individuals are not merely subjected to external authorities but actively participate in shaping the principles that govern their lives. Read alongside the testimonies of Learning Disabled Artists at Mind the Gap, this ideal highlights a crucial tension: while social and institutional systems often position them as dependent or passive, their creative practices demonstrate precisely the kind of self-reflection and authorship that Kant associates with enlightenment. Kant's moral philosophy is grounded in the individual's capacity to act freely and rationally - to refuse the passive acceptance of externally imposed roles or beliefs. For learning disabled individuals, whose identities are often shaped by medical or social authorities, the opportunity to exercise such autonomy becomes crucial. While Kant's framework does not account for disability or social exclusion, it provides a useful contrast: it draws attention to the power of self-definition and the ethical importance of recognising agency where it is often denied.

Mind the Gap, in many ways, becomes a Kantian space of self-authorship. It offers artists the tools to redefine their identities on their own terms. As Alison shared: 'People presume my traits are just because of my disability. But I'm also a singer, a Christian, an actor. I'm not just one thing.' (Alison Colborne, Artist Interview, 2019). This redefinition echoes what Tajfel and Turner (1986) observed in the fluid boundaries of social identity - how people may adopt, contest, or move between group affiliations based on shifting contexts and emotional needs. Hogg et al. (1995) argue that group identity becomes most powerful when it is salient, that is, when it is activated by social circumstances. For MTG artists, this salience often emerges during public performances or social labelling, when they are reminded that their group identity overshadows their personal identity. Yet it is precisely in those moments, through performance and artistic expression, that new, more integrated identities can emerge. Paul's journey with MTG reflects this transformation: 'It helped me realise that I do have something. I am good at acting. I'm not just being pitied anymore.' (Paul Bates, Artist Interview, 2019).

Through Social Identity Theory, we can better understand the structural forces shaping group identity. But through the voices of Learning Disabled Artists, we see the theory come alive: not as a closed system, but as an evolving dialogue between personal experience and social perception. Identity here is not simply inherited; it is contested, reimagined, and most powerfully performed.

5.2 Constructs of Identity

Alison, an artist at Mind the Gap (MTG), voiced a question that goes to the heart of identity theory:

> I've always struggled defining the parts of me that are me, and the parts of me that are there because of my learning disability. What do I do because that's who I am-and what do I do because it's a 'symptom' of autism?
>
> (Alison Colborne, Artist Interview, 2019)

This ambiguity, the difficulty of locating a stable, coherent self when one's identity is shaped by medical language, social labelling, and deeply personal experience, reflects the complexity of identity as both a psychological and sociocultural construct. Scholars across disciplines have developed multiple frameworks for understanding identity. Despite differences in focus, they converge on one point: identity is not static. It is a process, rooted in recognition by oneself and others.

Lev Vygotsky (1978) conceptualised the self as something that emerges through interaction. Identity, in this view, is formed relationally: in conversations, in cultural practices, and in the mediated tools we use to make meaning. This helps explain why so many MTG participants described their sense of self as becoming clearer through artistic collaboration. As Paul put it, ' I didn't really know how to talk about who I was until I had a part to play. Being on stage made me realise I had something real to say' (Paul Bates, Artist Interview, 2019). This insight mirrors Vygotsky's idea that identity is not innate, but socially constructed, enabled and constrained by cultural contexts. The studio, script, or rehearsal becomes the 'mediating tool' through which identity can be explored and reshaped.

Erik Erikson's (1959) psychosocial theory also offers a lens for understanding identity as a lifelong developmental task. He saw identity as a 'fundamental organising principle' shaped by successive challenges across the lifespan. For Erikson, adolescence marks a critical period

of identity formation, but that process continues into adulthood as people integrate past experiences with future aspirations. However, it is important to acknowledge that Erikson's model is built on normative assumptions about development. His stages presuppose a trajectory in which individuals progressively achieve independence, industry, and initiative - milestones typically marked by increased autonomy in adolescence and entry into productive adult roles. As Jordan and Tseris (2018) argue, applications of Erikson's theory have positioned disabled people as experiencing ‘stagnated development’ because they are deemed unable to complete the achievements required for full participation in adulthood. This framing risks casting learning disabled individuals as permanently ‘diminished adults,’ based on narrowly defined notions of what autonomy and competence look like, notions that render invisible the systematic exclusion of disabled people from social and economic opportunities (Jordan & Tseris, 2018). For people with learning disabilities, the normative developmental markers that Erikson's stages assume, such as leaving the family home, entering employment or forming independent relationships, are frequently delayed, or denied altogether, not because of individual deficit but because of institutional and social barriers. Life narratives for people with learning disabilities are often non-normative: the adolescent markers of increased independence that Erikson's model treats as universal are not necessarily experienced in the ways the theory anticipates. This was evident throughout life narrative interviews with MTG artists. Alison's comment about having only one recognised social status: ‘my only status in life is as a learning disabled person’ (Alison Colborne, Artist Interview, 2019), points to what Erikson might describe as a blocked or prematurely foreclosed identity path, but it also reveals something his model alone cannot fully account for: that the foreclosure is not a failure of the individual's development but a product of how institutions and social systems limit the identity options available to learning disabled people. Yet Erikson's model does allow for ongoing reinvention.

Terry Barrett and Susan J. Dowling build on these psychological perspectives by showing how art serves as a site of identity construction. In Barrett’s (2008) exploration of Expressionism, the artist’s emotional experience becomes materialised in the work itself, and re-evaluated by the artist and audience in an ongoing cycle of self-reflection. Dowling (2011) similarly argues that visual metaphors and symbols can communicate parts of identity that are difficult to express in words. As one MTG participant reflected: ‘Sometimes I can’t say how I feel about being disabled. But I can dance it, or show it in a character. That’s how people understand me better.’ (Lorraine Brown, Artist Interview, 2019). This artistic process, of revealing the self, reevaluating it, and projecting it outward, demonstrates the performative nature of identity,

particularly in communities where verbal self-description may be complicated by stigma or diagnostic language.

Philosophical debates around identity also raise critical questions about what makes a person the same over time, despite changes in memory, ability, or role. Fearon (1999) challenges the idea that identity is merely a 'social category', instead arguing that identity also involves a moral and emotional investment in being recognised a certain way. This is especially relevant for Learning Disabled Artists, many of whom wrestled with both assigned and resisted identities. Paul's story again illustrates this complexity. He didn't reject his diagnosis, but he did reject the assumption that it defined the entirety of his being: 'I am not just the "special" kid. I'm a good actor. I've got thoughts and things I want to say. I want to be known for what I can do, not what I can't.' (Paul Bates, Artist Interview, 2019). Fearon's distinction between identity as categorical assignment and as personal meaning becomes particularly useful here.

Finally, identity cannot be divorced from context. As Fearon notes, the meaning of identity emerges from the situational importance of a label - how often it is invoked, how others treat it, and what behaviours are expected. For MTG participants, the studio became a space where the label learning disabled could be displaced or reinterpreted. In the outside world, this label might foreclose opportunity. Inside MTG, it could be the starting point for collaboration, creativity, and agency. In sum, identity for Learning Disabled Artists is not a singular construct. It is an unfolding, multi-layered negotiation between social expectations, internal selfconcepts, and creative agency. Through theoretical lenses such as Vygotsky's social formation of self, Erikson's life-stage development, and Fearon's dual model of category and meaning, we can better appreciate the voices of MTG artists, not just as respondents or subjects, but as cotheorists of identity in their own right.

5.3 Learning Disabled Identity

Anna, one of the artists at Mind the Gap, spoke candidly about the challenge of living with a socially imposed label: 'My learning disability is personal. I don't want to say it a lot… I just don't think anybody needs to know. It's too much for me to talk about. It makes me sad.' (Anna Gray, Artist Interview, 2019). This reluctance to disclose a learning disability was echoed by several participants. For many, the term 'learning disabled' did not simply describe a medical diagnosis; it carried the emotional weight of stigma and misrecognition. These responses

underline a crucial insight: the identity of ‘learning disabled’ is not only given, but it is also lived.

In the UK, people with learning disabilities are often defined diagnostically, based on criteria such as an IQ below 70 and impairments in adaptive functioning across domains like communication, self-care, and social skills. But these clinical definitions rarely align with how people understand their own lives. Gillman (2000) famously asked, ‘Who has the power to name?’ and concluded that disabled identities remain largely shaped by professionals, not by those who live with them. This disconnect was clearly evident during interviews at MTG. While all ten participants were aware that they belonged to a company for Learning Disabled Artists, only half saw the label as relevant or important to how they defined themselves. Most struggled to explain what ‘learning disability’ actually meant, except in terms of how others had treated them. Paul shared his experience of being sent to a ‘special school’: ‘The doctor said I had autism, but I felt no different. When I went to that school and saw people who were different, I was scared. I didn’t belong there.’ (Paul Bates, 2019). His initial reaction was fear, disconnection, and self-distancing, revealing a powerful mechanism of social comparison, in which identity is shaped as much by perceived difference from others as by personal traits. This is what Rapley (2004) describes as the fluid, interactional nature of the ‘learning disabled’ identity, an identity that is not fixed, but constantly negotiated. Importantly, this negotiation can be emotionally charged. The label of learning disability often carries with it a sense of permanent otherness. Harris (1995) describes this as an identity that is ‘hard to leave’, a kind of social shadow that follows individuals throughout their lives. Several participants at MTG expressed distress when asked directly about their diagnosis. One said: ‘I’ll always tick prefer not to say. I don’t want to be boxed in by that. It’s something between me and my parents.’ (Anna Gray, Artist Interview, 2019). This refusal reflects what Davies and Jenkins (1997) describe as the emotional disconnection between understanding a label verbally versus understanding it personally. Their research found that while many learning disabled individuals could define the term abstractly, few related to it emotionally or claimed it as a central part of who they were. That gap, between diagnosis and identity, can create tension. In an interview at MTG, one artist explained:

> I used to help the other kids at school. They were called ‘special’ too, but they would bite me or scream. I didn’t think I was like them. I just knew I had to be strong.
>
> (Paul Bates, Artist Interview, 2019)

This story highlights how favourable self-comparison becomes a way of navigating stigma. But it also points to the ambiguity of social identity: being included in a group that one doesn't feel they belong to can lead to a kind of quiet disidentification. Beach and Metzgar (1997) argue that 'insufficient knowledge' about one's diagnosis may not be a failure of awareness but a protective mechanism. Claiming not to know, or choosing not to say, can be a way to assert agency in a world where other people have long spoken on your behalf. For some participants, it wasn't that they denied their disability; it was that they resisted the idea that it explained everything. Paul Bates, for example, described how the label of 'special' became a catch-all that erased his individuality:

> If I couldn't do something, it was because I was 'special'. If I could do something - even something basic - it was also because I was 'special'. It took over everything about me.
>
> (Paul Bates, Artist, Interview, 2019)

This kind of erasure reflects what Davies and Jenkins call a 'master status' (1997: 95): a dominant identity that overshadows all others. At MTG, several participants described feeling unable to express other important parts of themselves, like being an actor, a sibling, or a church member, because their learning disability became the only identity others recognised. Todd and Shearn (1997) suggest that parents sometimes help maintain a 'protective cocoon' around children with learning disabilities, shielding them from stigma by avoiding direct conversations about diagnosis. While well-intentioned, this can further alienate individuals from their own identity. As Todd (2000) puts it, this strategy often involves parents tour guiding their children through a normative world while concealing the emotional reality of their difference. And yet, the narratives from MTG participants do not suggest passivity or ignorance. Rather, they reveal individuals navigating a complex set of messages: they are categorised medically, pitied socially, and yet often feel no internal correspondence with the label.

Rapley (2004) critiques the assumption that people who don't affirm the 'learning disabled' identity simply don't understand it. Instead, he argues that identity is actively constructed in context and that denying or resisting the label can be a valid form of self-expression. This is exactly what emerged in many of the MTG interviews. Participants weren't confused. They were selective. They knew what the label meant in public and bureaucratic terms, but they also knew when, how, and why to withhold it. The identity of 'learning disabled', then, is not a

neutral classification. It is a socially imposed, emotionally loaded, and politically contested status. For MTG artists, it is something to manage, sometimes to accept, sometimes to challenge, often to work around. Yet what stands out most in their narratives is the desire to be known as more than the diagnosis. As Paul powerfully stated: 'Learning disability doesn't ruin my identity, but it does keep defining me. I want people to see me for the whole person - not just the diagnosed part.' (Paul Wilshaw, Artist Interview, 2020).

5.4 Artistic Identity

At Mind the Gap, artists don't just take part in performances, they co-create them. They write, act, direct, compose, build, and question. Mind the Gap artists may receive holistic support from the company, but this does not equate to being clients or recipients of care; within the rehearsal room and on stage they are treated as cultural producers. And through this creative work, something fundamental happens: they reimagine themselves. Paul described this process in terms of transformation: 'At school and college, no matter how good I was, I knew people weren't looking past my learning disability. They saw me as "special." But here [at MTG], they saw an actor. They saw me' (Paul Bates, Artist Interview, 2020).

For Paul Bates, performing became a way to reassert agency and self-definition. The stage became a space in which identity was not just assigned, but actively claimed. This aligns with Zygmunt Bauman's (2001) observation that in contemporary society, identity is no longer something we 'have', but something we must continuously 'make and remake'. For individuals whose identities have been historically fixed by diagnosis or deficit models, artistic spaces like MTG offer a rare site of fluidity and authorship. Importantly, this identity shift is not just symbolic; it is structural. Mind the Gap's model gives artists full participation in production processes: scriptwriting, movement, direction, music, and technical design. The emphasis on collaboration over containment radically repositions participants as decisionmakers in both their artistic practice and their personal narratives. As Alison reflected: 'I've been able to grow into roles. I'm not only someone with autism. I'm also a person of faith, a musician, someone with ideas.' (Alison Colborne, Artist Interview, 2020). Her words highlight the concept of role identity: the idea that who we are is shaped in part by the roles we inhabit and the responsibilities they entail. In many educational or medical contexts, the 'role' assigned to learning disabled individuals is one of passivity. At MTG, those roles are inverted. Artists take responsibility for artistic decisions, lead projects, and in doing so, experience new forms of social adulthood. Narratives like Alison's and Paul's demonstrate

what Erikson (1968) described as the developmental function of identity: it is both retrospective and futurefacing. Past experiences are integrated into a coherent self-concept, which in turn enables forward movement, ambition, and self-worth. Participation in the arts becomes a turning point, a narrative moment where individuals begin to see their lives differently.

This process is also captured in the work of Terry Barrett (2008), who argued that art, especially when approached through the lenses of expressionism and cognitivism, becomes a powerful site of identity construction. In Barrett's framework, these represent two distinct but complementary ways of understanding what art does. An expressivist lens holds that art externalises the artist's inner emotional and psychological life; that the artwork is not merely an object but a direct manifestation of subjective experience, feeling, and selfhood (Barrett, 2008). To approach art through expressionism is therefore to read it as an act of selfdisclosure: the artist reveals who they are through what they make. A cognitivist lens, by contrast, holds that art is not only emotionally expressive but also a genuine source of knowledge and understanding, that artworks can communicate insights about the world, about human experience, and about the artist's own situation that could not easily be arrived at through other means (Gibson, 2008). Taken together, these two lenses suggest that art-making is simultaneously an act of feeling and an act of knowing: the artist both expresses an inner reality and, in the process, comes to understand it differently. As one MTG Artist explained: ‘Sometimes, I can’t say how I feel. But I can show it in a character. I can perform it. That’s when people understand me better.’ (Lorraine Brown, Artist Interview, 2019). Susan J. Dowling (2011) adds that metaphor and symbolism in the arts allow for ‘multifaceted representation’, compressing complex emotional and social realities into a single gesture, image, or phrase. This is especially important for people with learning disabilities, whose emotional lives are often misunderstood or underestimated. At MTG, performance becomes a form of selfexpression that reclaims emotional depth and complexity.

The impact is not only internal. Artistic identity creates new social meanings. Paul Bates noted that while he still carried the label of autism, being associated with a respected arts organisation changed how others saw him: ‘It wasn’t just me saying I could act anymore. It was that I was performing in real shows, doing real work. People took me seriously for the first time.’ (Paul Bates, Artist Interview, 2019). Here, the public nature of performance serves as a form of identity verification, a concept explored by Michael Hogg and others. When selfconcept is affirmed by others, identity becomes more stable and self-esteem grows. MTG creates a

context in which that affirmation is not only possible but institutionalised. Participants are recognised as artists not out of charity, but through their demonstrable contributions. Yet artistic identity is not without tension. Many Artists expressed the difficulty of holding multiple identities in a world that often sees only one. Alison spoke to this: ‘I don’t always know what’s me, and what’s autism. Sometimes people say it’s all the same. But it’s not. I want to be more than just my diagnosis.’ (Alison Colborne, Artist Interview, 2020). Her experience reflects a broader struggle: the conflict between personal multiplicity and social reductionism. Bauman (2001) suggests that identity in modern life is fluid, but for many disabled people, identity remains frozen by external perceptions. Logeswaran et al. (2019) found that the majority of people with intellectual disabilities are acutely aware of the label ascribed to them by others, with most recognising that others view that label negatively, leading to feelings of shame, anger and powerlessness, a process in which fluid selfhood is effectively arrested by an externally imposed deficit-based identity. Goodley (2010) further argues that disability labels, as deployed by institutions such as schools, objectify disabled people and contribute to their experience of alienation, reducing complex, multidimensional identities to a single deficit category. MTG's model offers a space where this tension can be acknowledged and lived with, rather than denied. Ultimately, what emerges from these narratives is a sense of becoming and a dynamic, ongoing redefinition of self that takes place in and through artistic practice. Mind The Gap is not merely a place to gain skills; it is a context in which participants are invited to reclaim their identities on their own terms. As Paul summarised: ‘Being at Mind the Gap didn’t fix everything. But it gave me a chance to be more myself than I’ve ever been.’ (Paul Bates, Artist Interview, 2020). Where identity has been consistently shaped by exclusion, the simple act of self-definition carries a weight that extends far beyond the personal. To say 'this is who I am', and to be heard, is, in such contexts, a profoundly political act.

5.5 Resisting the Learning Disabled Identity

When Paul looked back on his early experiences of performance, he described the quiet pain of not being taken seriously: ‘Even when people told me I was good, I knew they weren’t really looking. They saw the ‘special’ part first. They weren’t clapping for me, they were clapping for trying.’ (Paul Wilshaw, Artist Interview, 2020). This insight cuts to the heart of how personal identity and self-esteem are entangled. Paul and other Learning Disabled Artists in this research articulated self-worth not simply in terms of internal confidence, but as something shaped by how others saw them and whether that recognition aligned with how they saw themselves.

Personal identity, the sense of being a unique, continuous self, is not formed in isolation; it emerges in relation to how others see us, and through the social roles and recognitions available to us (Jenkins, 2008; Mead, 1934). Self-esteem, in turn, reflects how individuals evaluate their worth within those social mirrors. A successful resolution of identity leads to stronger selfesteem; failure results in confusion, instability, and vulnerability. Many MTG participants described a sense of delay or disruption in this process, particularly because the category of 'learning disabled' is often imposed early in life, before individuals have the chance to shape self-concepts freely. As Alison explained: 'I didn't choose to be seen this way. It was chosen for me. And after that, people stopped seeing anything else.' (Alison Colborne, Artist Interview, 2019). Here, we see what Erikson might call a 'foreclosed' identity: a self that is prematurely fixed, limiting the possibilities for growth. But at MTG, participants described how artistic practice allowed them to reclaim and expand their personal identities, which in turn reshaped their self-esteem.

This reciprocal process is mirrored in Social Identity Theory (SIT), where Tajfel and Turner (1979) argued that people derive self-worth in part from the social groups they belong to. When a group is positively valued, self-esteem is enhanced. But when it is stigmatised, like 'learning disabled', it can erode confidence and trigger emotional distress. This explains why several MTG artists sought to disidentify with the label, or to reposition it in more empowering terms. One Artist shared:

> I don't tell people unless I have to. Not because I'm ashamed, but because I know what comes next: 'Oh, you're brave,' or 'That's so inspiring.' It changes the way they talk to me.
>
> (Daniel Foulds, Artist Interview, 2021)

This observation speaks directly to the idea of self-verification, the psychological need to have our self-concept affirmed by others. When people respond only to the category, and not the person, that verification fails. According to Michael Hogg and colleagues (1995), such failed affirmation can destabilise identity and lower self-esteem, especially when the marginalised identity is highly salient, that is, always present and visible in social interactions. By contrast, when participants at MTG experienced recognition for performance, collaboration, or leadership, self-verification was more successful. These moments produced not just pride, but resilience. As Paul noted: 'When I performed with Mind the Gap, I felt like people were seeing

me properly for once. Not as someone trying to be good, but as someone who was good.' (Paul Bates, Artist Interview, 2019). In this moment, identity and esteem are mutually reinforcing: performance leads to affirmation, which strengthens self-worth, which in turn stabilises identity. This kind of feedback loop between external evaluation and self-concept is well documented in social psychology and symbolic interactionism, from Charles Horton Cooley's 'looking-glass self' (Cooley, 1902), in which others' responses generate pride or shame and crystallise into a sense of who we are. Chester Insko et al. (1992) expand this further through their work on social comparison. Individuals evaluate themselves in relation to others within their own group (intragroup) and across groups (intergroup). MTG participants sometimes engaged in these comparisons consciously, noting differences between themselves and others with more complex support needs. But more often, comparisons took place between their past selves and their current artistic selves. As one artist reflected: 'Before this, I never thought I could be anything. Now, I know I can do something. I've done it already. It's not just a dream anymore.' (Laura Reed, Artist Interview, 2021). This form of internal comparison, a shift in one's narrative about who they are and what they can do, is among the most powerful contributors to self-esteem.

Artistic spaces like MTG also offer something even rarer: the chance to hold multiple, valued identities simultaneously. Many participants spoke of being actors, musicians, friends, people of faith, and not just learning disabled. This is vital because, as intersectional thinkers have long argued, the ability to live with layered, complex identities is crucial to psychological wellbeing. Still, the effects of stigma remain. Several artists spoke about how, outside of MTG, they felt flattened, seen only through the lens of diagnosis. But inside the company, they experienced a different form of recognition, one that validated effort, skill, and individuality. In these narratives, we see identity not as a fixed condition, but as a practice. It is continually shaped by environment, opportunity, and interaction. Similarly, self-esteem is not a static trait, but a living response to how identity is allowed to flourish or is denied space. In sum, the relationship between personal identity and self-esteem among Learning Disabled Artists is not only psychological, but it is also social, emotional, and political.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has explored identity as a lived, negotiated and relational process for Learning Disabled Artists who took part in this research. Participants' narratives suggested that identity could not be reduced to diagnostic labels or professional roles, but was continually shaped

through interaction, resistance, performance and reflection. What emerged was not a fixed category of what it means to be a 'Learning Disabled Artist', but a series of unfolding practices: acts of making, becoming and asserting selfhood under conditions of social constraint.

Participants often pushed against externally imposed meanings of 'learning disability'. While some recognised the category in functional or bureaucratic terms, few accepted it as a core element of who they were. For many, it was a label placed upon them without consent, shaping how others responded long before they had developed the language or space to define themselves. At the same time, the label was not passively accepted. It was questioned, reshaped, or set aside in favour of identifications such as artist, actor, musician, colleague or friend. In this sense, the question of what a Learning Disabled Artist is became less about a clinical or legal definition and more about the conditions under which a person could participate fully and meaningfully in artistic life. Within Mind the Gap, being an artist involved not only having creative skills but also being treated as a cultural contributor whose work and perspective mattered.

Learning disability, as many participants described, had profound effects on how others shaped their identities. The label often operated as a dominant, or 'master status', overshadowing achievement. It coloured expectations, limited opportunities, and could obscure other aspects of personality such as faith, humour, sexuality or talent. At the same time, being part of a learning disabled community brought moments of solidarity and recognition, though not without tensions and internal hierarchies. Participants described intra-group comparisons, differing support needs and a spectrum of experiences that challenged any notion of homogeneity. Identity here appeared as something both socially imposed and strategically navigated.

The chapter has also suggested that artistic practice at Mind the Gap functioned as one important site of identity re-working. For a number of artists, the rehearsal room and stage offered a setting in which they could experiment with different versions of themselves, sometimes for the first time outside the gaze of education, care or assessment. As noted, the theme of interdependence has been largely implicit in this discussion. Many of the examples considered hint at how the familiar binaries of independence versus dependence started to loosen in practice. The next chapter takes this further, examining how MTG's creative processes and organisational structures frame interdependence as a condition for artistic risktaking, shared responsibility, and mutual accountability, and how artists described

developing agency within a collective framework that both respected their voices and provided scaffolding for growth.

Across these accounts, alternative understandings of artistic legitimacy and leadership became visible. Participants did not measure success primarily in terms of commercial acclaim or complete professional autonomy, but in their ability to contribute to work they valued, to develop their skills, and to have that work recognised on equal terms. Artists were involved not only in performance but, to varying degrees, in devising material, contributing to decisions about productions, and influencing aspects of the company's direction. This shift – from being positioned solely as recipients of access to being involved in the production of cultural value – offers one way to understand what learning disability-led practice looked like in this context. Rather than simply fitting disabled artists into existing models of professionalism, Mind the Gap staff and artists experimented with allocating responsibility and leadership in ways that accounted for diverse communication styles and support needs. How far these experiments succeeded, and where their limits lay, is taken up again in later chapters.

The findings in this chapter can be further understood through Hickey-Moody's (2009) account of performance as a site of relational becoming. For Hickey-Moody, performance does not simply provide a space in which an already-formed identity is displayed. It creates conditions in which bodies, identities and relationships may be reconfigured. This is particularly relevant to the experiences of the Mind the Gap Artists, whose accounts suggest that identity was not a fixed personal attribute brought into the organisation, but something continually shaped through rehearsal, performance, friendship, employment and collective belonging. This does not mean that the Artists' identities were dissolved into the company or that Mind the Gap produced a single, collective identity that replaced individual difference. Rather, the company provided a context in which individual and collective identities could become mutually reinforcing. The Artists' accounts indicate that being part of Mind the Gap could provide recognition, confidence and a sense of belonging, while their individual practices, personalities and ambitions also shaped the identity of the organisation. In this sense, the company functioned as a relational environment in which artists could become more fully recognisable to themselves and to others as artists.

Hickey-Moody's concept of reverse integration is useful here because it challenges the assumption that learning disabled artists must adapt to pre-existing norms of artistic professionalism and identity. The experiences discussed in this chapter suggest that Mind the

Gap offered, at least in part, an alternative direction of movement. The organisation created spaces in which different communication styles, learning processes, embodied practices and forms of sociality could influence the way artistic work was made. The question was not only how individual Artists might fit into theatre, but how theatre might be reorganised around the ways in which learning disabled artists create, communicate and work together. This process was not without contradiction. Mind the Gap remained connected to a wider cultural sector that frequently measured professionalism through speed, independence, verbal fluency and individual achievement. Artists therefore moved between different identity regimes: one in which they were recognised as capable artists and leaders, and another in which they were positioned through deficit, dependency or assumptions about what learning disability meant. Performance became significant because it offered a space in which these competing meanings could be tested. The Artists were not simply representing learning disability; through their practices, they were contributing to the ongoing production of what a learning disabled artist could be.

Calvert's (2020) concept of convivial theatre further supports an understanding of identity as relational. His discussion of care and collaboration suggests that theatrical identity is produced through shared activity rather than possessed independently by the performer. The identity of the artist is therefore connected to the network of people, practices and forms of care that make performance possible. This is evident in the Mind the Gap Artists' accounts, in which artistic identity was closely related to relationships with peers, creative enablers, producers, staff, audiences and family members. These relationships did not merely support an otherwise separate artistic self; they were part of the conditions through which that self was formed and recognised. This has implications for how artistic identity is understood within learning disabled theatre. If identity is relationally produced, then the responsibility for inclusion cannot rest solely with the individual artist. Organisations and collaborators also participate in shaping whether an artist is recognised as competent, creative and authoritative. The question is therefore not simply whether learning disabled artists possess an artistic identity, but whether the structures around them provide the recognition, time, access and relationships through which that identity can be sustained.

Ultimately, the chapter has argued that identity for the Learning Disabled Artists in this study was not a background condition to be worked around; it was central to their creative and social lives. Identity appeared as a practice - something formed through everyday encounters, institutional arrangements and moments of artistic change. The artists' accounts did not

suggest that they were straightforwardly ‘remaking the system’, but they did indicate that their participation was nudging, testing and sometimes reconfiguring what counted as legitimate artistic contribution in the spaces where they worked.

Chapter 6: Interdependence

The meaning of independence for Learning Disabled Artists has become a focal point in UK policy, practice, and research. The White Paper Valuing People: A New Strategy for Learning Disability for the 21st Century (2001) set out a ‘new vision’ for learning disability services based on four principles: rights, independence, choice, and inclusion, explicitly linking independence to full citizenship for people with learning disabilities. This emphasis was reaffirmed in Valuing People Now: A New Three-Year Strategy for People with Learning Disabilities (2009), which again foregrounded ‘independent living’ and personalisation, framing independence as greater choice and control over support and daily life, even while recognising that this does not necessarily mean living alone or doing everything by oneself. Similar priorities are echoed in subsequent national and devolved strategies, such as the Scottish learning disability implementation frameworks, which list ‘independence’ and ‘active citizenship’ as core strategic objectives, and local authority strategies that aim to promote ‘independence, choice and control’ as key outcomes for adults with learning disabilities.

The reasons for this policy focus on independence are considerable: a drive to move away from institutionalisation towards community living, to align services with human rights frameworks, and to promote participation in education, employment, and public life through personalisation and individualised support. At the same time, more recent policy documents and employment initiatives have tended to equate independence with economic selfsufficiency and labourmarket participation. Valuing Employment Now (Department of Health, 2009) explicitly states that ‘all people with learning disabilities, like all other people, can and should have the chance to work’ (DH, 2009), framing paid employment as both a universal expectation and the primary marker of social inclusion. Valuing People Now (DH, 2009) reinforces this by setting employment as a key performance indicator, while the more recent Pathways to Work Green Paper (DWP, 2025) goes further still, proposing to replace welfare

assessments with a ‘right to try’ work guarantee, explicitly aiming to "rebalance spending towards work over welfare" for disabled people (DWP, 2025). Disability organisations have noted the persistent gap between these expectations and the structural realities: fewer than 6% of people with learning disabilities known to social services are in paid employment, and barriers, including inaccessible recruitment processes and employer attitudes, have remained largely unaddressed across successive policy cycles (Mencap, 2019; 2022). This chapter critically engages with that landscape, examining how independence is understood, experienced, and expressed by disabled artists, and crucially, how their accounts point towards a more relational, interdependent model of autonomy that sits uneasily with narrow, individualised policy constructions.

The concept of interdependence developed in this chapter builds on, but also extends, the literature’s discussion of collaboration and care. Hickey-Moody’s (2009) theory of reverse integration identifies the importance of transforming the terms of interaction between disabled and non-disabled performers. Calvert’s (2020) account of convivial theatre demonstrates how care and togetherness can become part of the aesthetic and ethical conditions of theatrical production. These approaches are valuable for understanding what happens within collaborative creative encounters. However, the experiences of the Mind the Gap Artists suggest that artistic practice cannot be understood only through the immediate relationship between performer and collaborator. It is sustained through wider and longer-term networks of people, institutions, resources and forms of knowledge.

I describe these as care networks. A care network is not simply a group of people who provide support to an individual artist. It is a relational and organisational system through which artistic participation, identity and agency are made possible. Such networks may include other artists, creative enablers, producers, directors, support workers, family members, transport providers, funders, educators, venues and audiences. Some of these relationships are explicitly described as care, while others are understood as professional, artistic or administrative. In practice, however, these categories frequently overlap. A producer may help an artist navigate a funding application while also protecting the artist’s creative intention; a peer may provide emotional support while also contributing artistic feedback; and a venue may offer access arrangements that alter the pace and form of the work itself. The idea of care networks therefore extends Calvert’s discussion of care beyond the performance event. Calvert demonstrates that care can be visible within the theatrical encounter, disrupting the assumption that professional performance is based upon individual autonomy and self-sufficiency. The findings presented

here suggest that care also operates across the temporal and institutional conditions of artistic life. It is present in the preparation for rehearsal, travel to the venue, interpretation of information, negotiation of payment, development of skills, maintenance of relationships and recovery after performance. These forms of care may be overlooked because they do not always appear within the finished performance, but they are essential to the production of that performance.

This also marks a movement from collaboration to interdependence. Collaboration is often used to describe people working together towards a shared artistic outcome. Interdependence refers to a deeper condition: the recognition that participants are mutually shaped by, and reliant upon, one another. It does not suggest that everyone contributes in the same way or that power is automatically shared. Rather, it asks how different forms of contribution are valued and how responsibility, decision-making and authorship are distributed. In this sense, interdependence includes collaboration but cannot be reduced to it. The distinction is important because the language of collaboration can sometimes conceal unequal relations. A project may be described as collaborative while significant decisions remain controlled by non-disabled directors, producers or organisational leaders. Similarly, care may be offered in ways that support participation while reinforcing the position of the learning disabled artist as dependent or less authoritative. Interdependence provides a way to examine these tensions more closely. It requires attention not only to whether people work together, but to how their relationships are structured, what each person brings, what each person receives and whose knowledge determines the direction of the work.

The Mind the Gap Artists' accounts demonstrate that interdependence can be a condition of agency rather than its opposite. Artists described gaining confidence, professional identity and creative authority through relationships with others. Peer networks were particularly important because they did not position the Artists solely as recipients of support. They created reciprocal relationships in which Artists offered one another encouragement, humour, feedback, creative challenge and practical knowledge. This is consistent with Calvert's account of conviviality, but the findings also indicate that such relationships extend beyond the convivial encounter of performance. They become part of a longer-term ecology through which artists develop and sustain their practices.

Through participatory, arts-based, and ethnographic research with Learning Disabled Artists, particularly those affiliated with Mind the Gap, this chapter asks: What does independence

look like for artists who live and work within networks of sustained support? How do they negotiate agency, authorship, and autonomy in artistic and organisational contexts? In exploring these questions, artist voices and experiences are centred, positioned alongside relevant theoretical frameworks including identity fusion (Swann, 2009), interdependent self-construal (Singelis,
1994), and social interdependence theory (Johnson & Johnson, 1989). Findings suggest that independence is not a fixed or singular ideal, but a dynamic, constructed process - shaped by identity, circumstance, and social context. Artists often frame independence not as separateness, but as collaborative strength. This includes the ability to make choices, assert agency, and develop an affirmed identity while embedded in supportive networks. This chapter explores that nuance through interconnected themes: independence as identity; independence as agency; and the role of interdependence in enabling both.

6.1 Independence as Identity

Independence, for many participants, was central to how they understood themselves. Yet the dominant policy and cultural narrative around independence for people with learning disabilities has overwhelmingly been framed in binary terms: one is either independent or dependent, self-reliant or in need of care. Fine and Glendinning (2005) identify this as a pervasive conceptual problem, arguing that thinking about care and support has been structured around a rigid dichotomy in which 'autonomy and independence… are promoted as universal and largely unproblematic goals,' (Fine & Glendinning, 2005, p.601) while dependency is treated as its stigmatised opposite - a condition to be overcome or eliminated. Within UK learning disability policy, this binary has been remarkably persistent. Valuing People (2001) and Valuing People Now (2009) both foregrounded independence as a core pillar of citizenship, framing it predominantly in terms of individual choice, self-direction, and reduced reliance on formal care. The disability rights movement has itself challenged the equation of independence with self-reliance: Jenny Morris argued forcefully that independent living 'does not necessarily mean disabled people "doing everything for themselves," but… that any practical assistance people need should be based on their own choices and aspirations.' (Morris, 2004, p. 431) Yet in practice, policy implementation has often reverted to a narrower, more individualised model, one aligned with neoliberal emphases on personal responsibility, economic self-sufficiency, and the withdrawal of collective support.

This binary framing has particular consequences for people with learning disabilities. As

Symeonidou and Mavrou (2019) observe, the dependence–independence binary produces a ‘disabling discourse’ in which learners and adults with disabilities are positioned as ‘dependent’ or ‘not independent enough,’ while the independence of non-disabled people is treated as natural and unquestioned. The result is that independence becomes a standard against which people with learning disabilities are perpetually measured but rarely seen to succeed - not simply because of individual impairments, but because the dominant policy model builds its idea of independence around normative assumptions about cognition, communication and self-management that many disabled people are structurally excluded from meeting, even with appropriate support (Shakespeare, 2006). Research on how nondisabled people define disability reinforces this: defining disability as ‘lacking independence’ is one of the strongest predictors of implicit prejudice against disabled people. In other words, the binary model does not merely describe a neutral state of affairs; it actively constructs the conditions under which people with learning disabilities are devalued. It is against this backdrop that the accounts of Mind the Gap Artists show that independence was not experienced as the policy model imagines it, as isolated self-reliance. Rather, it was independence through relationship, a concept that identity fusion theory helps illuminate. Lorraine, a performer and facilitator, described independence not as ‘doing everything alone,’ but as ‘feeling strong in who you are and what you can do, but knowing that you don't have to do it by yourself’ (Lorraine Brown, Artist Interview, 2020). This conception directly challenges the binary. Instead of independence or dependence, it articulates a model of interdependence - what Fine and Glendinning (2005) call a recognition of ‘the basic social condition of interdependence and caring solidarity’ as an alternative to the ‘individualising and excluding language of dependency.’ It also resonates with theories of interdependent agency, in which personal identity and group belonging are co-constituted rather than opposed.

Identity fusion theory (Swann et al., 2012) helps make sense of these narratives. While traditional social identity theory frames identity as either personal or group-based, and assumes, through the principle of 'functional antagonism,' that the activation of one necessarily diminishes the other, identity fusion posits a more integrated model. As Swann describes it, fusion 'occurs when people experience a visceral feeling of oneness with a group,' (Swann et al., 2012, p. 441) such that 'the boundaries that ordinarily demarcate the personal and social self become highly permeable.' Crucially, this permeability does not dissolve the individual: the fused person does not lose themselves in the group but rather maintains a strong personal identity that works *with* group identity, each strengthening the other in what Gómez et al. (2011, p. 4) call 'identity synergy.' In other words, the 'fused individual' is not someone who

has surrendered their selfhood to the collective, but someone whose sense of self and sense of belonging have become so mutually reinforcing that the two can no longer be cleanly separated. This offers a valuable framework for understanding MTG Artists, whose individual artistic identities and their shared identity as a company appear not to compete but to coconstitute one another. Fused individuals do not abandon personal agency when embedded in a group; instead, their connection to the group strengthens their individual purpose. As Gómez and Vázquez (2015) argue, in identity fusion, 'the personal and social selves synergise,' leading to enhanced feelings of belonging and personal power. Many participants were closely affiliated with groups such as Mind the Gap, Access All Areas, and Pyramid of Arts, sometimes for over a decade. For them, these communities were not simply workplaces but sites of personal transformation. One artist shared: 'Mind the Gap is my family. I don't feel disabled when I'm here. I feel like a leader' (Anna Gray, Artist Interview, 2019). This form of group identification was rarely expressed as passive assimilation. It is active, agentic, and generative. It echoes Swann's notion of the 'agentic-personal self,' where the personal self is not diminished by social belonging but amplified through it. Gómez and Vázquez (2015) articulate two key principles of identity fusion relevant to this research. The 'agentic-personal self principle' assumes that when a person fuses with a group, they do not abandon their personal self. Social identity does not override individual goals and norms; instead, the overlapping of these two identities does not necessarily lead to the weakening of personal identity. The second principle, the 'identity synergy principle,' describes how the fused person's personal and group identities are highly interconnected, such that activating either the independent or interdependent selfconstrual strengthens group tendencies.

These insights challenge binary models of independence and dependence. Rather than seeing independence as the opposite of needing support, artists framed interdependence as a condition that made independence possible. Alison Colborne, reflecting on her long career at Mind the Gap, explained: 'If you don't fully embrace your disability, you make it redundant. If I own who I am, I get to decide how I'm seen. That is how I define independence' (Alison Colborne, Artist interview, 2020). In the context of her broader narrative, my reading of Alison's words is that she is moving from acceptance to agency. Disability is not framed as a limitation to be managed or overcome, but as something to be actively claimed - an identity resource that, once owned, becomes a source of power over self-representation. This reading resonates with Tobin Siebers's argument that disability is 'not a biological or natural property but an elastic social category both subject to social control and capable of effecting social change' Siebers's (2008,

p. 4). To name and claim it is to wrest it from others' definitions and redirect its meaning. Alison's phrase 'if you make it redundant' is especially loaded – it implies that suppressing or distancing oneself from one's disability does not neutralise it but rather abandons it to be defined by others, leaving the individual with less authority, not more. In this sense, she is engaging in what Swain and French (2000, p. 569) describe through the affirmative model of disability: the development of "positive social identities, both individual and collective, grounded in the benefits of lifestyle and life experiences of being impaired and disabled." Crucially, Alison's definition of independence, 'I get to decide how I'm seen', is not about self-sufficiency or the absence of support; it is about narrative control. Independence, here, is understood as an interpretive act.

The relationship between independence and self-construal becomes important here. Selfconstrual refers to how individuals frame themselves in relation to others, either through autonomy and uniqueness or through connectedness and relationships. According to Singelis (1994), the interdependent self and the independent self are considered two dimensions rather than two ends of a single dimension. Importantly, individuals might develop both independent and interdependent self-construals, with the cognitive accessibility and influence of each on social functioning specific to each person. A key question in identity fusion research is how a person's independent self-construal, their sense of themselves as a distinct, autonomous individual, relates to the experience of being fused with a group. In most social identity frameworks, a strong sense of personal independence is assumed to compete with or weaken group alignment: the more you see yourself as an individual, the less you identify with the collective. Identity fusion theory challenges this assumption. It proposes that a strong independent self-construal does not diminish group connection but can coexist with, and even amplify, it.

Participants in this research often embodied both simultaneously. Dom, a student and aspiring actor and comedian, exemplified this paradox. He wanted to be seen as independent in the audition room, yet acknowledged relying heavily on peer support in preparation. 'I want them to see what I can do on my own,' he said, 'but I know I do better when I've rehearsed with the group first' (Dom, workshop quote, 2021). Crucially, what Dom describes is not simply onedirectional support; it is interdependence. The distinction matters. Support implies a one-way relationship in which one party gives and the other receives; interdependence, by contrast, describes a reciprocal dynamic in which both parties are simultaneously giving and gaining. In Dom's case, my participant observation confirmed that the group benefited from his creative

energy, humour and ambition during rehearsals, while he benefited from the feedback, confidence and collective rhythm that only emerged from working together. Neither party was simply helping the other; both were being shaped through this ongoing exchange. As Shogren et al. (2017) argue, interdependent social relationships yield the social capital that most people need to achieve their self-determined goals and should therefore be given far greater weight in our understanding of agency and autonomy.

This interplay of the independent and interdependent self explains why group membership, when structured around mutual recognition, creative challenge, and shared purpose, can foster rather than restrict agency. Participants were not passive recipients of care or direction; they were co-authors of their creative practice, shaping both their individual identity and the collective ethos of their groups. This co-authorship was visible at Mind the Gap, for instance, artists contributed to the devising of new work, led warm-ups and workshop exercises for one another, mentored newer members of the company, and made collective decisions about how pieces should be performed, all while pursuing individual artistic ambitions and identities. Yet it would be misleading to present this as a seamlessly harmonious process. Disagreements over creative direction, tensions between individual need and ensemble discipline, and the emotional labour involved in sustained collaborative practice were all part of the experience. Melanie Nind and Dave Hewett note that inclusive creative communities require 'a willingness to tolerate ambiguity and discomfort' (Nind & Hewett, 2005, p. 14) precisely because genuine participation, as opposed to the performance of it, involves real negotiation, and sometimes conflict. What is significant is not that these tensions were absent, but that they were navigable: the structure of the company provided a relational framework in which friction could be worked through collectively rather than managed away. In this sense, the rough periods were not failures of interdependence but evidence of it - moments where the relationship was tested and the practice of mutual recognition renewed. The relationship was not one of artist-andhelper but of artist-and-artist, each drawing on and contributing to a shared creative ecology, in which both the rewards and the difficulties were held in common.

What emerges is a nuanced understanding of independence as an interactive achievement. Identity and agency were not experienced as self-contained qualities but as continually constructed in relationship to others. This challenges dominant models of professional success in the arts, which have historically rewarded individualism and self-promotion. Oscar Wilde's famous declaration that 'art is the most intense mode of individualism that the world has ever known' (Wilde, 1891, p. 12) captures a deep-seated cultural assumption: that artistic

achievement is fundamentally a solo endeavour, born of singular vision and personal genius. This mythology pervades the contemporary arts industry, where career advancement typically depends on individual reputation, self-branding, and the capacity to operate as an autonomous freelancer in a competitive marketplace. Vera John-Steiner identifies this as a deeply embedded cultural myth, arguing that while 'the Western belief in individualism romanticises the perception of the solitary creative process, the reality is that scientific and artistic forms emerge from the joint thinking, passionate conversations, emotional connections and shared struggles common in meaningful relationships' (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 3). At the same time, many influential strands of contemporary performance already work against the fantasy of the solitary auteur. Collaborative devising practices, including Frantic Assembly's task-based 'Frantic Method', which deliberately places performers and directors on the same starting point in a shared process of discovery. Within Disability Arts, Petra Kuppers and the Olimpias collective have articulated a similar rejection of 'splendidly autonomous' creativity, consistently writing in a plural 'we' and describing disability culture as 'a process, not a static definition' (Kuppers, 2011, p. 12), sustained through communal labour, shared risk and collective imagination. These feminist and queer lineages have significantly shaped the Disability Arts ecology in which Mind the Gap operates.

For these artists, interdependence is not a limitation, it is a foundation for sustainable, meaningful independence. The ability to act, decide, and lead is rooted not in an abstract sense of agency, but in the tangible relationships that scaffold their practice. Agency is relational, it emerges from supportive environments, reciprocal trust, and recognition of capability. When artists speak about 'becoming more independent' they often describe social processes, not solitary acts. Their capacity to lead or self-direct is nurtured through interdependence, a theme that challenges both cultural and institutional assumptions about independence as isolation. Paul's experience illustrates this dynamic. The artistic space at Mind the Gap allowed him to build confidence not just in his skills, but in his right to be seen as a whole person: 'I knew I was good at performing. But I never felt like I was really taken seriously until I came here. People still saw my disability first. But here, they see me as an artist.' His experience aligns with sociological accounts of agency not just as the power to act, but as the capacity to be recognised as a legitimate actor. For Learning Disabled Artists, that legitimacy is often denied or delayed, especially in mainstream settings. But in inclusive or disability-led spaces, recognition becomes part of the creative process itself. Artists are not only enabled to act; they are given the symbolic tools to re-author their identities.

Relational autonomy theorists (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000) argue that autonomy is never simply the absence of constraint; it is always exercised within a social matrix that shapes what is possible. For these artists, autonomy did not mean detachment from support, but rather having control within supported environments. Anna Gray captured this distinction: ‘I don't want people doing things for me, but I want people with me.’ (Anna Gray, Artist Interview, 2000). This speaks to what Eva Feder Kittay (2001) calls dependency work, the labour of support that enables people to flourish. While traditional understandings of dependency carry stigma, Kittay reframes it as an integral part of justice. From this perspective, support networks around disabled artists are not evidence of inadequacy, but signs of an ethical and functional artistic ecosystem.

6.2 Intersections of Interdependence

Being an artist with a learning disability was a central part of most participants’ identities, but it was never experienced in isolation. During life-narrative interviews and group conversations, nearly all Mind the Gap artists described how teachers, mentors, and families had recognised their creative talents and channelled them toward artistic development. Lorraine, for example, first became interested in creative work at a specialist school for disabled children; a teacher then referred her guardians to Mind the Gap, where she continued training and now works as a professional artist touring nationally and internationally. In other cases, parents played a mentoring role, spotting creative potential and actively supporting its growth. These stories are not simply about individual talent; they show identity emerging within networks of recognition, care, and opportunity. When Artists spoke about their impairments and disabilities, their accounts further revealed that disability identity is neither singular nor fixed. One artist reflected, ‘I feel that I am independent. I've always been independent and I'm proud of it,’ (Alison Colborne, Artist Interview, 2020) yet this assertion coexisted with more complicated realities of needing support, encountering stigma, and negotiating systems. The social model of disability, outlined in Chapter 2, shifted attention from individual impairment to social barriers. However, participants’ narratives suggested that their everyday lives involved both social oppression and the material realities of impairment. Hughes and Paterson’s (1997) call for ‘an embodied, rather than a disembodied, notion of disability’ is helpful here, recognising that disabled people live at the intersection of bodily limitation and disabling environments. This duality is evident in the words of Daniel Foulds, a writer and director:

> When you have a diagnosis that doesn't have any scientific data to back it up, and you are questioned by authorities such as Disability Benefits about the legitimacy of that diagnosis - it becomes difficult to self-identify. No one around you accepts that diagnosis, therefore you have to prove it, sometimes ensuring people understand what a “really bad day” looks like by acting it out. That “acting out” distances you from what your disability actually means for you day-to-day, therefore how can you truly selfidentify with that disability?
>
> (Daniel Foulds, Artist Interview, 2021)

Foulds’ reflection exposes a specifically relational tension: impairment is lived in and through the body, but the ability to claim a stable disability identity depends on how others recognise or deny that identity. Disability identity here is not simply interior; it is worked out in a field of interdependent relations, where social validation or invalidation shapes how people can name themselves. Building on this, disability theorists have increasingly framed disability identity as both personal and political. Siebers argues that ‘to call disability an identity is to recognise that it is not a biological or natural property but an elastic social category both subject to social control and capable of effecting social change’ (Siebers, 2008: 4). Swain and French’s (2000) affirmative model of disability similarly emphasises the potential for ‘positive social identities, both individual and collective, for disabled people grounded in the benefits of life style and life experiences of being impaired and disabled’ (Swain & French, 2000: 569). Participant accounts at Mind the Gap showed how such affirmative identities are rarely forged alone. They emerge within communities that offer recognition, solidarity, and space for experimentation. Paul Wilshaw’s description of Mind the Gap captures this interdependence vividly:

> Being part of Mind the Gap gives me reason. It is an outlet for me, it is somewhere I feel good about myself and gives me an opportunity to do something well. It allows me to socialise, and to deal with challenges in my life because of the family and support I have here.
>
> (Paul Wilshaw, Artist Interview, 2021)

For Paul, identity, wellbeing, and artistic practice are inseparable from belonging to a specific community. Mind the Gap is not only a workplace; it is a relational environment that holds him through difficulty, amplifies his strengths, and offers roles in which he can contribute to

others. Here, interdependence is not a euphemism for reliance; it names the mutual, ongoing exchange through which Paul both receives support and gives value back.

Carol J Gill describes disability identity formation as a process that moves from ‘coming to feel we belong’ (claiming a place in social and cultural life) to ‘coming out’ as proudly disabled (Gill, 1997). Belonging, in this sense, is not just an emotional state but a structural condition: having a community in which disability is normalised, valued, and shared. Rosalyn B. Darling (2003), however, cautions against imagining this as a linear progression. Drawing on decades of sociological research into disability and identity, she proposes a typology of orientations that disabled people may adopt towards their own condition - not as fixed stages, but as fluid positions shaped by social context, access to resources, and the responses of others. These orientations range from normalisation (where the person minimises or conceals their disability in order to assimilate into non-disabled norms) through crusadership (active advocacy and political engagement with disability identity) to affirmation (a settled, positive identification with disability as part of selfhood). She also identifies situational identification (where disability is foregrounded in some contexts but not others), resignation (passive acceptance without positive identification), apathy(disengagement from disability identity altogether), and isolated affirmation (positive identification maintained in the absence of a wider disability community). What makes this typology particularly useful is Darling's insistence that none of these positions is final: disabled people may move between them as circumstances change, as they gain or lose access to community, encounter new forms of recognition or exclusion, or enter contexts, such as an arts company, that actively reconfigure how disability is valued. Artist narratives at Mind the Gap reflected this non-linearity. Some artists spoke with consistent pride in their independence and disability identity; others oscillated between aspiration and constraint; still others felt caught in externally imposed labels they struggled to escape.

What ties these diverse trajectories together is that none of them unfolds in isolation. Learning Disabled Artists at Mind the Gap come to know themselves as disabled and as artists, with and through others: teachers who open doors, families who advocate, peers who co-create, and organisations that provide a cultural home. In this sense, the intersections of interdependence in this chapter are threefold: between impairment and social structures, between individual identity and disability movements, and between personal artistic practice and the collective life of Disability Arts communities. Together, they show that for Learning Disabled Artists, interdependence is not the opposite of independence but the very condition under which

meaningful, affirmative identities can be formed and sustained. Interdependence and identity are linked.

The Disability Arts movement played a crucial role in enabling identity transformation for the participants in this study, but its relationship to learning disability culture is not straightforward. Swain and French describe how Disability Arts has enabled disabled people to contest stigma:

> Through song lyrics, writing, drama and so on, disabled people have celebrated difference and rejected the ideology of normality in which disabled people are devalued as "abnormal". They are creating images of strength and pride, the antithesis of dependency and helplessness.
>
> (Swain & French, 2000: 577–578)

Walker similarly emphasises the role of art in a broader disability culture:

> Disability culture is made up of artists who are not trying to pass, artists who don't buy into society's rule that we should be ashamed of our disabilities, artists who often show in their art a self-acceptance and a pride about who they are, not in spite of a disability, not because of a disability, but including a disability.
>
> (Walker, 1998: 84)

However, learning disability culture occupies a more ambivalent space in relation to this tradition. While disability culture assumes a confident 'coming out' as disabled, many Learning Disabled Artists at Mind the Gap described distancing themselves from the label learning disability or choosing 'prefer not to say' on forms. For them, shame and misrecognition were still powerful forces. Rather than beginning from a position of proud identification, they often started from uncertainty, reluctance, or a desire to be seen simply as 'an artist' rather than 'a Learning Disabled Artist.' In this context, Mind the Gap functioned as a space where a distinct learning disability culture could be built collectively over time. Artists did not simply step into an already-formed disability culture; they co-created it through rehearsal rooms, touring ensembles, and shared authorship of work. Taylor's (2005) observation that arts education can enable young people 'to engage in a process of selfrealisation' and to challenge 'negative and oppressive perceptions of disability via their artwork,' adopting 'positive, inclusive and potentially multi-identity' perspectives, is particularly relevant here. For Learning Disabled Artists, this process was often gradual and

collaborative: moving from rejecting or hiding the label, to questioning it together, to experimenting with ways of naming and performing learning disability on their own terms.

Projects such as Contained (2017) and Daughters of Fortune (2019–2022) exemplify this journey. These productions did not simply include artists with learning disabilities; they were devised, scripted, and shaped by them, foregrounding themes like sexuality, parenting, institutionalisation, and the politics of care. In doing so, they provided a shared platform where artists could test more affirmative narratives of learning disability, sometimes embracing the term, sometimes subverting it, but always in dialogue with peers. The identities that emerged were therefore not solely individual achievements but collective ones: a learning disability culture forged in and through interdependence, where belonging to an arts company and belonging to a disability community were mutually reinforcing rather than separate.

6.3 The Role of Independence in Learning Disabled Identity

Yet identity formation for Learning Disabled Artists remained deeply complicated by systemic barriers. Through iterative thematic analysis of life-narrative interviews, creative workshops, and ethnographic fieldnotes (see Chapter 4: Methodology & Ethics), three interrelated dimensions emerged that illuminate how independence operates within learning disabled identity. These dimensions, independence as established identity; independence as aspirational identity; and independence as compulsory identity, are analytical categories that were developed inductively from the data, rather than terms drawn directly from existing models. They were constructed by repeatedly coding participants' descriptions of 'being independent,' clustering similar codes, and then tracing how these clusters patterned across accounts in relation to context, support, and systemic constraint. While they resonate with Darling's (2003) argument that disability identities take multiple, shifting orientations over the life course, they are grounded specifically in the narratives of artists at Mind the Gap and are intended to capture how independence is lived, claimed, and sometimes imposed in this particular context. Together, these three dimensions illustrate both the possibilities and constraints within which disabled artists negotiate their sense of self in relation to independence.

Independence as Established Identity: For some participants, independence was experienced as a stable, embedded aspect of who they were, something that did not need to be fought for or justified but was simply a given. This manifested in two ways: independence established through accumulated life experience and independence described as an innate characteristic. As one Artist reflected: 'I can't give examples of when I have been independent, but I feel that

I am independent. I've always been independent and I'm proud of it.' (Joanne Haines, Artist Interview, 2020). Another noted: 'My independence is always there, but I only ever acknowledge it when something comes up that might affect it.' (Jez Colborne, Artist Interview, 2019). These statements suggest a form of disability identity that centres capability and selfdetermination, drawing on the affirmative model's emphasis on pride and strength (Swain & French, 2000). They also show how, for some artists, independence is woven into their selfstory long before formal opportunities in the arts arise; the company context then gives that pre-existing sense of self a place to be recognised, rather than creating it from scratch. Independence as Aspirational Identity: For others, independence was something to strive toward, a quality they wanted to claim but felt was not yet fully within reach. This aspiration was often expressed as a reason 'to keep fighting' against societal expectations that positioned them as incapable. For some, the aspiration was complicated by the tension between presenting as capable and receiving the support they needed. One Artist articulated this:

> People look at me and see I have a disability and expect me to need assistance. Assistance shouldn't be presumed. I might need it, but only when a barrier comes up, and I will let you know when that barrier comes up.
>
> (Charlotte Jones, Artist Interview, 2020)

Another expressed this dimension in relation to professional ambition: 'I want to be a professional actor, but I don't know if a director would know what I am capable of because of my disability, I don't know if they would treat me differently than everyone else. I don't lie about my disability, but sometimes I might cover up something I struggle with because of my disability.' (MTG Academy Student, 2020). This student's words reveal how systemic barriers and discrimination create conditions in which aspiration must be coupled with strategic selfpresentation, a survival tactic that complicates authentic identity formation. The aspiration for independence here is real, but it is pursued within a social landscape that routinely questions whether learning disabled people can be independent at all. In this sense, aspirational independence is interdependent: it depends on others being willing to see and recognise capability, not only on individual effort.

Independence as Compulsory Identity: The third dimension is perhaps the most troubling. Here, participants described not choosing independence but feeling compelled to perform it, pressured by a society that treats independence as the benchmark of a worthwhile life and dependence as its shameful opposite. Karmiris (2020) identifies this as 'the myth of

independence as better,' arguing that orientations toward independence in institutional and educational settings serve to reinforce hierarchies of exclusion in which those who cannot demonstrate conventional self-reliance are positioned as lesser. For some Mind the Gap artists, the imperative to appear independent was not empowering but exhausting. One Artist expressed this poignantly:

> I might feel independent, but those closest to me probably don't feel the same way as they make most of my decisions, help to pay for things for me, and I rely on them for travel.
>
> (Anna Gray, Artist Interview, 2019)

Another captured the weight of visible stigma: 'I love the word learning disability, it isn't a negative word. But I don't mention it, because even without mentioning it you are treated different - it's like a target to the head.' (Daniel Foulds, Artist Interview, 2020). What is 'compulsory' here is not the disability itself, nor stigma alone, but the expectation that independence should be the goal. When they cannot meet that standard, the gap between the ideal and the reality becomes a source of shame, concealment, and emotional labour. This dimension exposes the limits of affirmative models when confronted with entrenched social devaluation: pride in disability identity becomes harder to sustain when the surrounding culture insists that the only acceptable version of a disabled life is an independent one.

Taken together, these three dimensions of independence, established, aspirational, and compulsory, demonstrate that independence within learning disabled identity cannot be understood as a single, stable quality. Instead, artists moved fluidly between positions of affirmation, striving, and constraint, depending on context, social recognition, and the systemic barriers they encountered. The arts provided a crucial space for this identity work, a place where, as one participant noted, they could feel 'good about myself' and exercise agency. Yet this affirmation remained fragile and contextual, constantly shaped by the wider cultural insistence that independence equals self-reliance.

6.4 Independence as Agency

Agency means the ability to act, the motivation, and the purpose that participants bring to their activity. Artists' conceptualisation of independence and the way in which they assessed their personal independence was determined by the level of agency they felt they had. Schönau

formulates four distinct dimensions of agency (Schönau, 2021): decisional, executional, relational, and supported agency. These will be used here to explore the intersection between independence and agency.

Decisional agency primarily means acting in accordance with personal preference and values. For many Artists, independence and its maintenance was understood in terms of their ability to make their own decisions. This included personal responsibility for both major decisions (where they lived) and everyday decisions (what they ate). Alison Colborne spoke about this:

> I do a lot of things by myself, both as an artist and just as me. I don't need much help around the house, sometimes just advice because of my epilepsy. I decided on my musical training, I decided on my religion, I decide who my friends are, I decided on my marriage.
>
> (Alison Colborne, Artist Interview, 2022)

For other participants, decisional agency was about being able to live according to their own schedule and free from constraints imposed by others:

> Life skills are important to me. I learn how to do things myself, how to manage myself and travel independently. I think it is important to prove that you can make your own decisions, because then directors and employers can see that you are independent in your personal life, meaning you are probably capable of independent work.
>
> (Paul Bates, Artist Interview, 2021)

Financial autonomy emerged as particularly significant. Many participants saw their ability to manage their own finances as central to their independence: ‘It has taken me a long time to get off benefits and within employment, but now I am working full-time and earning my own money I feel in full control of my own life.’ (Paul Wilshaw, Artist Interview, 2022). Yet Artists also recognised that decisional agency was shaped by wider influences, negative stereotypes about learning disabled adults that could compromise opportunities to exercise such agency.

Some distanced themselves from disability labels, recognising the power of stereotypes:

> I don't ever declare I have a disability on equality forms for job applications or similar. What that word means and what it stands for is not who I am. I just want to be seen the

> same as everybody else, I want to be treated fairly. Some people say that disabled people can't do things and have a lower expectation of us.
>
> (Zara Mallinson, Artists Interview, 2021)

Others acknowledged the tension between the actual and desired levels of decisional agency:

> I think we speak about having choice and having independence but some things we can't do and we can't make a choice on because of our learning disability.
>
> (Howard Davies, Artist Interview, 2022)

Executional agency refers to participants being able to carry out activities unassisted, or being able to act upon decisions without needing help from others. Artists emphasised that this was an important and valued aspect of their independence. For many, this was evident in daily living activities and personal care: shopping, cooking, housework. One Artist reflected: 'Sometimes it takes me longer to do things, or to learn things, but I keep trying. I can get frustrated and angry whilst I'm trying, but I am human. Eventually I will have it.' (Lorraine Brown, Artist Interview, 2022). Many Artists had a strong desire to do as much as they could without assistance, acknowledging that this might take longer than for someone without a disability, but emphasising the importance of being able to carry out activities alone.

Relational agency refers to participants' ability to contribute to, maintain, and draw upon social networks as needed to achieve and sustain independence. Participants' understanding of social networking varied; some saw their network as family-based, while others encompassed friends, colleagues, and social workers. Central to participants' understanding of relational agency was the idea of reciprocity, providing support for others and accepting support, seen as important in supporting others within their social network to also be independent. As one Artist shared:

> Mind the Gap people are my family and it is my second home. The other artists help me with auditions and build my confidence, and I help them with dance and music. They are such an important group of people.
>
> (Lorraine Brown, Artist Interview, 2022)

Another described the reciprocal dynamic:

> Sometimes I find it hard to remember things so when I go to dance Lorraine comes to remind me of what we did the week before. I feel lost when she isn't there. I help Lorraine sometimes when she is feeling angry and frustrated. We all look after each other.
>
> (Laura Reed, Artist Interview, 2022)

Peer collaboration frequently enabled participants to claim agency in spaces where it might otherwise be withheld. One Artist described how peer support with rehearsals transformed her experience: ‘Sometimes I get overwhelmed with lines, and my friend helps me. But I also help him-I'm better at blocking and remembering movement. We kind of balance each other out.’ (Anna Gray, Artist Interview, 2022). This reciprocal framework contrasts sharply with onedirectional narratives of ‘support.’ It reveals how interdependence is not simply about being helped, but about mutual enablement. Moments of supported leadership exemplified how agency flourished within interdependent contexts. One artist recounted: ‘I didn't think I'd be good at it, but I planned it with [staff member] and then I led it on my own. People said it was great. That made me feel like a leader.’ (Jez Colborne, Artist Interview, 2021). This is interdependence as an artistic strategy. Leadership here does not require self-sufficiency, but it does require trust, structure, and shared responsibility, features often absent from conventional arts employment.

Supported agency meant that, despite having assistance from care and support staff, participants were still able to maintain their sense of independence. For some, support was vital as it allowed them to have their current sense of independence. For others, the emphasis was upon knowing support was available if needed, a safety net that enabled independence. One Artist reflected:

> Ever since I moved in to supported living I feel so much more myself. It has meant that I'm better at what I do at Mind the Gap. I don't have to worry about my personal life at home, so I can concentrate more on what I do in Mind the Gap. It is the best thing I've ever done.
>
> (Paul Bates, Artist Interview, 2022)

For participants in supported living, having control over when and from whom they sought support promoted their feelings of independence. There was recognition that seeking support in certain circumstances enabled them to feel more independent in others. Supported agency

was thus understood as a means of ensuring, rather than undermining, independence. Together, these four dimensions reveal how independence is not a single, monolithic state, but a multifaceted practice negotiated through different modes of agency. Decisional agency centres on choice; executional agency centres on action; relational agency centres on reciprocity; and supported agency centres on the infrastructure that makes autonomy possible.

6.5 Social Interdependence Theory

The creative lives of disabled artists at Mind the Gap demonstrate how success often emerges not from independence in isolation, but from co-constructed pathways. The interdependent structures supporting these artists, peers, mentors, companies and networks, are not auxiliary; they are central to how they achieve visibility, grow artistically and claim space in a field that can be difficult to enter and navigate. This sits alongside feminist and queer accounts of relational selfhood, which argue that selves are always formed in and through relationships rather than in separation from them (e.g. relational autonomy theorists who reject the 'atomistic' subject of liberal individualism: Jaggar, 1983; Freeman, 2011). Arthur Frank's notion of the 'contingent self' in The Wounded Storyteller further emphasises that identities are sustained through ongoing exchanges of recognition and care, rather than through selfsufficiency alone (Frank, 1995). In this light, the interdependence evident in learning disabled performers' working lives is not an exception to a norm of independence, but a particularly visible instance of a more general human condition: all selves are contingent and relational, but this is made especially explicit in the creative practices described in this thesis.

Social Interdependence Theory (Johnson & Johnson, 1989) provides a framework for understanding how interactions among group members influence outcomes. It emphasises that when people work together, their achievements are influenced not only by individual efforts but by their interactions with others. This interplay is shaped by the degree of interdependence, which can either foster cooperation or competition. Positive interdependence occurs when individuals recognise that their goals are intricately linked to those of others. Success is mutually dependent; one person's achievements contribute directly to the success of others. This fosters promotive interaction, where group members support, encourage, and assist one another. In practice, positive interdependence creates environments where individuals feel motivated to contribute equally, knowing their efforts benefit the collective.

Mind the Gap exemplifies this dynamic by allowing individuals' achievements to ripple outward, inspiring and enabling others. A prime example is the organisation's success with

Develop Your Creative Practice (DYCP) funding from Arts Council England. In 2022, four artists from Mind the Gap - Alan Clay, Daniel Foulds, Jez Colborne, and Paul Bates - secured funding, enabling them to pursue new creative avenues. This marks a significant milestone not only for the individual artists but for the broader artistic community within Mind the Gap and Disability Arts. Each artist's success reinforces the organisation's ethos: one person's breakthrough opens doors for others to follow. When asked about these successes, another artist in the company reflected: 'If Paul can do it, it means I can too.' (Howard Davies, Artist Interview, 2022). This statement is not about imitation but about visibility, about how individual progress becomes a collective resource. This model of distributed achievement challenges the dominant arts narrative of the lone-star model, affirming instead a model of collaborative excellence where success radiates through the community. Similarly, Liam Bairstow's role as the first actor with Down Syndrome in a long-running television series (Coronation Street) is not just his personal accomplishment but a source of inspiration and validation for the entire community - a subject which would come up again and again within the canteen at breaks. Mind the Gap's emphasis on positive interdependence extends beyond artistic success to broader advocacy and inclusion. The organisation's approach ensures that every individual is valued for their unique contributions, creating a space where collective achievement thrives. Yet not all interdependence is positive. Negative interdependence arises when individuals perceive their goals as being in direct opposition to one another. In this scenario, achieving success becomes a zero-sum game: one person's gain is inherently tied to another's loss. This dynamic fosters oppositional interaction, where individuals work against one another to achieve their objectives.

In the context of the arts, particularly for Learning Disabled Artists, the line between positive and negative interdependence can be incredibly thin. Opportunities for representation and funding for disabled artists remain scarce, creating an environment where competition can undermine the collaborative spirit. In mainstream theatre, roles written for disabled characters are often awarded to non-disabled actors. A notable example is Christopher Boone in The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time. Despite the character's autistic identity, it took five years after the play's premiere for Mickey Rowe to become the first openly autistic actor to play the role. This systemic inequity not only limits access but also perpetuates a hierarchy in which disabled artists must compete more fiercely for the few roles and opportunities available to them. Within communities like Mind the Gap, this scarcity of opportunities can strain peer relationships. Artists who might otherwise support each other may find themselves vying for the same limited funding or roles, creating tension and fostering feelings of

resentment or alienation. Artists may feel they must constantly fight for visibility and recognition, which can detract from the shared mission of advocacy and artistic excellence. The emotional toll is considerable. As one artist reflected: 'I'm proud when someone gets a big role, but sometimes I think - would they ever give me a chance?' (Alison Colborne, Artist Interview, 2021). The emotional labour behind this paradox of pride and longing, hope and exclusion, runs deep within the community. It shows how interdependence is shaped not only by intention but also by material conditions: funding, representation, access to stages and institutions.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter has examined how disabled artists understand and practice independence, revealing it to be neither a fixed state nor a solitary achievement. Rather, independence emerges through dynamic processes of identity formation and agentic practice, deeply shaped by interdependence. Independence as identity is formed through group belonging, recognised and affirmed within communities that value the contributions of learning disabled people. The arts, particularly organisations like Mind the Gap, play a crucial role in enabling artists to develop proud disability identities and integrated senses of self that bridge personal and social dimensions.

Independence through interdependence is exemplified by positive social interdependence structures that enable collective success. Yet this remains fragile, threatened by the scarcity of opportunities and resources in a cultural industry still ambivalent about disabled leadership. Sustainable interdependence, therefore, requires structural advocacy and material commitment to dismantling the barriers that force competition where collaboration should prevail. The artists in this study model a form of independence that is scaffolded, relational, and collective. It is not diminished by interdependence; it is made possible through it. As they navigate complex negotiations between personal aspiration and collective care, between visibility and safety, they are performing an alternative model of what it means to be independent.

Chapter 7: Leadership

> When you are in a room leading it is important you don't just tell people what to do. It is as much about listening as it is about instructing. You might not be the best person in the room, someone might know more than you, so you shouldn't ignore people. Being a leader is as much about working with other people in that room as it is about you showing them what to do.
>
> (Joanne Haines, Artist Interview, 2020)

Leadership for many Learning Disabled Artists begins here: not in abstract theory or formal titles, but in the room, in the concrete, embodied practice of being with others, paying attention, and sharing power. It is in rehearsals, workshops, and devising spaces that they first experiment with giving direction, inviting ideas, and holding responsibility in front of their peers. In these contexts, leadership is learned relationally rather than bureaucratically: through listening as much as instructing, recognising when others know more, and making space for different forms of expertise, including lived and embodied knowledge.

The questions of care, voice and relational identity developed in the previous chapters have direct implications for leadership. If artistic identity is formed through relationships, and if artistic agency is enabled through care networks, then leadership cannot be understood only as the possession of an individual skill or formal organisational position. The literature discussed above suggests that learning disabled theatre requires forms of leadership capable of recognising different modes of communication, distributing responsibility and adapting to the knowledge held by disabled artists. Leadership is therefore one of the principal sites at which reverse integration, conviviality and the politics of voice become organisational questions. The issue is not simply whether learning disabled artists are present within leadership structures, but whether their knowledge and ways of working are able to change how leadership itself is understood and practised.

This chapter centres the voices and experiences of Learning Disabled Artists who lead, facilitate, and advocate within Disability Arts organisations across the UK. It draws on interviews and observations from organisations including Mind the Gap (Bradford), DIY Theatre (Manchester), Access All Areas (London), and Pyramid of Arts (Leeds), tracing how leadership is practised in these rooms and how those everyday practices both challenge and reimagine dominant models of artistic leadership.

7.1 Defining Leadership: From Theory to Practice

Leadership remains contested in academic discourse. Despite decades of research, scholars have reached little consensus on a universal definition (Northouse, 2016). The challenge lies partly in leadership's multifaceted nature - it operates across organisational hierarchies, relational contexts, and cultural systems, meaning no single framework adequately captures its complexity. At its core, leadership scholarship identifies common threads: influence, vision, and the ability to inspire others toward shared goals (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Kouzes & Posner, 2017). Kouzes and Posner (2017) argue that 'leaders are attentive to the language and words that they use because these words are metaphors for concepts that define attitudes and behaviours,' suggesting that how we define leadership shapes what we value in leaders and what we believe is possible.

The definition of leadership has evolved significantly over time, shifting from hierarchical, power-centric models to process-focused, relational frameworks. Joseph C. Rost listed 221 definitions of leadership from around the world in his paper Leadership for the Twenty-First Century (1991), each one building on some aspect of a previous definition. Rost describes this evolution: 'the twentieth-century view emphasised management orientation, superior–subordinate relationships, individualism, and hierarchy, whereas post-industrial leadership increasingly emphasises inclusion, community orientation, and complexity'. (Rost, 1991, p.53). This shift reflects growing recognition that 'attention to collaboration and mutual influence on the processes for seeking a common good in setting up goals' (Kezar & Carducci, 2009, p. 45) is central to contemporary understandings of leadership. However, much leadership scholarship emerges from corporate and educational contexts, often failing to account for the specific realities of disabled people and disability-led organisations.

In UK cultural policy, disability-led practice is commonly defined in structural terms. Arts Council England, for example, describes disability-led organisations as those 'where 51 per cent or more of the organisation's board and senior management team are disabled.' (Arts Council England, 2025). This threshold is designed to ensure disabled people are present at the highest levels of governance and decision-making. Yet, as learning disability practice shows, representation alone does not guarantee meaningful leadership opportunities for Learning Disabled Artists. Many learning disability theatre companies and arts organisations are founded or managed by non-learning disabled allies, while placing Learning Disabled

Artists at the centre of their artistic programmes, advocacy work, and public profile. In such contexts, the lived experience of learning disability may be highly visible in creative roles, but less present in formal governance; conversely, a board could meet the 51 per cent criterion while day-to-day decisions, rehearsal processes, and strategic agendas remain shaped by one or two non-disabled leaders.

This raises critical questions for this chapter. What counts as leadership in learning Disability Arts: holding a title, sitting on a board, or leading a workshop in a rehearsal room? How should Learning Disabled Artists' contributions, as facilitators, devisers, spokespeople, and peer mentors, be recognised within, or alongside, policy definitions of disability-led practice? By examining these questions through the experiences of artists at Mind the Gap, DIY Theatre, Access All Areas, and Pyramid of Arts, the chapter argues that leadership in learning disability contexts is often practised collectively and relationally, and that any structural definition (such as the 51 per cent rule) must be read critically in light of how power, authorship, and voice are actually distributed in practice. When Joanne Haines describes leadership as listening, she articulates something that shifts understanding from competency-based models to relational practice. Sigrid Merx identifies empathy as 'the human capacity to engage inter-subjectively with others, to understand others, to be able to relate to their feelings and experiences.' (Merx, 2015, p. 220). This resonates with Joanne's account: leadership requires being present to what others know, not simply transmitting knowledge downward. This perspective aligns with recent scholarship on relational leadership. Dian Marie Hosking argues for 'being in the now rather than in the know,' (Hosking, 2011, p. 463) emphasising immediacy and presence over expert knowledge. More significantly, Hosking introduces listening as 'participatory knowing whereby listening becomes sensing and feeling or 'being with' the phenomenal world; listening is heart-felt, engaged relating' (p. 463). Joanne's insistence on listening reflects a theoretically sophisticated understanding of leadership as embodied, relational work.

7.2 Leadership Models in Disability-Led Organisations

Robert Lord's implicit leadership theory argues that 'individuals rely on prototypes that are abstractions of the most widely shared features or attributes of specific categories.' (Lord, 1984, p. 402) . Group members share a prototype of 'the leader', a mental template of attributes and behaviours associated with leadership. Research on implicit leadership suggests that learning disabled people may be prevented from being recognised as leaders not because of actual ability or interpersonal capacity, but because they do not match the prototype. This is

compounded by the fact that learning disabled people themselves may internalise limiting prototypes and apply them to themselves, limiting ambitions and opportunities, as well as selfstigmatisation. However, when learning disabled people occupy visible leadership positions and exercise real power, prototypes begin to shift. Charlene Salter's emphasis on visibility and role models directly addresses this: without seeing disabled leaders, disabled people, and nondisabled people, cannot imagine disabled leadership as possible.

> If we always see leaders as 'heroic' individuals then only very special, charismatic people can be leaders. If on the other hand we think that leadership is about people and relationships, then leadership can be much more fluid and shared - people can be both leaders and followers and more than one person can be involved in leadership at the same time.
>
> (DIY Arts, Reference Company Quote, 2019)

DIY Theatre's statement explicitly rejects trait theory approaches to leadership, which posit that certain innate traits distinguish leaders from non-leaders (Stogdill, 1948; Zaccaro, 2007). Instead, DIY operationalises a distributed leadership model where leadership capacity is understood as learnable and widely distributed across the organisation. The Friday Group, an experienced group of adult leaders with learning disabilities, exemplifies this approach. These leaders specialise in planning and delivering arts and health projects. From 2018–2019, they worked with the University of Manchester to deliver a module on arts and health to fourth and fifth-year medical students. Rather than token involvement, Friday Group members served as instructors, designing curriculum, facilitating sessions, and delivering training in areas such as the Five Ways to Well-being and social prescribing. Through drama exercises, they explored how the social model of health complements the medical model. This pedagogical role positions Learning Disabled Artists as experts, not case studies or inspiration narratives, but educators whose knowledge is essential to professional training. The Friday Group also runs workshops at national conferences, including at the Creative Therapies Conference where they facilitated 'Movement through the Life Stages,' inviting professional delegates to engage with well-being frameworks through embodied practice.

The Young Leaders Group operates similarly, developing leadership and employability skills through arts and drama for young disabled people in transition to adulthood. Through structured projects and Arts Award pathways, members develop artistic practice, communication, and the ability to plan, promote, and evaluate their own work, gaining

nationally recognised Silver and Gold Arts Awards in the process. One notable project, Circus Tricks!, began as a live promenade performance and, during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdowns, was adapted into a series of animated videos, radio content, and participatory activity packs. Young leaders made creative decisions at every stage of this re-imagining performance material for online formats, co-developing participation resources, and collaborating with professional musicians and animators to realise their ideas. These are not incidental details of a single project; they illustrate how leadership is practised interdependently in learning disability Arts. Rather than being positioned as assistants or 'participants,' young leaders occupy initiating and decision-making roles, while drawing on the technical expertise of nondisabled collaborators in animation, music, and digital production. Leadership here is not a solitary act of directing others, but a shared process: disabled young people set the artistic direction and hold responsibility for the work, and professionals support, translate, and extend those ideas into new media.

Susan Caudle, DIY's Artistic Director, formalised these insights through doctoral research on leadership in disability theatres. She concluded that leadership practices are 'fluid and emergent' (Caudle, 2019, p. 140), requiring practitioners to 'work with "light structuring"', to be heedful, generous, to accept and build on what is offered and to work in the moment. To work dialogically[…]is to feel discomfort, to take risks and to feel out of control at times. It requires recognition of power inequalities which can be deeply ingrained in existing approaches but it also offers a space where we can choose to do things differently' (Caudle, 2019, p. 140).

This description reflects contingency theory principles, namely that the effectiveness of leadership depends on alignment between style and situational factors (Fiedler, 1967; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969). However, Caudle's emphasis on discomfort and power negotiation grounds leadership in the relational, political work of actual practice. Recognising power inequalities is uncomfortable because it requires leaders and participants to confront who holds authority, whose voices are centred or sidelined, and how decisions are really made, rather than how they are described in policy or on organisational charts. It can expose tensions between espoused values (for example, inclusion and co-creation) and everyday realities. This discomfort was evident in my own research. Several artists at Mind the Gap spoke, often cautiously, about the experience of being led by an Executive Director and Artistic Director who were both non-disabled. One artist reflected:

> The person who decides on what shows we are going to make for the next 5–10 years isn't disabled. They come and talk to us about what we want to do, but she makes the decision, and she will make what she is interested in making.
>
> (Zara Mallinson, Artist Interview, 2019)

Artists described 'needing to stay quiet' about these concerns, worried about jeopardising opportunities or relationships. Here, the contingency is not only about matching leadership style to context; it is about how non-disabled leaders choose to respond to the discomfort of being named as gatekeepers in a Disability Arts company, and whether they are prepared to share or restructure power in response. In this sense, leadership practice in learning disability Arts is not just situational but explicitly political: it involves negotiating unequal power relations in rooms where disabled and non-disabled people work together, and where the language of collaboration can both mask and reveal those inequalities.

Organisational leadership (Caudle, 2017) refers to how the company or event is run through the visible, day-to-day structures. At Mind the Gap, this includes artists running workshops and warm-ups with the Academy and mirroring staff as co-practitioners weekly. ZARA (2019), a large-scale outdoor theatre event with four performance runs in Halifax and London, exemplifies this model. The cast included Mind the Gap artists alongside over 400 performers from learning disabled community groups and theatre companies. Significantly, learning disabled people held leadership roles across cast, devising, rehearsal, technical roles, and frontof-house. This was not diversity-as-decoration but leadership embedded in every organisational layer. By 2020, Mind the Gap presented organisational practices as complementary to artistic skills, with 'funding applications alongside performance skills with no sense of hierarchy' (Mind the Gap, 2020). This moves beyond seeing leadership as separate from artistic work, positioning it as integral to artistic practice. At the same time, artists' reflections reveal that this is an ongoing, imperfect process rather than a solved achievement. As one Artist put it, 'I have built my leadership skills up - but I don't think anyone will take me seriously. Sometimes I get stuck. I can't lead people straight away so they might just get on with it without me.' (Laura Reed, MTG Artist, 2020). This honesty highlights both the ambition and the difficulty of cultivating learning disabled leadership: opportunities exist and are valued, but confidence and shared responsibility still require continual reflection.

Access All Areas commits to disruptive theatre and performance by learning disabled and autistic artists. Their work spans multiple strands: a Performance Company of twelve learning

disabled and autistic artists creating original work; an award-winning Performance Making Diploma with the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama; and a Take Part Programme coled by learning disabled professionals. The Transforming Leadership programme, funded as part of Arts Council England's Transforming Leadership Fund, employed nine learning disabled leaders across directing, social media, trustee board co-chairing, and beyond. The programme's innovation lies in its co-leadership model, pairing leaders with and without learning disabilities. As Access All Areas stated: 'We created this programme because learning disabled and autistic people are still, consistently, left out of leadership conversations. Our learning disabled and autistic peers are massively underrepresented in the stories we tell, in our character onscreen and onstage. We don't think this will change until we value the role of different lived experiences in shaping these stories, and in shaping our cultural sector.' (Access All Areas, Reference Company Quote, 2020)

Charlene Salter, now Co-Chairperson, reflects: 'It is important for learning disabled and autistic leaders to make our voices heard. For years we've been left out-we need to show that we are strong, confident leaders. We don't see learning disabled and autistic people represented. We don't see role models when we are younger.' (Charlene Salter, Interview with author, 2022) Charlene Salter's observation connects to implicit leadership theory (Lord, 1984), which argues that group members share prototypes of 'the leader' and sets of attributes and behaviours associated with leadership. Without visible learning disabled leaders, disabled people themselves may internalise limiting prototypes about who can lead. Co-leadership disrupts these prototypes, making visible new possibilities. The co-leadership model proved transformative not only for learning disabled leaders but for the entire organisation. According to programme evaluation, non-disabled co-leaders experienced increased collaboration, new ways of working, and recognition that 'everybody has a different set of skills.' This aligns with research on inclusive leadership: Juliet Bourke & Andrea Titus identify inclusive leaders as those who demonstrate 'visible commitment, humility, awareness of bias, curiosity about others, cultural intelligence, and effective collaboration.' (Bourke & Titus, 2020, p. 8) Coleadership structures institutionalise these qualities.

Mind the Gap Case Study

Tim Wheeler, founder of Mind the Gap in 1989, articulated a radical vision for the company: if he had succeeded in his mission, he would have 'been put out of a job' (Wheeler, 2019). This vision, working towards the organisation's own obsolescence by transferring power to Learning Disabled Artists provided a philosophical foundation for Mind the Gap's trajectory.

Yet by 2018– 2020, the company recognised a significant contradiction between its public advocacy for disability-led leadership and its internal structures (Staging Change & Engage, 2020). It became increasingly clear that Mind the Gap could not credibly promote leadership by Learning Disabled Artists without creating concrete, paid pathways into decision-making roles across the wider arts sector.

This recognition crystallised around the Staging Change internship programme, launched at the end of 2018 as 'a new leadership programme… based around dynamic three-way partnerships between Mind the Gap, arts venues and Learning Disabled Artists,' (Disability Arts Online, 2019) aimed at getting people with learning disabilities employed in the arts. Working with venues such as Leeds Playhouse and Square Chapel Arts Centre, Mind the Gap employed four learning disabled interns in key production roles on the large-scale outdoor show ZARA: Assistant Producer, Assistant Director, Researcher, and Creative Engagement Facilitator. The programme's stated aim was to 'increase the visibility of Learning Disabled Artists in the wider arts sector and offer skills development and advocacy opportunities for learning disabled people,' (Disability Arts Online, 2019) including adapting audition processes and demonstrating that Learning Disabled Artists could and should be appointed to backstage and decision-making roles.

In practice, Staging Change functioned as both a leadership development scheme and a piece of action research. The lived experiences of the four interns, Learning Disabled Artists stepping into roles such as Assistant Producer and Researcher, exposed a series of systemic challenges. Contracts offering 16 hours per week were reported as exhausting and unsustainable by those working the contracts, casting doubt on the viability of full-time professional work given the cognitive and emotional demands. Interns described a sense of pressure to be constantly switched on - engaging in theatre research, staying up to date with companies, and demonstrating initiative - without having the space or support to disengage or recharge. When staff became occupied with other responsibilities, interns felt abandoned and unsure where to turn for guidance. The interns often reported they struggled to voice concerns, lacked confidence in professional contexts, and were unsure how to navigate organisational hierarchies (Post-Internship Interviews, 2021); yet crucially, these issues were not treated as individual deficits but as reflections of systemic barriers around contracts, benefits, support structures, and expectations.

Mind the Gap's response was not limited to ad hoc adjustments for individual interns. Instead, learning from Staging Change fed directly into a strategic reimagining of what leadership development for Learning Disabled Artists could look like, including subsequent work under the Engage banner. Central to this shift was a process of listening, not collecting feedback, but treating artists' experiences as authoritative knowledge about what supports or undermines leadership. From this emerged an expanded approach to leadership as both political education and skill-building. Alongside practical training in producing, facilitation, and communication, a significant focus was placed on situating leadership within the history of disability activism, helping artists understand their place in a wider political movement and equipping them with a framework to view the arts as a form of activism. This mirrored Bob Healy's assertion that self-advocacy training should enable people 'to be in charge rather than being told what to do,' (Healy, 2017) shifting the emphasis from passive participation to active agency.

In this case study, then, Staging Change and Engage are not presented simply as successful programmes, but as sites where Mind the Gap grappled with the tensions between vision and structure, opportunity and risk, representation and real power. They mark a moment when the company moved from advocating for learning disabled leadership in principle to testing what it means in practice. Artists were supported to articulate their access needs in professional environments, moving beyond medicalised language and towards a confident negotiation of support structures. This addressed a key issue raised by Associate Artist Daniel Foulds, who described the complex challenges he encountered during his internship. He explained how difficult it was to manage tasks that others assumed were intuitive: creating to-do lists, prioritising, managing competing demands, interpreting email etiquette, or knowing how much to contribute in meetings. When reflecting with Daniel after his internship, Foulds noted that many people with learning disabilities 'were never taught' (Daniel Foulds, Artist Interview, 2020), and never had the opportunities to learn these foundational workplace skills, often because educators and employers assumed they would never need them. His account exposes the link between educational failure and unconscious ableism, a structural belief that disabled people are not expected to succeed in professional spaces. These deficits are not about individual capability but about opportunities systematically denied. This perspective is reinforced by Ofsted's 2018 inspection of services for 0–25-year-olds with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), which found 'serious concerns' in 44% of local areas (Ofsted, 2018). The report paints a stark picture of how poorly young disabled people are prepared for leadership or employment. Against this backdrop, Mind the Gap's leadership programme deliberately included training in workplace communication, time management, and

decisionmaking - skills that non-disabled peers might acquire implicitly but which learning disabled adults often have to be taught explicitly and later in life. Daniel Foulds's account exposes how systemic educational failure creates barriers to leadership emergence. Nicki Crick & Kennneth Dodge (1994) describe social functioning as ‘encoding of social cues and mental interpretation that result in a desired outcome’ (Crick & Dodge, 1994). If learning disabled people have not been taught workplace social codes, because of low expectations about their employment futures, they cannot be expected to navigate workplace contexts without support. Yet this is often pathologised as individual difficulty rather than understood as systemic failure. When organisations respond by teaching missing skills (as Mind the Gap does through Staging Change), they enable agency.

Another key dimension of the programme involved helping artists recognise their own strengths and track achievements over time. Artists were encouraged to build reciprocal relationships with the organisation, including researching upcoming projects, questioning internal processes, and, crucially, learning that they had the right to say no. As artist Alan Clay reflected, ‘When someone offers you something and you are not interested in it, you can say no. You don’t always have to say yes; it is your decision’ (Alan Clay, Artist Interview, 2020). This statement articulates a powerful shift in authority, from compliance to autonomy, and reflects inclusive leadership principles such as ‘humility,’ in which those in power create space for others to lead. Professional development also included practical sessions on job applications and workplace scenarios, ensuring that artists not only developed political awareness and selfunderstanding but also concrete competencies for leadership. Even in its early stages, the impact of this approach was visible. Mind the Gap reported that artists were already beginning to claim space within the organisation in new ways, initiating conversations about the practices of visiting directors, advocating for involvement in research and development processes, and opening discussions about representation on the Board of Trustees (Mind the Gap, 2020). What emerged was a palpable sense of liberation and ownership. Alan Clay's statement: 'You can say no. It is your decision’ (Alan Clay, Artist Interview, 2020) captures something fundamental about learning disabled autonomy. Many learning disabled people have been trained, through experience, to accept whatever is offered. Organisations that explicitly teach artists they can decline opportunities and can question processes are teaching fundamental skills of agential leadership. This reflects both servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970) and inclusive leadership (Bourke & Titus, 2020) frameworks, which emphasise empowerment and creating space for others' voice. However, it goes further: it requires systemic change in how organisations relate to disabled members, shifting from benevolent

provision to genuine shared decision-making. Mind the Gap's inclusion of ‘Disability Activism’ in Staging Change reflects recognition that leadership cannot be divorced from disability politics. Understanding the history of disability, the social model, and disability-led activism situates individual leadership within collective movement toward justice: ‘I understand us more. I want to protest, because now I understand’ (Laura Reed, Artist Interview, 2021). Bob Healy (2017) emphasises that self-advocacy training is fundamentally about learning ‘to be in charge rather than being told what to do.’ When artists understand disability politics, they understand that their needs are not individual problems but structural realities that organisations must accommodate. They understand that saying no, asking questions, and claiming leadership are acts of political assertion within systems historically designed to exclude them.

Pedagogical leadership involves learning disabled performers as trainers and educators. Mind the Gap (along with other companies such as The Lawnmowers) have extensively used Forum Theatre (Boal, 1979) in training health professionals. In these practices, the performer is not a case study but an expert combining theatre knowledge with insider expertise on learning disability. Anna Gray describes performing in ANNA (2016): ‘We would play out scenes like telling your family that you are pregnant, and then we would ask the people who were watching to talk about it. It was interesting because they came up with new ways for us to act it, and how we could maybe change what happened for good and for bad’ (Anna Gray, Artist Interview, 2019). In Forum Theatre, the audience watches scenes reflecting real dilemmas. They are invited to step in, offering alternatives. The Learning Disabled Artist is not performing for passive audiences but facilitating critical reflection on complex social issues using lived experience as foundational expertise. This model treats disabled artists' experience as valuable knowledge, central rather than peripheral to learning.

Drawing on Matthew Reason’s ‘Where in your body?’ method (Reason, 2015), Mind the Gap artists were asked: ‘Where on your body do you feel something when you are in a leadership position?’, one artist answered 'in my heart.' (Alison Colborne, Artist Interview, 2020) Colborne elaborated: ‘Because I am caring for people. I am watching people, making sure people are okay. I am helping people, and I am relating to those people. I feel it in my heart because I am proud because I am connecting with people.’ (Alison Colborne, Artist Interview, 2020). Alison's embodied description reveals leadership not as a set of competencies but as relational presence and care. Dan Zahavi describes empathy as a ‘distinctive form of otherdirected intentionality…which allows foreign experiences to disclose themselves as

foreign rather than as own' (Zahavi, 2010, p. 138). Alison's heart-felt awareness of others' needs reflects this empathetic intentionality. Her account demonstrates what Hosking terms 'heart-felt listening' (Hosking, 2011, p. 463), engaged relating that responds to the phenomenal world rather than imposing predetermined structures. Leadership, in this model, emerges through attentiveness to what is actually present in the encounter. This contrasts sharply with transactional leadership approaches (Bass, 1985) focused on reward-punishment exchanges, or even some transformational models that emphasise the leader's vision over relational responsiveness.

Arts Council England (2016) reports that only 4% of the arts industry identify as disabled, compared with 18% of the population nationally. This massive disparity persists despite disability-led theatre's excellence and visibility. Tom Shakespeare's social model of disability (2006) argues that society disables people through exclusionary structures. The logical conclusion would be that mainstream theatre should become universally inclusive, rendering specialist disability theatre unnecessary. However, the 4% figure suggests we are far from this goal. Until representation is achieved and systems transform, specialist disability-led organisations remain essential spaces where disabled people can lead without competing against entrenched ableism. Access All Areas' statement is clear: 'We don't think [representation] will change until we value the role of different lived experiences in shaping these stories.'. (Access All Areas, Reference Company Quote, 2021).

7.3 Upstairs and downstairs: the spatial organisation of leadership

The distinction between "upstairs" and "downstairs" became an important feature of my experience of Mind the Gap. I use these terms not simply to describe the physical arrangement of the building, but to name the organisational and cultural hierarchy that the building appeared to materialise. "Downstairs" was associated primarily with the Artists and Students with learning disabilities: the spaces of rehearsal, workshops, performance preparation, social interaction and everyday creative activity. "Upstairs" was associated with the staff who managed and administered the company, the majority of whom did not have learning disabilities. The relationship between these spaces was not entirely separate or fixed, but the distinction was sufficiently persistent that it shaped how leadership, authority and organisational knowledge were experienced.

The physical separation of the two groups gave material form to a wider division between those who made the work and those who organised, governed and resourced it. Leadership

was therefore experienced as being located elsewhere. It was not only that particular decisions were made by people with formal titles; the organisation's spatial arrangement communicated where authority was situated and who was expected to move between spaces. The Artists and Students were primarily positioned downstairs, while the staff who held responsibility for strategic planning, funding, administration and organisational direction were primarily positioned upstairs. In this sense, the architecture of Mind the Gap participated in the production of organisational meaning. It suggested that artistic participation and institutional authority were related, but not equivalent, forms of belonging. This spatial hierarchy is significant because it complicates the language of inclusion. Mind the Gap was established to support and promote learning disabled artists, and the downstairs spaces were often sites of creativity, community and belonging. However, the existence of an inclusive artistic environment did not necessarily mean that the whole organisation was equally accessible. Inclusion could be experienced strongly within rehearsals and workshops while remaining more limited in the structures through which decisions were made, information circulated and organisational priorities were established. The company could therefore be both a place in which learning disabled artists were centred artistically and a place in which non-disabled staff continued to hold substantial institutional authority.

I want to be careful here not to reduce the relationship between the two spaces to a simple opposition between an oppressive "upstairs" and an empowered "downstairs". The upstairs staff were not external to the work of inclusion, and many were committed to supporting learning disabled artists. The organisation's staff provided essential creative, administrative and practical labour, without which many of the artistic opportunities available to the Artists would not have been possible. The problem is not that non-disabled staff existed, nor that particular responsibilities were held by people without learning disabilities. The more difficult question is how necessary forms of support and expertise become organised, and whether they enable learning disabled artists to exercise meaningful influence over the structures that shape their work.

The upstairs/downstairs distinction is therefore best understood as a structural tension rather than a moral judgement on individual staff members. It draws attention to the difference between an organisation's stated commitment to learning disabled-led practice and the everyday distribution of authority within the organisation. A company may create paid artistic opportunities, provide accessible workshops and foreground learning disabled performers in public-facing work, while strategic power remains concentrated elsewhere. This is not a

contradiction that can be resolved simply by increasing the visibility of learning disabled artists. Visibility and authority are not the same thing. Artists may be highly visible as performers and representatives of the organisation while remaining less influential in decisions about programming, employment structures, funding priorities or long-term organisational development.

The distinction between upstairs and downstairs became particularly visible when learning disabled Artists moved into work-experience or employed roles associated with the upstairs administration. These transitions were important because they appeared to challenge the spatial and organisational hierarchy. They demonstrated that learning disabled people could occupy roles beyond performance and could contribute to the administrative, producing and strategic life of the company. However, movement upstairs did not automatically result in full inclusion. In some cases, the cultures of the two spaces remained markedly different, and the person moving between them was required to negotiate that difference. This suggests that access is not only a question of whether someone can enter a particular room. It also concerns whether they can understand, influence and feel a sense of belonging within the practices that operate there. The upstairs culture was shaped by different forms of language, pace, expectation and professional knowledge from those that characterised the downstairs creative spaces. Information was often organised according to administrative or institutional conventions that were not necessarily accessible to the Artists and Students. Conversely, the forms of embodied, relational and experiential knowledge that were central downstairs did not always appear to carry the same authority upstairs. The two cultures were therefore not equally legible to one another.

The movement of an Artist upstairs could consequently be interpreted as a form of reverse integration in the sense described by Hickey-Moody (2009), but also as a test of the limits of that principle. Reverse integration requires the dominant environment to change in response to the practices and knowledge of disabled people. If an Artist moves upstairs but the organisational culture remains unchanged, the direction of adaptation remains largely oneway. The individual is invited into a pre-existing institutional space, but the space itself does not necessarily reorganise around their communication, access needs or expertise. The physical movement upstairs may therefore look like progression while leaving the underlying distribution of power intact. This is where the distinction between presence and participation becomes important. Presence refers to being physically located within a space or formally included within a role. Participation involves having the resources, information, confidence

and authority to influence what happens there. Leadership requires something further: the ability to shape agendas, make decisions, challenge established practices and have one's knowledge treated as consequential. The movement of learning disabled Artists into upstairs roles created the possibility of this progression, but it did not guarantee it. Without structural changes to communication, decision-making and organisational culture, employment upstairs could risk becoming an example of individual inclusion within a continuing system of collective exclusion.

My perspective as an embedded researcher is important here because the upstairs/downstairs distinction was not always necessarily articulated as a formal organisational policy. It was something I came to recognise through proximity: through observing where people spent time, who was present in particular conversations, how information moved, and which forms of work were treated as organisationally significant. This is one of the advantages of an embedded position. Sustained involvement can make visible tacit structures that are not necessarily recorded in official documents or acknowledged in formal accounts of leadership. At the same time, my interpretation remains partial. I was neither a learning disabled Artist nor a permanent member of staff, and my reading of the organisation was shaped by my own position as a nondisabled researcher with access to spaces that were not equally available to everyone. The upstairs/downstairs metaphor is therefore an analytical interpretation of organisational experience, not a claim that every person associated with Mind the Gap experienced the company in precisely the same way. Nevertheless, the metaphor helps to name a recurring problem in learning disability theatre: the separation between artistic participation and institutional power. The Artists and Students were not simply excluded from the organisation. They were central to its artistic identity and public purpose. Yet being central to the organisation's cultural identity did not necessarily mean being central to all the processes through which its future was determined. This distinction is crucial. An organisation may depend upon learning disabled artists to demonstrate its values to funders, audiences and the wider sector, while still limiting their involvement in the decisions that determine its strategic direction. The risk is that learning disabled people become the visible subjects of an organisation without becoming its recognised institutional authors.

The upstairs/downstairs structure also complicates the concept of interdependence developed in this thesis. Interdependence does not mean that everyone performs the same role or that all forms of hierarchy can be eliminated. Organisations require differentiated responsibilities, expertise and accountability. However, interdependence does require those differences to be

acknowledged as reciprocal rather than arranged through a one-way model of dependence. If downstairs is understood as the place where learning disabled Artists receive support, while upstairs is understood as the place where non-disabled staff provide direction, then the relationship remains dependent rather than interdependent. An interdependent organisation would recognise that knowledge and expertise move in both directions. Staff may possess expertise in funding, administration, safeguarding or organisational management, while Artists possess expertise in lived experience, creative practice, access, representation and the cultures of learning disabled communities. Neither form of expertise should automatically cancel out the other. The question is how they are brought into relation, and whether organisational systems allow both to shape decision-making. Interdependence therefore requires more than proximity between staff and Artists. It requires mechanisms through which knowledge can travel across the organisation and alter what happens upstairs as well as downstairs.

This is also why interdependence should not be confused with harmony. The removal of the upstairs/downstairs mentality would not mean the removal of disagreement, responsibility or organisational complexity. Indeed, meaningful participation may produce more disagreement because it enables people to challenge decisions that would previously have gone unquestioned. An organisation that is genuinely interdependent must therefore develop ways of working with disagreement rather than interpreting it as evidence that inclusion has failed. Learning disabled Artists must be able to express dissatisfaction, propose alternatives and challenge non-disabled leadership without placing their employment or future opportunities at risk. The issue of “people’s jobs” is central to this discussion. When particular roles are consistently associated with non-disabled staff, the arrangement can begin to appear natural, even when it is produced by structural barriers rather than individual preference or ability. Administrative, producing and leadership roles may require access to education, informal professional networks, written communication, financial systems and decision-making spaces that have historically been inaccessible to learning disabled people. If these barriers are treated as evidence that learning disabled people are not suited to such roles, the organisation reproduces the very hierarchy it claims to challenge. Conversely, if learning disabled people are employed into these roles without adequate support or genuine authority, the appearance of inclusion may conceal a continuing lack of power.

A future-oriented approach would therefore ask not only whether learning disabled people are employed, but what jobs are available to them, who designs those jobs, what support accompanies them, and whether they have opportunities to progress. This includes recognising

forms of leadership that may not fit conventional administrative models: peer mentoring, workshop facilitation, artistic direction, advocacy, access consultancy, co-evaluation, public speaking and the shaping of organisational policy. Such roles should not be treated as preparatory exercises on the way to "real" leadership. They are already forms of leadership, provided that the organisation recognises their authority and gives them material value through payment, status and decision-making power. The future development of learning disabled theatre depends on moving beyond the symbolic inclusion of learning disabled artists towards a redistribution of institutional authority. This does not require every organisation to adopt an identical model of governance, nor does it mean that all leadership must be exercised by learning disabled people alone. It does require organisations to examine where leadership is located, whose knowledge informs strategic decisions and how the boundaries between artistic, administrative and organisational work are constructed.

One potential development is the creation of more porous organisational structures in which movement between creative and administrative spaces is supported in both directions. This could involve learning disabled Artists contributing to programming, recruitment, budgeting, evaluation and strategic planning, alongside non-disabled staff spending sustained time in creative and community spaces without treating those spaces as merely preparatory or developmental. The purpose would not be to ask Artists to leave their own cultures behind in order to access institutional authority. It would be to enable the organisation's institutional culture to be changed by the knowledge and practices developed within its creative spaces. A second development concerns the recognition of care networks as part of organisational infrastructure. If learning disabled theatre relies upon networks of Artists, creative enablers, producers, support workers, families, venues and funders, then these relationships must be resourced rather than treated as invisible or supplementary labour. Funding models should account for the time required to communicate accessibly, build trust, support decision-making and sustain relationships across different working rhythms. Without this investment, interdependence risks becoming an ideal that organisations value rhetorically while continuing to rely upon unpaid or under-recognised labour. A third development involves rethinking what counts as organisational success. Conventional measures may privilege audience numbers, touring, income generation, speed of delivery or the production of a finished performance. These measures are not irrelevant, but they do not capture the full value of learning disabled theatre. A more expansive account might also consider whether Artists have gained authority over their own representation, whether peer relationships have been strengthened, whether leadership opportunities have increased, whether access has altered artistic form, and whether

the organisation has changed its practices in response to learning disabled knowledge. Such measures would make visible the relational and cultural work that currently remains "downstairs" - present in the life of the organisation but less visible in accounts of institutional achievement.

The upstairs/downstairs mentality should therefore be understood as both a problem and an invitation. It reveals the limits of an organisation in which learning disabled artists are central to the artistic work but remain structurally separated from the spaces in which institutional power is concentrated. At the same time, it identifies a practical point of intervention. The task is not simply to invite more people upstairs, but to change what upstairs means: whose language is used, whose knowledge is valued, how decisions are made and what forms of leadership are recognised. Future learning disabled theatre will be most transformative when it does not merely create space for learning disabled artists within existing cultural structures, but allows their practices, relationships and knowledge to reshape those structures from within.

7.4 Building Inclusive Leadership

Drawing on the practices and voices of disability-led organisations such as Mind the Gap and Access All Areas, a distinct model of inclusive leadership for Learning Disabled Artists begins to take shape, one that does not simply accommodate disabled people within pre-existing leadership norms, but redefines leadership itself. Rather than framing leadership as a set of traits possessed by exceptional individuals, these organisations understand it as a relational and systemic process: one that is cultivated, shared, and deeply context-specific. Leadership, in this model, is not something done to or on behalf of learning disabled people, but something co-produced with them. There are clear points of contact here with Bourke and Titus's work on inclusive leadership, which identifies six 'signature traits': visible commitment, humility, cognisance of bias, curiosity, cultural intelligence and collaboration (Bourke and Titus, 2016). I do not mean that companies like Mind the Gap explicitly adopted this framework; rather, my analysis suggests that many of the leadership practices observed in this research can be read through, and also extend, these traits.

In the organisations studied, these traits were only partially realised and were often aspirational, but they were nevertheless embedded in specific practices and evolving relationships of power rather than remaining abstract ideals. For example, 'visible commitment' took the form of Learning Disabled Artists being named as co-leaders on

projects, paid at professional rates, and included in key meetings about programming and access - while at the same time, final sign-off on budgets and strategy frequently remained with non-disabled senior staff. Similarly, collaboration and curiosity were enacted in rehearsal rooms where artists and staff shared decision-making about material and staging, even as institutional hierarchies reasserted themselves around funding, HR and long-term planning. In this sense, what I observed was not a settled state of shared governance, but an ongoing attempt to move from symbolic inclusion and one-off consultation towards more durable forms of joint decision-making, within the practical and structural limits of each company.

Humility, often invoked but rarely enacted in leadership discourse, is made visible in structures like the Staging Change programme, where non-disabled staff are asked to unlearn assumptions, defer decisions, and recognise the limits of their own experience. This is a radical form of humility: one that creates space for disabled artists not just to be heard, but to lead. Awareness of bias is developed through explicit, political education about the history of disability rights and the pervasiveness of ableism - including internalised ableism among disabled artists themselves. As Mind the Gap's training demonstrates, dismantling unconscious exclusion requires more than good intentions; it requires sustained, collective work to reframe what counts as professionalism, leadership, and knowledge. Curiosity about others is cultivated not as a superficial interest in difference, but through deep listening and relational practice. Leadership becomes an act of attention and presence, where asking questions and sitting with discomfort are valued more than asserting expertise. This relational mode is visible in the practices of artists like Alison Colborn, Joanne Haines, and Alan Clay, whose leadership is embodied through empathy, listening, and autonomy, forms of leadership that traditional hierarchies have often ignored or devalued. A particularly clear example comes from *Leave the Light On For Me* (2022), when Mind the Gap worked with community casts alongside the core company. During these rehearsals, Learning Disabled Artist Paul Wilshaw co-led sessions with community cast director Madeleine O'Reilly. Rather than Madeleine directing and Paul 'supporting,' the structure of the rehearsals positioned Paul as the creative lead: he introduced exercises, set the tone for the room, and explained the dramaturgical logic of scenes to community performers. Madeleine's role in these moments was consciously decentered; she managed timings, the logistics and safeguarding, but deferred to Paul's artistic decisions and followed his lead in the facilitation. When questions arose from community cast members, they were directed first to Paul. Here, humility was a visible practice: a non-disabled director stepping back from default authority so that a Learning Disabled Artist could shape the creative process.

Disability-led work is not merely a genre or a theme, it is a cultural practice with its own artistic lineage. Recognising this requires shifting from ‘access’ as an add-on to leadership as a space of cultural authorship. Effective collaboration is perhaps the most foundational trait in this model, yet it is also the most structurally demanding. It cannot be reduced to teamwork or inclusion policies; instead, it requires change at the level of organisational roles and accountability. Co-leadership, as developed in Access All Areas’ Transforming Leadership programme, is one such structural experiment. By pairing learning disabled and autistic leaders with non-disabled co-leaders in directing, governance and advocacy roles, the company explicitly sets out to ‘shake up the landscape of arts leadership’ and to challenge assumptions about who can lead, and how (Access All Areas, Reference Company Quote, 2024). In interviews and public resources associated with the programme, non-disabled staff described these partnerships as prompting shifts in their own practice, new ways of sharing responsibility, of listening, and of making space for different leadership styles, rather than as a loss of status or authority. At the same time, the programme materials and my observations also point to this as an ongoing, negotiated process rather than a finished state of shared governance.

From these practices and accounts, a set of core principles emerged that, taken together, characterise what genuine learning-disability-led leadership looks like in the organisations studied. These principles are not borrowed wholesale from existing leadership models; rather, they are analytical categories I developed inductively through thematic analysis of interviews, creative workshops, ethnographic fieldnotes, and programme documentation (including Mind the Gap’s Staging Change and Engage projects, and Access All Areas’ Transforming Leadership initiative). They resonate with broader debates around disability-led practice and lived-experience leadership (for example, Beddard, 2023; MacLeod et al., 2025), but are grounded in the specific experiences of learning-disabled artists in this research. What follows, then, is not a universal template, but a set of practice-based principles that describe how leadership is currently being imagined, negotiated, and enacted in learning-Disability Arts contexts.

First, decision-making power must be real, not symbolic. Learning Disabled Artists are not simply consulted or invited to contribute ideas; they are placed at the centre of decisionmaking processes. This includes authority over budgets, casting, creative direction, and the ability to

say no to opportunities that do not align with their interests or values. The right to refuse is a critical marker of agency.

Second, leadership development must be responsive, not generic. Standardised training programmes often fail to address the specific barriers learning disabled people face. Instead, development must emerge from lived experience. At Mind the Gap, when interns reported feeling unsupported or disoriented, the organisation listened and redesigned its approach. This responsiveness is leadership in action, not the reproduction of best practices, but the continuous reimagining of what support actually looks like.

Third, lived experience must be treated as expertise. Learning Disabled Artists are not passive recipients of training or charity; they are knowledge-holders whose insights reshape not only the content of work but the form and structure of leadership itself. Their experiences inform how access is understood, how decisions are made, and how futures are imagined.

Fourth, leadership is embodied and relational. In the experiences of artists like Alison, Joanne, and Alan, leadership does not always look like charismatic public speaking or strategic control. It looks like emotional attunement, shared decision-making, and the confidence to say no. These are not lesser forms of leadership, but different ones, forms often dismissed in ableist and masculinised leadership cultures that privilege dominance and certainty.

Fifth, representation matters, not just in visible roles but in positions of real authority. As long as artistic directors and executive decision-makers in disability-led organisations are predominantly non-disabled, a structural message persists: that disabled people can contribute, but not control. True inclusive leadership requires learning disabled people to be present at every level, from project teams to boards of trustees and senior management.

Finally, co-leadership transforms everyone involved. When disabled and non-disabled leaders share power, the result is not merely a more inclusive workplace but a fundamentally different way of organising. Non-disabled leaders often report experiencing a sense of liberation in coleadership arrangements, a release from the pressure to know everything, an openness to surprise and mutual growth. Inclusive leadership, in this sense, is not a gift extended to disabled people by a more enlightened majority. It is a collective reimagining of leadership that benefits all.

7.4 Conclusion

The voices of Learning Disabled Artists in this chapter reveal a model of leadership radically different from hierarchical, individualistic, expert-driven models that dominate leadership literature. Leadership, in their accounts, is relational, embodied, and fundamentally connected to care, autonomy, and community.

This leadership does not emerge from abstract theory but from actual practice: from Alison feeling it in her heart, Alan saying no to unsuitable opportunities, Daniel learning skills he was never taught, Charlene demanding visibility, Joanne insisting on listening. These are not exceptional leaders but Learning Disabled Artists given space, support, and real power to lead. The organisations in this chapter, DIY Theatre, Access All Areas, Mind the Gap, are not perfect. Issues of representation persist. Barriers remain. But they actively listen to what Learning Disabled Artists say they need, building structures to honour that. They understand that leadership development for learning disabled people must address systemic educational failure, challenge unconscious ableism, and create structures where disabled people exercise genuine power. For the arts sector to become genuinely learning disability-led, it must recognise that disabled artists are not the future of leadership. They are the present. They are already leading through their work (within the constraints already in place). The sector's task is to stop obscuring that reality and to build structures that allow it to flourish. Finally, it shows that the future of leadership across the arts may not lie in perfecting existing models, but in letting go of them entirely.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge by providing a sustained, participatory and critically reflexive account of learning disabled artists as artists, rather than primarily as recipients of care, subjects of inclusion or objects of representation. Through three years of embedded research with Mind the Gap, alongside engagement with other learning disability arts organisations and cultural partners, the thesis brings together questions of identity, interdependence and leadership that are often discussed separately. It demonstrates that these are not discrete concerns: they are mutually constitutive dimensions of learning disabled artistic practice. The ways in which artists understand themselves, the relationships through

which they work and the structures within which they are recognised as leaders cannot be separated.

The first contribution is conceptual. The thesis develops an understanding of the learning disabled artist as a relational and situated identity. It argues that learning disability is not simply an individual characteristic that exists prior to artistic practice, nor a fixed identity that determines what an artist can do. Rather, artistic identity is formed through interactions between individuals, communities, organisations, cultural expectations and material conditions. The thesis therefore extends existing discussions of learning disabled theatre beyond questions of representation and participation by demonstrating how theatre organisations can become sites in which learning disabled artists negotiate, claim and reshape their identities. Mind the Gap emerges not merely as a workplace or theatre company, but as a cultural environment in which individual and collective identities are produced through artistic practice, belonging and recognition.

The second contribution is the development of interdependence as a structural and artistic principle. Existing discussions of learning disabled theatre have established the importance of collaboration, care and relational performance. This thesis extends those discussions by showing how interdependence operates across the wider networks that sustain artistic work. These networks include fellow Artists, creative enablers, producers, staff, support workers, families, educators, venues, funders and audiences. Interdependence is therefore not understood as a form of individual dependence or as a one-way provision of support. It is a reciprocal condition through which artistic agency, professional identity and collective achievement become possible. The thesis demonstrates that the independence valued by many learning disabled Artists is not independence from relationship, but agency achieved through relationships of mutual recognition and support.

This reconceptualisation makes an important intervention in both disability studies and arts practice. Dominant cultural and policy frameworks frequently position independence as selfsufficiency, individual responsibility and economic productivity. Against this model, the thesis demonstrates that interdependence can strengthen, rather than diminish, autonomy. The Mind the Gap Artists' experiences show that receiving support does not negate authorship or agency when the relationships involved are reciprocal and when Artists retain meaningful influence over creative decisions. The thesis therefore proposes care networks as a way of understanding the relational, material and institutional conditions through which learning disabled theatre is made.

The third contribution concerns leadership. The thesis extends existing models of disabilityled and learning-disability-led practice by distinguishing between visibility, participation and authority. Learning disabled people may be highly visible within an organisation's artistic work while remaining excluded from the strategic and institutional decisions that determine its future. The analysis of Mind the Gap identifies the continuing separation between artistic presence and organisational power, including the "upstairs and downstairs" division through which learning disabled Artists and Students were associated primarily with creative spaces, while formal authority was concentrated among staff, the majority of whom did not have learning disabilities. This analysis contributes an organisational perspective to debates that have often focused on performance, collaboration or individual leadership.

The thesis argues that learning-disability-led practice cannot be defined solely by the presence of learning disabled artists, by the subject matter of a performance or by formal representation within governance structures. It must also be evaluated according to how power is distributed in everyday practice: who sets agendas, who makes decisions, whose knowledge is trusted, who controls resources and whose interpretation determines the meaning of the work. Leadership is consequently theorised as relational, distributed and embodied. It may be exercised through performance, facilitation, peer mentoring, advocacy, creative decisionmaking and access expertise, as well as through formal organisational roles. This provides a more inclusive account of leadership than models based on hierarchy, individual charisma or conventional professional autonomy.

A further contribution is methodological and ethical. The thesis demonstrates the value of combining participatory and ethnographic approaches with creative methods, including deep hanging out, life-narrative interviews, reflective conversations, visual activities and collaborative forms of review. These methods enabled Artists to contribute through different modes of communication and participation, rather than requiring them to conform to the linguistic and procedural expectations of conventional academic research. The thesis also contributes a critical account of the limits of participation. It shows that consultation does not, by itself, redistribute power, and that co-production must be understood as an ongoing negotiation involving consent, interpretation, disagreement and accountability. In this respect, the research offers not a universal method for inclusive research, but a situated account of how participation was made possible, where it was productive and where its limits remained.

The thesis also contributes to knowledge by bringing academic scholarship into dialogue with the practical knowledge of learning disabled Artists and arts organisations. The research does

not treat practitioners' and Artists' experiences as illustrative examples of theories developed elsewhere. Instead, their accounts are used to question established concepts of identity, independence, professionalism, care and leadership. The thesis shows that learning disabled artists are not only participants in cultural production but also theorists of their own experience. Their reflections generate knowledge about how arts organisations function, how disability is constructed within professional spaces and how alternative cultural practices might be developed.

Taken together, these contributions produce a new account of learning disabled theatre as an ecology of identity, care, interdependence and cultural authority. The thesis demonstrates that the significance of learning disability arts lies not only in increasing the representation of disabled people on stage. Its wider significance is that it challenges the assumptions through which theatre defines the artist, the professional, the leader and the conditions of artistic value. Learning disabled theatre offers practical and theoretical models for rethinking how cultural organisations operate, particularly by making visible the relational labour and support upon which all artistic production depends.

8.1 Revisiting the Research Questions

The thesis was guided by five central research questions. Each sought to unravel aspects of how Learning Disabled Artists navigate the arts sector and articulate new paradigms of inclusion:

8.1a What is a Learning Disabled Artist?

The findings challenge singular or medicalised definitions. Instead, a Learning Disabled Artist emerges as a political, cultural, and relational identity shaped by access, recognition, and power. Rather than viewing learning disability as a limitation, the research shows how artists reframe it as a fundamental and empowering part of their artistic expression, deeply integrated into their practice, community, and sense of self: a Learning Disabled Artist emerges as someone whose identity is entangled in historical marginalisation but who resists and redefines that identity through cultural production. This identity is further shaped by the social construction of disability, influenced by Foucauldian discourse, Crip Theory, and disability activism. Artists are not defined by impairments but by the social environments and power structures they must navigate, and their artistry becomes a vehicle to interrogate those norms.

8.1b How does learning disability affect the identity of artists?

Identity was shown to be intersectional, dynamic, and often negotiated under external assumptions and internal resistance. The artist's self-perception frequently resisted marginalising narratives, asserting complexity and pride. The thesis demonstrates that learning disability becomes a 'master identity' (Chapter 5), often dominant over other aspects of a person's self. This identity is shaped not just by the individual but by their interactions with institutions, society, and dominant discourses around ability, professionalism, and normalcy.

The findings of this research reveal that Learning Disabled Artists frequently navigate a complex and shifting terrain of identity formation, often oscillating between resisting dominant negative stereotypes and reclaiming disability as a source of pride. This dual movement reflects the tension between external societal narratives, which have historically framed learning disability through deficit and dependence - and the internal processes of selfdefinition, empowerment, and artistic authorship. Rather than passively absorbing imposed labels, many artists actively resist reductive characterisations of their capabilities, choosing instead to assert their own narratives of identity.

Identity, as evidenced throughout the thesis and particularly in Chapter 5, is not experienced in isolation but is deeply entangled in the support structures that surround the artist. Support networks, whether in the form of family, professional carers, institutional gatekeepers, or cocreative collaborators, play a significant role in shaping how Learning Disabled Artists see themselves and how they are perceived by others. These relationships can both enable and constrain, acting as sites of affirmation but also, at times, of gatekeeping that filters or restricts the artist's access to autonomy and opportunity (Williams, 2013; Causton-Theoharis and Burdick, 2008). In several of the fieldwork settings, for example, support workers or producers informally decided which opportunities were 'appropriate' for an artist, or spoke on their behalf in meetings, even when the artist was present and able to answer for themselves. The thesis illustrates that while such networks are often essential for navigating the arts sector, they must be critically examined for the ways they may reinforce hierarchies, redirect decisionmaking away from artists, or unintentionally diminish the scope of the artist's agency.

Furthermore, the thesis draws attention to the nuanced debate surrounding the use of personfirst versus identity-first language, a linguistic choice that encapsulates broader questions of autonomy, politics, and self-representation. The way artists choose to refer to themselves, whether as a 'person with a learning disability' or a 'Learning Disabled Artist', is

not merely semantic. It reflects differing attitudes toward the integration of disability into the core of one's identity. Some artists, such as those at Mind the Gap, articulated a strong sense of pride in their learning disability and expressed a desire for it to be recognised as inseparable from their artistic identity. Others preferred person-first language as a way of resisting being wholly defined by their diagnosis. This interplay reveals the diversity of perspectives within the learning disabled community and underscores the importance of enabling individuals to define their own identity terms within and beyond institutional contexts.

8.1c What is the significance of independence or interdependence in relation to Learning Disabled Artists?

This thesis repositions interdependence as a generative, empowering framework that rejects individualistic paradigms dominant in both art and neoliberal disability policy. This research robustly challenges the valorisation of independence in the arts and instead promotes interdependence as a more accurate, ethical, and sustainable model for both artistic and organisational practice.

Chapter 6 of the thesis, alongside insights drawn from participants throughout the study, presents a compelling critique of the dominant cultural narrative that idealises independence. The concept of independence, particularly as it is understood within neoliberal frameworks, is revealed to be largely inaccessible, and often irrelevant, to the lived experiences of Learning Disabled Artists. Rooted in assumptions of individualism, self-sufficiency, and productivity, this ideal fails to account for the ways in which many artists operate within interdependent systems of care, collaboration, and support. Rather than viewing this as a limitation, the research reframes interdependence as a generative and empowering alternative, one that reflects the real conditions under which creative and professional success becomes possible for many learning disabled individuals.

Interdependence, in this context, is not a concession but a strength. It is characterised by mutual support, collective authorship, and an openness to shared decision-making processes. Far from being a marker of deficiency or dependency, interdependence is positioned in the thesis as an ethical and creative model that offers a more accurate reflection of how artistry and leadership are cultivated within learning disabled communities. This model resonates deeply with Crip Theory, which challenges normative expectations around independence, bodily autonomy, and linear success. Crip Theory's rejection of the so-called 'norm' makes space for fluidity in how support is structured and understood, embracing relational accountability over rigid autonomy.

Through this lens, interdependence emerges not as an alternative to be tolerated but as a paradigm to be embraced-not just for Learning Disabled Artists, but for the arts sector as a whole.

8.1d What are the models for success for Learning Disabled Artists?

Success was revealed not to be linear, but instead grounded in relational validation, processbased outcomes, collective authorship, and visibility on one's own terms. It is not tied to mainstream metrics such as ticket sales or critical acclaim, but rather to:

- Visibility and self-definition
- Relational validation from peers and audiences
- Process-based outcomes
- Inclusive working environments

The thesis critiques how traditional arts institutions often exclude Learning Disabled Artists by defining success in terms of able-bodied excellence. Instead, Learning Disabled Artists are shown to redefine success on their own terms, often through collective and participatory models.

8.1e What is learning disability-led practice, and how does it link to employability, access, and leadership?

Learning disability-led practice functions as both a methodology and a politics, focusing on self-authorship, transforming power structures, and opposing tokenism. It redefines employability and leadership through principles of equity and belonging. Framed as both methodology and activism, learning disability-led practice involves shifting control to Learning Disabled Artists in creative decision-making, embedding access at every stage of the artistic process and challenging tokenism and performative inclusion within the arts sector.

Such practice reimagines employability and leadership not as individual achievements but as collaborative, supported, and systemic processes. The thesis presents real examples of this leadership, notably through Mind the Gap's 'Staging Change' and 'Engage' programmes, which positioned Learning Disabled Artists at the forefront of creative and organisational innovation.

8.2 Identity and Representation: Beyond the Social Model's Subject

The social model of disability was founded on a crucial distinction: between impairment and disability (Oliver, 1992; Barnes, 1991). This shift was politically transformative, as it moved

the focus of change from the individual to society. However, for Learning Disabled Artists, the experience of identity does not fit neatly into this binary. The data from this research reveal a more complex landscape: one where identity is not merely oppressed by external structures and waiting for liberation, but is actively and sometimes contradictorily constructed through them. Throughout Chapter 5, artists reflect on the ongoing difficulty of navigating a 'master identity' that can mask their multiplicity and agency. As one artist states: 'Having a learning disability means people think they know who you are already.
Before you speak, they've decided you can't. That's not who I am.' (Howard Davies, Artist Interview, 2022). This is, in a sense, a textbook example of the disabling barriers presented by the social model. Yet, what the artist continues to express is not simply a wish to remove that barrier. It is a demand for complexity, the multifaceted nature of the self that is Christian, musician, collaborator, friend, and learning disabled, all at once and in an irreducible way.

This is where a social constructionist and Butlerian perspective becomes essential. Here, identity is not a fixed state that exists before social life and is then suppressed; it is performed through practice, relationships, and cultural authorship (Butler, 1990; Goodley, 2014). Artists don’t simply oppose their diagnostic labels; they actively perform against them, reshaping and repurposing cultural forms to create new meanings. As Daniel Foulds explains: 'I'm not just an artist with a learning disability. I'm a collaborator, a teacher, and sometimes a director. The disability's part of me, but it's not all of me.' (Daniel Foulds, Artist Interview, 2020). This is a performative assertion, a re-inscription of subjectivity that the social model cannot fully explain because it is not solely about removing barriers but about creating a self in relation to others, institutions, and art itself. Therefore, the findings from Chapter 5 deepen our understanding of the social model's subject. The Learning Disabled Artist is not a passive recipient of social restrictions waiting for structural change. Nor is identity simply reducible to diagnosis, even when diagnosis underpins exclusion. In the context of Mind the Gap, identity is a dynamic interaction between imposed categories and self-created meaning, negotiated through creative practice, influenced by institutional surroundings, and always directed towards an audience. The disability becomes part of the material; the artist engages with it, not in opposition to it. This has practical implications for how organisations, funders, and researchers understand Learning Disabled Artists. Framing representation solely through a social model lens, counting disabled people in institutions, removing barriers to access, risks reproducing the very reduction these artists resist. What is needed, and what this thesis argues for, is a relational model of identity that takes the social model's structural insights as its foundation, while building upward into the performative, creative, and intersubjective

dimensions of selfhood that the artists themselves describe. The question is not only 'what stops learning disabled people from being artists?' but 'what does being a Learning Disabled Artist make possible?

8.3 Interdependence as a Structural Principle

The social model's political horizon has always been independence - the right of disabled people to live, work, and create on their own terms, free from the paternalism of care regimes and institutional control. This emancipatory aspiration was hard-won and remains essential. Yet independence, as a normative ideal, carries significance. In arts policy discourse, it often appears as the celebration of the solitary creative genius. For Learning Disabled Artists, this ideal is not only unachievable: it is, the thesis argues, the wrong aspiration altogether.

Chapter 6 argues that interdependence is not merely a pragmatic solution for artists who struggle with independence. Instead, it is a fundamental principle, a different understanding of what creative and organisational life is for, and who it serves. Artists at Mind the Gap consistently challenged the idea that support signals a lack. As one artist states: 'People think being supported means you're less of an artist. But without support, I couldn't do what I do. That doesn't make me less.' (Howard Davies, Artist Interview, 2021). The core issue here is not about managing limitations but about expressing a radically different creative ontology. This aligns with the disability justice concept of access intimacy, the shared understanding that develops when access is more than just logistics, but relational. In this view, access becomes a space for creative production, not just practical accommodation. The co-authorship that Alison Colborne describes: 'We all bring different things. My ideas, someone else's planning, someone else's tech skills. It's how the art comes alive' (Alison Colborne, Artist Interview, 2020), is not about dependency. It describes the generative conditions of making. The social model accurately highlights the institutional and attitudinal barriers that prevent such conditions, but it does not provide a vocabulary for describing the relational richness that emerges when those barriers are lifted and genuine collaboration takes their place.

Findings also show where the social model's logic is undermined by institutional practice. Organisations that nominally 'support' Learning Disabled Artists can frame that support as charity, compliance, or professional development, thereby reinforcing the very hierarchy the model aims to dismantle. In contrast, at Mind the Gap, interdependence functions as a design principle rather than a concession: access and care are structurally embedded, not added later, and creative processes are designed from the start around flexible, distributed authorship. This

organisational difference is significant both theoretically and practically. It indicates that the social model's call for structural change should be seen not only as removing barriers but also as building interdependent infrastructures, organisational forms that enable and sustain relational creativity. The theoretical contribution here is what this thesis terms a relational access model: an extension of the social model that retains its structural critique while replacing independence as its normative horizon with interdependence as a creative, ethical, and organisational value. This is not a retreat from politics. It is, as Kafer (2013) argues of crip futurity, a refusal of the able-bodied futures that disability discourse so often, even unwittingly, reproduces. The Learning Disabled Artists in this study are not striving toward an imagined autonomous selfhood. They are proposing a different world - one in which shared access are the conditions of good art and good work for everyone.

8.4 Leadership and the Redistribution of Cultural Authority

Leadership is where this thesis's argument becomes most clearly interventionist. The findings of Chapter 7 indicate that the more challenging question, which the social model is less prepared to address, is what happens once they are present: whether those structures are altered by their presence, or if presence is merely absorbed without causing institutional change.

The Learning Disabled Artists in this study are already exercising leadership, but not in ways that conventional leadership discourse tends to recognise. They are not leading from the front of hierarchies. They are leading through artistic presence, through the authority of embodied expression, through the patient, accumulated trust that comes from sustained creative collaboration. As Lorraine Brown articulates: 'When I'm on stage, I'm showing who I am. People see me differently. That's leadership.' (Lorraine Brown, Artist Interview, 2020). This is what the thesis terms embodied leadership, a form of influence rooted in artistic visibility and the capacity to reshape how audiences, institutions, and sector peers understand what learning disability can do and be. Alongside embodied leadership, the research highlights distributed leadership as the operative model in the organisations studied. At Mind the Gap, Access All Areas, and Heart 'n Soul, authority is not concentrated but circulated, shared across artists, facilitators, and staff in ways that enable collective ownership of creative decisions. One Mind the Gap staff member describes it thus: 'Leadership here isn't about one person at the top. It's about collaboration and giving people the chance to lead in different ways.' (Charli Ward, Staff Interview, 2020). This distributed model is not simply an inclusive aspiration; it is, the findings suggest, how good arts organisations actually work, and Learning Disabled Artists are among its most sophisticated practitioners.

Yet the thesis does not smooth over the persistent threat of tokenism that shadows these spaces. Learning disabled leaders are sometimes placed in roles, on panels, in steering groups, in advisory capacities, without genuine authority, without the institutional redesign required to make their leadership meaningful. As one Artist warns: 'Sometimes they want a disabled person on the panel, but they don't want to change how the panel works.' (Laura Reed, Artist Interview, 2021). This is precisely the dynamic the social model anticipated: inclusion as presence without redistribution of power. The answer, the thesis argues, is not more representation but structural transformation, a redesign of decision-making processes, funding relationships, and cultural authority that takes learning disabled leadership as its starting point rather than its afterthought. The theoretical contribution of this section is a leadership model grounded in learning Disability Arts practice: one that integrates embodied, distributed, and narrative modes of leadership into a coherent framework that sits in productive tension with mainstream leadership theory. This model is derived from the practice of Learning Disabled Artists themselves, and offered back to the sector, and to leadership theory, as a generative provocation.

8.5 Practical Implications and Future Directions

This research carries substantial practical implications across multiple sectors, with relevance to arts organisations, educational institutions, policymakers, funders, and future researchers. Central to these implications is the need to move beyond surface-level inclusion toward a transformative, structural approach that foregrounds access, authorship, and leadership by learning disabled individuals. The findings challenge dominant frameworks in the arts and advocate for a fundamental reimagining of how Learning Disabled Artists are supported, valued, and engaged.

8.5a For Arts Organisations

Arts organisations must urgently reconsider how learning disabled people are positioned within their structures, not as passive participants or recipients of access, but as creative leaders and cultural decision-makers. As the thesis demonstrates through its engagement with Mind the Gap and other leading Disability Arts organisations, inclusive practices must be codesigned with Learning Disabled Artists from the outset. Access cannot be an afterthought or a ‘bolt-on.’ Instead, it must be embedded at every stage of artistic development, from conception to delivery, evaluation, and dissemination.

This involves building systems of relational care and interdependence into institutional cultures, challenging the dominant ableist notions of independence and artistic individualism. Practical strategies may include reconfiguring rehearsal spaces to account for different access needs, allowing for flexible timelines, and prioritising communication methods that centre accessibility and clarity. Leadership pipelines must also be restructured to ensure that Learning Disabled Artists hold meaningful, decision-making roles, not simply advisory or symbolic positions. Moreover, organisations must invest in the long-term professional development of Learning Disabled Artists, not simply fund short-term, project-based opportunities.
Sustainability, visibility, and continuity are key.

8.5b For Education Providers

The thesis also reveals a significant gap in how learning disability is addressed in arts education. Existing curricula often fail to account for alternative cognitive styles, communication preferences, or non-linear learning trajectories. As a result, Learning Disabled Artists are frequently excluded from formal training pathways or find themselves forced to conform to normative models of artistic development that do not reflect their lived realities. Education providers must begin by acknowledging the systemic barriers that limit access to arts education for learning disabled individuals. Beyond access, they must engage in a radical rethinking of pedagogy, one that validates multiple ways of knowing and doing, including embodied learning, visual languages, co-creation, and non-verbal expression. The thesis makes clear that Learning Disabled Artistry is not less than - it is different, often innovative, and deserving of its own space within the academic canon. It is equally important for arts education to include Learning Disabled Artists as part of the curriculum - not merely as topics of study, but as theorists, practitioners, and leaders in their own right. This is both a matter of representation and epistemic justice.

8.5c For Policymakers and Funders

The role of policymakers and funders is critical in addressing the structural inequities that continue to marginalise Learning Disabled Artists. As discussed in the thesis, economic inequality and precarious employment are recurring themes in the lives of many learning disabled individuals. Arts funding models that prioritise speed, competitiveness, and entrepreneurialism often exclude those who require more time, support, or relational infrastructures to deliver work. Therefore, funding bodies must reform their criteria to recognise and value process over product, collaboration over individual achievement, and

access as a fundamental cost rather than an optional add-on. Funding applications must be made accessible, not just in format, but in logic, language, and pacing. This includes extending timelines, simplifying processes, and providing support to navigate bureaucratic systems.
Furthermore, policies must monitor equity of outcomes, not just equity of opportunity. Tokenistic inclusion is no substitute for genuine leadership and authorship. Funders should prioritise learning disability-led organisations and initiatives, recognising their essential role in reshaping the arts sector from within.

8.5d For Researchers

A central commitment within this project has been the return of findings to the communities that shaped them as an ethical obligation embedded in the research design itself. This was enacted most visibly through the creation of a series of accessible films, co-produced with Learning Disabled Artists from Mind the Gap and made publicly available on YouTube. These films represent a deliberate attempt to translate research findings into a format that is not dependent on academic literacy, offering an alternative mode of engagement with the work for Artists and the wider learning disabled community. In this way, the research does not conclude at the point of thesis submission but continues to circulate in a form accessible to audiences for whom a written academic document would constitute a barrier rather than an invitation.

It is important to be transparent, however, about the limits of this approach. The thesis itself, as a written, theoretically dense document, will not be directly accessible to the majority of Artists who participated in and shaped this research. What has been offered in its place is ongoing dialogue: throughout the research process, findings, emerging themes, and interpretations were communicated verbally and relationally, through conversation, through the sharing of interim outputs (such as the reports in the appendices), and through the kind of sustained communicative relationship that inclusive research methodology demands. This reflects Walmsley and Johnson's argument that inclusive research is a genuine commitment to ensuring participants 'shape and benefit from the process' (Walmsley & Johnson's, 2003, p. 9), a commitment that cannot be discharged through a single dissemination event but must be woven into the fabric of the research relationship over time.

For future researchers, a key implication is that, in contexts such as this, research relationships do not neatly end when the funded project or doctoral timeline concludes. When participants have contributed significantly as artists, and collaborators, there is an ongoing ethical

responsibility to consider how allyship, dialogue and activism might continue beyond the life of the study. This thesis may mark the formal end of the PhD, but not of the work: the mutual commitments that have developed with Mind the Gap Artists continue, and I would urge future researchers to factor this long-term relational dimension into their ethics methodological responsibility.

8.7 Methodological Reflection and Limitations

This thesis adopted a participatory, arts-informed methodology grounded in co-production, accessibility, and creative expression. This approach was ethically and methodologically appropriate to a study centred on learning disabled artists, enabling them to be positioned as collaborators rather than research subjects. The use of film, visual methods, and embedded practice within organisations such as Mind the Gap supported alternative forms of knowledge production and validated embodied, relational, and non-verbal ways of knowing that are often marginalised in academic research (Reason and Bradbury, 2008; Kuppers, 2014). However, it also generated tensions, particularly in balancing co-authorship with the conventions of academic rigour.

Accessibility remained a central commitment throughout the research, but one that required constant negotiation. Despite efforts to design inclusive workshops, interviews, and dissemination activities, not all processes were equally accessible, revealing the limitations of existing research infrastructures. As Liam Bairstow noted after the research conference linked with *Staging Change & Engage*, 'I wanted to say more, but I didn't always understand the questions the way they were asked' (Bairstow, 2020). This highlights the need for research tools that are co-designed from the outset rather than adapted retrospectively.

The study was also shaped by the institutional context in which it took place. While embedding the research within Mind the Gap enabled sustained engagement and rich insight, it also meant that the data was influenced by the organisation's values, structures, and forms of inclusion. My position as both researcher and associate artist further complicated questions of power and interpretation, underscoring the partiality of my perspective. This raises questions about those absent from the study, particularly artists working outside funded or formal settings. The UK-specific context is another limitation. The findings are deeply rooted in the UK arts ecology and policy environment, and may not transfer directly to other national or cultural settings. Comparative research in other contexts would be valuable, particularly where disability paradigms and funding structures differ significantly.

A key methodological strength of the project was *Deep Hanging Out* (Geertz, 1998), which allowed me to immerse myself within the organisation over an extended period rather than entering briefly as an external researcher. This sustained presence gave participants with learning disabilities time to get to know me, become comfortable with my role, and relax into the research relationship. It also created space for them to process the information being shared, rather than being expected to respond immediately within conventional research timelines. In this respect, the method supported a slower, more relational mode of inquiry that was better aligned with the rhythms of learning disabled participants and the ethical demands of accessible research. Just as importantly, *Deep Hanging Out* prevented the kind of "parachute" research that enters a setting for the researcher's benefit and then departs after extracting findings. Instead, it supported a more reciprocal and co-dependent relationship in which the research evolved alongside the work of the organisation. As findings emerged in real time, they could inform new conversations, creative possibilities, and forms of practice development within Mind the Gap. The process also demystified what research could be for organisational partners and practitioners, showing it to be something shared, negotiated, and useful rather than imposed from outside.

For these reasons, I would strongly recommend *Deep Hanging Out* to other researchers working with learning disabled artists and communities. It is particularly valuable where trust, accessibility, and mutual understanding are central to the work. However, it requires patience, transparency, and a willingness to allow the research relationship itself to shape the direction of inquiry. Used well, it offers a more ethical and accessible alternative to extractive research models, while also creating the conditions for knowledge to emerge collaboratively and meaningfully.

8.8 Legacy, Purpose and Audience

The question of the legacy of my role at Mind the Gap requires me to consider not only what this research has produced, but also what it is for, who it is intended to serve, and what responsibilities follow from having undertaken it. This is particularly important because the research emerged from a funded and embedded position within Mind the Gap's *Staging Change & Engage* project. My role was therefore never simply that of an external academic researcher. I was simultaneously a practitioner, evaluator, collaborator, advocate and doctoral researcher, working within the organisation while also developing an analysis that extended

beyond it. This position created opportunities for sustained relational engagement, but it also required me to remain attentive to the power attached to academic authorship, institutional affiliation and the production of knowledge about learning disabled artists.

The legacy of this role cannot be reduced to the completion of a thesis or to the production of an evaluation report. It lies, rather, in the relationships, practices and forms of knowledge that the research helped to make visible. My embedded position enabled me to spend extended time with Mind the Gap's artists and staff, to observe the organisation's everyday practices, and to attend to forms of knowledge that might not have emerged through short-term interviews or conventional evaluation. In this respect, the research documented not only what Mind the Gap did, but also how its work challenged dominant assumptions about independence, professionalism, authorship and leadership. The organisation provided a context in which learning disabled artists were able to develop artistic and professional identities, while also demonstrating that access, support and interdependence are not peripheral to artistic production. They are conditions through which artistic work becomes possible.

This is one aspect of Mind the Gap's legacy within the thesis: its practice offers an important counterpoint to cultural models that treat independence as the primary measure of professional value. The artists' experiences demonstrate that creative labour is always relational and that the apparent independence of non-disabled artistic production is itself sustained by networks of collaborators, producers, administrators, technicians, funders, educators, families and audiences. What is distinctive in learning disability arts is not the presence of interdependence, but the extent to which it is made visible and treated as a structural principle. Mind the Gap's work therefore contributes to a broader reimagining of the cultural sector, in which support is not understood as evidence of artistic deficiency and leadership is not restricted to those who conform to normative expectations of communication, speed or self-sufficiency.

At the same time, I do not want to present Mind the Gap as an uncomplicated model of inclusion or to imply that its practices can simply be transferred into other organisations. The research identified tensions between the company's aspirations and the institutional conditions within which it operated, including funding requirements, employment structures, access needs and the continuing pressure to demonstrate measurable impact. The legacy of the organisation is therefore not a fixed set of best-practice procedures. It is a body of situated learning: examples, questions, experiments and contradictions from which other artists,

organisations and researchers may learn. To treat Mind the Gap as a template would risk turning a relational and context-specific practice into another standard against which organisations and artists are judged. Its more productive legacy is as an invitation to ask what cultural structures would need to change in each context for learning disabled artists to exercise genuine authority.

This also clarifies the relationship between my role and the purpose of the thesis. The practitioner-facing report produced for Mind the Gap and its funders had a different function from this doctoral thesis. The report was intended to document the *Staging Change & Engage* project, communicate its learning and support future practice. The thesis, by contrast, places that project into dialogue with disability studies, theatre and performance research, and critical debates about identity, interdependence and leadership. The thesis therefore does not speak only to Mind the Gap's institutional needs, nor does it claim to provide a definitive account of learning disability arts. It uses the knowledge generated through that relationship to ask wider questions about who is recognised as an artist, whose knowledge is treated as authoritative, and how cultural organisations might redistribute power.

The question "who is the research for?" consequently cannot be answered with a single audience. Its primary accountability is to the learning disabled artists whose knowledge, labour and creative practice make the research possible. This does not mean that I can claim to speak on their behalf, or that the thesis can resolve the power imbalance between researcher and researched. Rather, it means that the research must remain answerable to their interests and must avoid treating their experiences as raw material for my academic advancement alone. The thesis is also for learning disabled artists and communities who may wish to recognise their own experiences, challenge the interpretations offered here, or use the research as a resource for advocacy and creative practice. This is why accessibility is not an additional dissemination strategy but an ethical requirement of the research itself.

The research is also for artists, creative enablers, producers, educators, venues and arts organisations. For these engagers, the value of the thesis lies in its capacity to unsettle assumptions that are often embedded within ordinary professional procedures. It offers ways of thinking about access that extend beyond reasonable adjustments; about employment that recognises the material conditions of artistic practice; about leadership that redistributes rather than merely broadens cultural authority; and about interdependence as a strength rather than a failure of independence. These audiences may not require the full theoretical architecture of

the thesis, but they may need its implications. Dissemination must therefore make the research usable without stripping it of the complexity, disagreement and situatedness that give its findings significance.

The research is further intended for funders and policymakers, who have the capacity to shape the conditions under which inclusive arts practice can be sustained. For these audiences, the thesis demonstrates that inclusion cannot be secured through short-term projects, representational targets or isolated access initiatives alone. It requires investment in time, relationships, training, artist payment, accessible education and organisational change. The evidence from Mind the Gap suggests that meaningful participation depends upon infrastructures that recognise care, support and communication as part of artistic labour. Dissemination to funders and policymakers must therefore move beyond celebrating successful individual artists and instead address the systems that determine who can enter, remain and lead within the cultural sector.

Finally, the research is for academic and practitioner-researchers. It contributes to scholarship on learning disability arts by placing artists' experiences in dialogue with questions of identity, interdependence and leadership, while also offering a methodological account of the possibilities and limitations of participatory and embedded research. However, its methodological legacy should not be understood as a transferable formula. The use of creative methods, accessible communication and sustained engagement made participation possible in this particular context, but none of these approaches guarantees that power has been redistributed. The continuing task for researchers is to ask who controls the research questions, who interprets the material, who benefits from publication and what is returned to the people whose knowledge sustains the project.

The five accessible films created alongside this thesis form part of this attempt to disseminate the research across different communities of engagement. They are not simply simplified versions of the written chapters. Their purpose is to create another route into the research, one in which Mind the Gap artists could respond to, challenge and revoice my interpretations. In this sense, the films function as a form of dialogic accountability: they return the research to some of the people who shaped it and enable their words to travel beyond the conventions of the doctoral thesis. The final film, *Listen Up*, makes this purpose particularly explicit. Cocreated with Paul Wilshaw, it shifts from reflection towards direct address and asks the creative industries to attend to the gap between the principles of Disability Arts and the

practices of the wider cultural sector. The film therefore carries forward not only the findings of the research, but also the demand that those findings should lead to action.

Dissemination must nevertheless be understood as a process of translation rather than a oneway delivery of findings. Different engagers require different forms, languages and levels of detail, but accessibility cannot mean presenting a single, simplified message to passive audiences. Learning disabled artists may engage through film, conversation, performance or visual materials; practitioners may need case studies and practical provocations; funders may require evidence of structural impact; and researchers may seek conceptual and methodological analysis. These forms should remain connected without being treated as interchangeable. The purpose of dissemination is not merely to increase the visibility of the thesis, but to create conditions in which its knowledge can be encountered, questioned, adapted and acted upon by those with different relationships to the research.

This understanding also places limits on what I can claim as the legacy of my role. I cannot claim to have transformed Mind the Gap, nor can I claim that the thesis has resolved the inequalities it identifies. The research took place within a particular organisation, during a particular historical period, and was shaped by my own non-disabled, academic and professional position. Its contribution is therefore partial and situated. What it can do is preserve and connect forms of knowledge that are often overlooked; make visible the structural and relational conditions of learning disabled artistic practice; and offer concepts through which organisations might examine their own assumptions. The legacy of my role is consequently less a completed intervention than an ongoing responsibility: to continue using the access, resources and authority available to me in ways that support learning disabled artists' leadership, rather than consolidating my own position as the person who interprets their experience.

In this sense, the question "who is the research for?" must remain open and active. The research is for learning disabled artists first, but it cannot be for them without also being directed towards the institutions, policies and professional practices that shape their opportunities. It is for the organisations that want to work differently, but it must not become another resource through which organisations claim inclusion without changing their structures. It is for researchers, but it must challenge researchers to relinquish the authority traditionally attached to academic expertise. Its purpose is therefore both practical and political: to support more

accessible and sustainable artistic practice while contributing to a redistribution of cultural and epistemic authority.

The most meaningful legacy of my work with Mind the Gap would be for the research to become less dependent on my authorship over time. If the thesis, films and related outputs are useful, their value will lie in how learning disabled artists, organisations, educators, funders and researchers take them up, contest them and develop them further. The responsibility of dissemination is not to make my interpretation definitive, but to ensure that the knowledge generated through this research remains available as a resource for collective reflection and action. The research began with learning disabled artists' expertise; its ethical conclusion is that this expertise must not end with the thesis. It must continue to inform who is commissioned, who is paid, who is listened to, who is represented and who is trusted to lead.

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Appendices

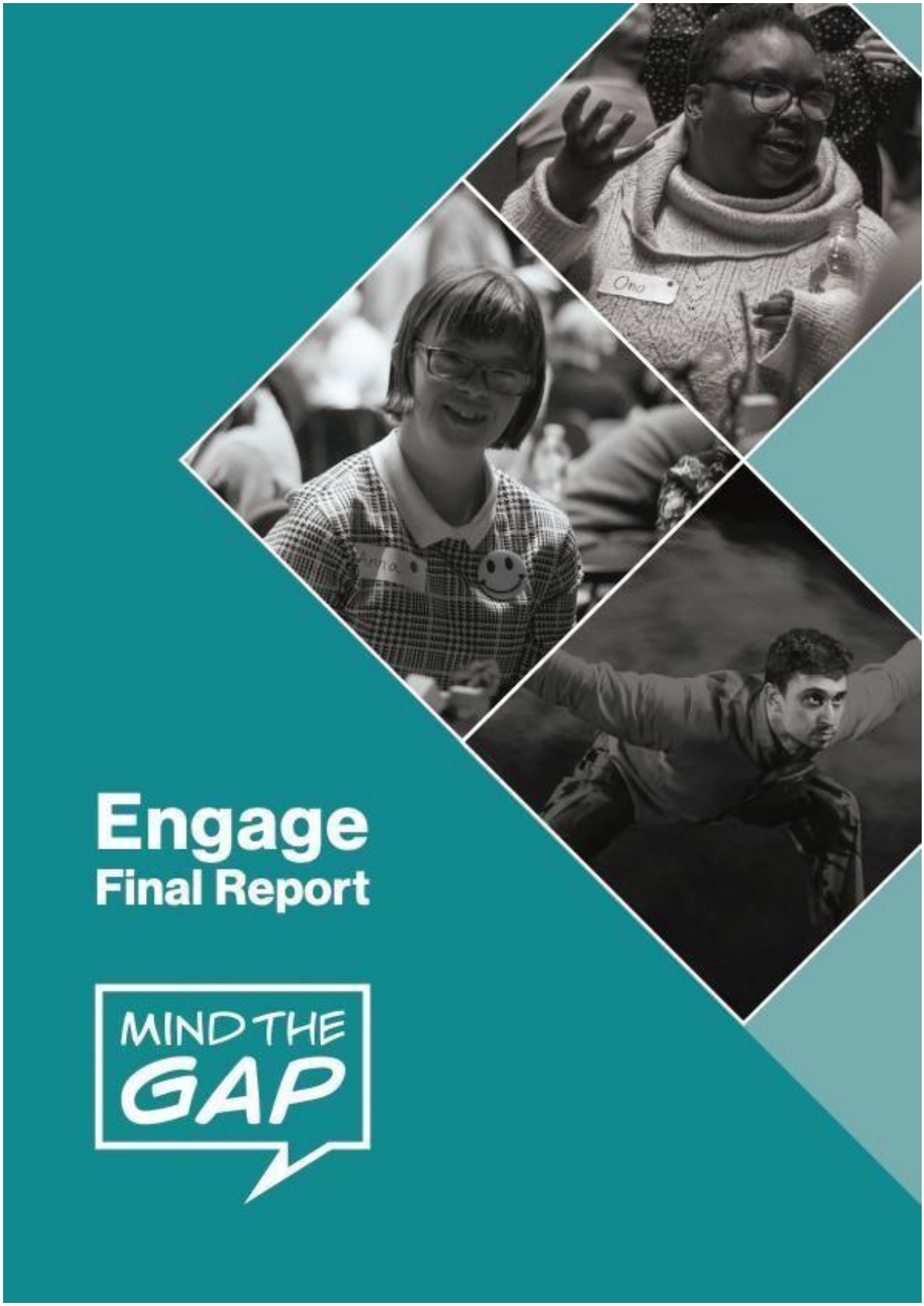
Staging Change Report

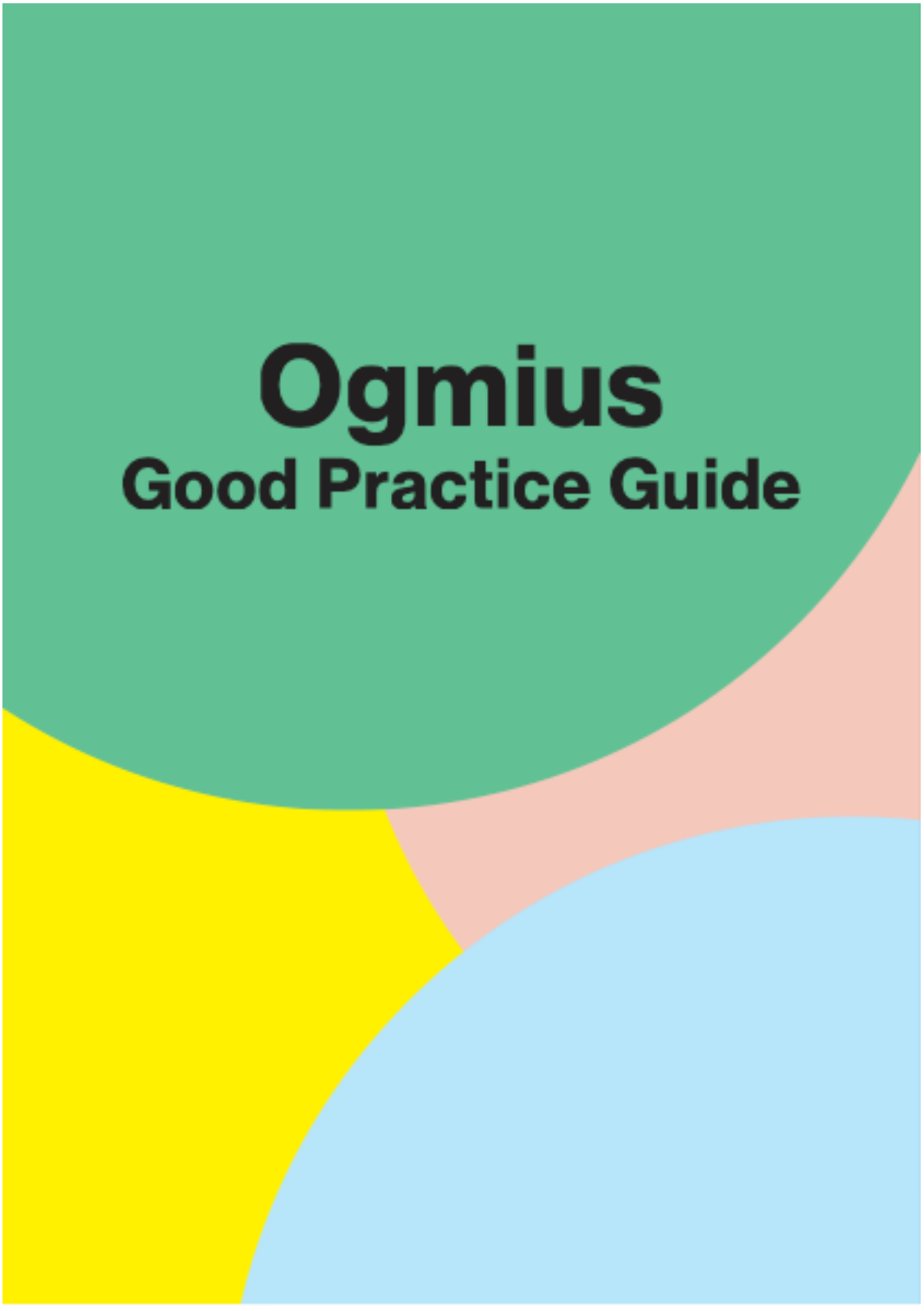
Staging Change Evaluation

Esmee Fairbairn

Contents:

Engage Report

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