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BARRIERS TO DANCE TRAINING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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Dance is a viable and enjoyable activity – and potential career – for young people with disabilities, yet they face several barriers to participation and training. The aim of this paper is to review the literature around barriers to dance training for young disabled people and to put forward practical recommendations for overcoming these challenges. The main barriers identified were aesthetic, attitudinal, training-related and logistical in nature, with further barriers related to physical access and a lack of knowledge or available information about opportunities. One of the key recommendations for overcoming these barriers is to build an effective network between special and mainstream schools, dance studios, youth dance groups and professional integrated dance companies in order to encourage dance participation at a range of levels and support young disabled people throughout their dance journeys.

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INTRODUCTION

Dance can be an inspiring, challenging and rewarding activity, yet there are several barriers to participation for young people with disabilities. Dance is a physical and artistic discipline and therefore may not automatically be considered as a suitable activity for young disabled people; nevertheless there are numerous examples of successful professional disabled dancers who are challenging these perceptions within the dance sector in innovative ways (e.g. Claire Cunningham, Mark Brew, Caroline Bowditch and Chris Pavia). Many performing artists with disabilities take idiosyncratic routes into the profession; most commonly, training happens `on the job' within a disability-specific company rather than via mainstream training routes (Verrent, 2003). Indeed, most dance provision for young disabled people is recreational in nature, focusing on creativity and fun rather than specific technical development. As such there is a clear gap in provision between recreational participation and the profession. This suggests either that young disabled people are not accessing dance training, or they are excluded from participating. In order to increase participation and access to training, and to promote dance as a viable activity for young disabled people, it is important to understand the barriers that individuals face in their pursuit of dance. The aim of this paper is to review the literature regarding barriers to dance training for young people with disabilities, and to recommend practical ways in which these barriers might be overcome. Given the relatively limited amount of academic research conducted within this area, the literature search not only included academic journal articles and academic books but also books and guides for dance practitioners, evaluation reports, Arts Council reports and magazine articles. Each barrier identified below is discussed in relation to recommendations from the literature, discussions with experts in the field and the researchers' own knowledge and experience.

ATTITUDINAL

Attitudinal barriers can come from disabled young dancers themselves, from peers, parents and carers, teachers, companies, audiences, and critics. The performing arts are not typically perceived as a viable, or appropriate, activity (never mind career) for people with disabilities (Delin, 2002). Discouragement may come from parents or carers who lack knowledge and understanding of the thriving disability arts scene, and may wish to protect their children from potential disappointment (Delin, 2002; Whatley, 2008). Well-intentioned discouragement may also occur in school environments; for example in special schools, arts classes tend to focus more on therapy than achievement (Walker, 2006). While there is value in the therapeutic use of the arts, it suggests that people with disabilities are somehow incapable of creating art worthy of being seen by others (Barnes, 2003). In mainstream schools, there may be a perception that dance is irrelevant to students with disabilities, and opportunities to participate are often limited (Verrent, 2007). Meanwhile, non-disabled children often assume that disabled children cannot dance (Zitomer & Reid, 2011). Even when a young disabled person accesses dance, teacher expectations of potential for achievement tend to be lower than their expectations of students without disabilities (deRight, 2009). Finally, in terms of higher-level training, some vocational dance schools perceive that elite training is in opposition to accessible training (Neelands, Lindsay, Freakley, Band, Galloway, Lindley & Roberts, 2006; Verrent, 2003). As such, even if parents and/or school staff are supportive of a young person's dance involvement, he or she may be excluded from participating in opportunities that are more than recreational.

More work clearly needs to be done to change people's attitudes towards dance as a viable activity for young people with disabilities. The visibility of disabled people in the arts must be increased, while dance providers should offer both disability awareness training and specific teacher training in integrated practice for their staff. Non-disabled students may also benefit from disability awareness training (Whatley, 2007; Verrent, 2003) in order to participate more confidently in integrated classes, and to ensure that the future generation of dance artists are aware of inclusion and access issues. Finally, providers may consider giving advice to parents about the nature of dance training and potential dance careers (Whatley, 2008). Given the level of family support essential in talent development in general (Walker, Nordin-Bates & Redding, 2010), and suggestions that young people with disabilities may need extra encouragement and support in order to follow their dreams (Fitzgerald & Kay, 2005; Martin & Wheeler, 2011), engaging parents in the training process will increase their understanding of disability dance.

TRAINING

If a young disabled person decides to pursue dance training, three key problems can emerge: the lack of available technical training, the content of dance training sessions (in particular the movement material used), and teachers' lack of knowledge in how best to train young people with disabilities. Perhaps the largest barrier is the notable lack of regular classes focused on progression, accredited courses, and vocational training available to dancers with disabilities (Charnley, 2011; Verrent, 2003). While there are a large number of first access participatory opportunities, most of these are recreational or therapeutic in nature, emphasising creativity and fun. Although such experiences can be invaluable, many young disabled dancers may wish to improve their technical competence but find few opportunities in which to do so; dancers with disabilities have reported that technical skill-building did not form a substantial part of their training (Verrent, 2003). Instead, ad hoc and idiosyncratic routes into the dance profession are currently the norm; a framework for talent development does not exist for training disabled dancers.

Building progression routes will undoubtedly take time. Early provision is necessary so that young children become familiar with dance from a young age and subsequently find it easier to access mainstream options (Schwyzer, 2005). This may begin with opportunities after school that introduce young disabled people to dance and signpost them to other opportunities within the local area. Organisations and companies could offer summer schools or intensive weekends in order to gauge the level of interest and to 'get the word out' (Verrent, 2007). Vocational schools and universities could deliver targeted outreach to attract potential students onto their programmes (Verrent, 2003). One other example is to encourage young disabled people to access dance via private studios. The first experience of dance for many young people is through private studios, taking exams in styles such as ballet and tap with established exam boards. Importantly, two of the main exam boards, the Royal Academy of Dance (RAD) and the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing, enable young dancers with disabilities to apply for exams with reasonable adjustments such as allowing more time or rest breaks for disabled candidates.

According to the RAD, the number of applications for reasonable adjustments is steadily increasing over time, as can be seen in Table 1, although the total number of students applying for reasonable adjustments is still relatively very small.

TABLE 1. REASONABLE ADJUSTMENT APPLICATIONS VERSUS TOTAL EXAM ENTRY FIGURES (RAD)

YEAR	REASONABLE ADJUSTMENT	TOTAL EXAM ENTRIES	PERCENTAGE
2007-08	178	65,239	0.27
2008-09	199	63,106	0.32
2009-10	242	59,374	0.41
2010-11	285	59,073	0.48

The content of dance sessions is a second training-related barrier. Talent development typically entails working on the technical and artistic aspects of dance by learning codified 'set' techniques. These codified techniques tend to be based on a certain type of body, meaning that the movement vocabulary can be a barrier to dancers with disabilities, who are often left to adapt material to their own bodies (Charnley, 2011; Toole, 2002). It can also be difficult for disabled dancers without significant prior training to understand the structure and discipline of a technique class, and they may need to dedicate more time to motor skill learning (Whatley, 2007). Perhaps unsurprisingly, disabled students can lack confidence when participating in dance classes, feeling concerned that they will not be able to keep up with the pace of classes, or that they will be a burden to teachers (Taylor, 2009; Whatley, 2008). For a discussion of specific practical strategies for teaching see Aujla and Redding (2012).

Finally, teachers may lack knowledge in how to deliver effectively to learners with diverse needs (Verrent, 2003). For example, dancers with physical disabilities must plan their time carefully to conserve energy and minimise bodily stress, which teachers may not anticipate (Sandahl, 2002). Teachers often lack confidence and report anxiety with regard to integrated work and adapting the curriculum, which can result in them being reticent to challenge students with disabilities (Verrent, 2003; Whatley, 2008). Clearly, teacher training is a crucial part of improving access to training, so that teachers are confident in including and challenging dancers with disabilities in all aspects of a dance programme (Schwarz, 2011). Teacher training is important for practitioners at all levels of provision, including mainstream and special schools, private studios, vocational schools and universities (Schwarz, 2011; Whatley, 2008; Verrent, 2007). A positive example of how teachers may gain training is through the new Master of Teaching (Dance) degree from the RAD, which includes an optional module entitled Inclusive Dance Practice: Disability and SEN. Student dancers can also receive training in integrated teaching practice as part of a dance degree programme at Winchester, De Montfort and Gloucestershire Universities (Schwarz, 2011).

QUALIFICATIONS

In relation to training, it is important to consider the role of qualifications because disabled performing artists have reported a desire for both experience and qualifications (Verrent, 2003). Qualifications provide evidence of a young dancer's competence in key areas and as such demonstrate his or her readiness to progress to the next level of training. After all, no dancer can be judged on a level playing field until it is clear that he or she has achieved a level of competence, and having qualifications is one way of evidencing this. Furthermore, gaining qualifications can impact not only on technical and performance skills but also on other dance skills. For example, knowledge gained from the study of dance history and analysis will have a positive impact on choreographic exploration as the dancer will have an understanding of the work's creative and historical context.

For schools and community groups, the Arts Council England Arts Awards may be a good foundation for progression, encouraging students to build relationships with arts venues and organisations beyond the school environment (Walker, 2006). Many dance groups, such as FRONTLINE and Corali, already offer Arts Awards; some groups, such as Freefall, have written their own qualifications for their dance training and performance activities. Importantly, accreditation is not only beneficial for the individual and his or her progression but may also help the organisation or group to survive in a difficult funding climate by demonstrating tangible outcomes.

LOGISTIC

Logistic barriers to dance training include transport, care and support needs; financial costs are often implicated in all of these factors (Verrent, 2003, 2007). Dancers with disabilities tend to need a greater length of time to train which has obvious financial implications for the parents or guardians of the student. Transport issues are also pertinent to highlight. While some regions in the country are developing progression routes for those wishing to pursue dance as a career, many young people with disabilities will be precluded from accessing this provision due to the distances between different levels of provision. As an illustration, there are a number of opportunities for young disabled dancers in the North West of England, including recreational classes, youth groups and continued professional development for emerging artists. However, the North West is a geographically large region and accessing these different types of provision may depend upon individuals' transport needs.

While adult dancers can address these barriers via the Access to Work organisation – an organisation which provides practical support to help people with a disability, health or mental health condition get to work – no such organisation exists for young people. Personal budgets and the Disability Living Allowance may go some way in providing assistance for training and transport costs, but the current governmental reviews may result in decreased availability and/or flexibility of such funds.

BUILDING ACCESS

Due to legislation, most arts venues are now accessible, yet the accessibility of buildings and materials can still be an issue for dancers with disabilities (Arts Council England Equality Impact Assessment Investment Strategy 2012-2015). Sandahl (2002) highlights how theatrical spaces dictate who can participate and at what level. For instance, many theatres are now accessible for audiences, but the stage itself and backstage areas such as dressing rooms remain inaccessible. Furthermore, many theatre spaces are only accessible provided no more than three or four disabled people attend at any one time (Scott, 2002). At the school level, Walker (2006) found that mainstream schools tended to have better arts facilities than special schools, inhibiting participation even at this stage.

While Verrent (2003) notes that only 4% of the disabled population use wheelchairs, physical access needs apply not only to wheelchair users but also to those with visual and hidden impairments. Pathways and routes around buildings should always be made clear to dancers with disabilities, for example the route from the changing room to the studio (deRight, 2009). Furthermore, all areas within a venue should be made accessible so that young disabled dancers are not only able to access the appropriate training and performance environment but can also enjoy sociable spaces such as cafés (Jacklin, Robinson, O'Meare & Harris, 2007).

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT PROVISION

Information about available opportunities may be withheld by well-meaning gatekeepers who judge dance to be an inappropriate activity for young disabled people (Delin, 2002). Perhaps in part because of this lack of awareness, some organisations have reported low uptake when opportunities for people with disabilities were provided (Verrent, 2003). Verrent (2007) also highlighted how a lack of information exchange between dance organisations offering opportunities in Scotland limited the amount of information available to potential users. In England, there is inconsistent information available on the websites of the national and regional dance agencies (strategic organisations aimed at developing dance activity in specific regions). Information about dance classes, projects and workshops is presented in very different ways according to different dance agencies' websites, meaning that finding relevant information is easier in some regions than it is in others. Interestingly, this problem is not restricted to dance; for example, in sport, young disabled people perceive a lack of available information about opportunities available to them (Fitzgerald & Kay, 2005). As such, effective dissemination of information must be a priority for organisations across a range of domains.

Information sharing, mapping of opportunities, email groups, newsletters, and interviews with inspiring individuals may all help to increase the amount of available information and raise the profile of disability dance (Delin, 2002; Verrent, 2007). At the very least, the national and regional dance agencies should consistently provide up-to-date information about what is available in their area and provide links to specific training opportunities and organisations. The inclusion of thorough information on provision should be part of the dance agencies' remit; for example the level and type of student that classes and courses are suitable for should be made clear, to enable young dancers to choose between recreational classes and those with more specific learning outcomes. Dance agencies, companies and organisations could take greater advantage of social networking by providing up-to-date information, including testimonials from participants and links to related organisations.

DANCE AND DISABILITY NETWORK

A key recommendation to arise from this literature review that may help to target all of the above barriers is the development of dance and disability networks. The development of networks between dance organisations at various levels appears crucial to develop awareness, share good practice, provide bridges between dance participation, training and the profession, and offer mentorship and professional development. There are several ways in which such networks can be built. Special schools could foster relationships with local arts and disability organisations to extend opportunities and provide a potential system of progression from school classes to those organised by groups with specific expertise in the arts (Walker, 2006). Integrated and/or disability-specific companies and organisations could build links with local schools, youth groups and emerging artists with disabilities. The results of such relationships could include the presentation of the work of youth groups as 'curtain raisers' prior to professional performances (Schwarz, 2011), and mentoring or co-mentoring opportunities (Scott, 2005). Companies should also continue to build networks with vocational schools and universities (Neelands et al., 2006; Verrent, 2003). Establishing such links appears paramount so that those working within integrated companies can share their understanding of how best to train talented young dancers with disabilities. These relationships could involve workshops, teacher training, disability awareness training for non-disabled students, shared showcases, holiday intensives, apprenticeship programmes, and placements with non-disability specific companies.

Passionate and dedicated individuals can play an integral part in building networks. For example, in her role as Dance Agent for Change at Scottish Dance Theatre, Caroline Bowditch's work included artistic and creative learning, strategic development and research, and dissemination and advocacy. In a relatively short space of time, the impact of this role included over 5,000 people seeing her choreographic work, over 1,200 people attending workshops, over 200 people being involved in training sessions, and 60 emerging and established artists being involved in mentoring or other professional development activities. One of the strengths of Bowditch's role was the way in which other members of Scottish Dance Theatre were involved and are now able to continue delivering outreach work; something that has been described as a 'cascading' effect (Verrent, 2010). Bowditch has not only been pivotal in building networks but could also be described as a role model. Indeed, a further benefit of building networks between various levels of dance provision is that it may help young people to identify similarly inspiring role models. Role models can help young disabled dancers to break down barriers and understand how others not only engage with the world around them but also with artistic practice, inspiring them to continue with their own participation (Walker, 2006). Therefore, the, maintenance and expansion of dance and disability networks may have a large impact for both individual dancers and the dance sector as a whole.

CONCLUSION

Dance can be a challenging and rewarding activity, and a viable career for people with disabilities, but young disabled people wishing to access dance face several barriers including aesthetic, attitudinal, training-related, logistic, and access barriers, as well as a lack of knowledge or available information about provision. One of the most effective means of overcoming barriers to dance training appears to be the establishment of local and national networks in the integrated dance sector in order to build progression routes, increase the visibility of integrated dance, signpost young people to activities and provide enrichment opportunities such as shadowing and mentoring. The more that communication is facilitated between providers, the greater the chance that young disabled people will be encouraged to engage in dance at a range of levels be it for enjoyment or talent development.

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