

DANCE 4

CHANGING
PERCEPTIONS



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DANCE4

Dance4 has a reputation for asking probing questions and creating conditions for artists and the public to challenge what dance is and can be.

Whilst establishing our Centre for Advanced Training in the East Midlands, it became apparent that disabled young people were not presenting themselves as potential students.

Surely we are duty bound to ensure we understand the barriers that prevent disabled young people engaging from training routes and make the necessary changes to provide the right environments for disabled young people to train and develop as inspired dance artists.

The barriers are not surprising, but have we taken the time to hear them and to understand how we change things for the better? I don't think we really have.

We can't continue without challenging the systems and environments that act as a barrier for those aspiring young people. This report heralds the start of the conversation, though clearly much more needs to be done. Please read, absorb and join the conversation. We all have to make changes and see the possibilities



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Over the last 10 years significant changes have taken place in the disability dance sector. We have seen the development and growth of disabled choreographers, more disabled students entering dance training and professional companies beginning to explore the inclusion of disabled dancers.

However, there is still much work to be done. One of the greatest sticking points that remains is convincing disabled people, of any age, that they DO belong in dance studios, that dance IS for them and that they CAN dance!

I am lucky enough to work with many young talented disabled people that others may overlook or not consider to be 'dancer material'. It is a complete privilege to be involved in opening new possibilities for a young person, seeing their confidence, skills and aspirations grow and begin to change the way they think about themselves and their physicality.

It time that we began to see disabled people as part of the 'target market' for all dance provision, not as a specialised group that people need magical powers to work with. If it all feels too hard or you don't feel ready - prepare yourself because it will happen with or without you.



DANCERS WITH DISABILITIES DESERVE MORE!

The impact of the 2012 Paralympics Games was significant. Young people with disabilities witnessed elite level performance in both sport and dance. Importantly, the inclusion of CandoCo and David Toole in the Opening Ceremony provided role models who demonstrated how powerful and brilliant it is to see very talented, trained dancers.

These events expanded young disabled people's ideas about the range of future opportunities available to them. However the amount of opportunities existing currently for these young people has not risen relative to the growth in aspirations. There is still much work to be done.

Dance helps children to be creative and physical while providing a means through which to express, communicate and interact with others. Young people with disabilities can develop these important skills through dance.

For many years, the community dance sector has played an important role in widening access to dance for people with disabilities. A large variety of recreational opportunities for participation exist around the UK which range from regular classes to one-off workshops and projects.

At the other end of the scale, several professional integrated dance companies are in operation, producing and touring high quality work nationally and internationally.

However, a gap in training exists between community dance participation and performing in a professional company. As a result, professional disabled dancers often 'learn on the job' rather than follow an established progression route. Many practitioners and organisations are keen to change the current landscape of the integrated dance sector by building clear progression routes and pathways to the profession.



THE RESEARCH: WHAT HAVE WE DONE?

Dance 4 commissioned Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance with funds from the Department for Education to conduct a research study to investigate the identification and development of talented young dancers with disabilities. The study was carried out with some specific consideration of how young disabled dancers may access training such as the national dance Centres for Advanced Training (CAT). The national dance CATs deliver accessible, non-residential, professional training programmes for young people aged 10 to 18 years who demonstrate exceptional potential in dance. Centres are pioneers in pre-vocational training and research, promoting best practice and providing exceptional and innovative tuition to young people, regardless of their personal circumstances.

Broadly, the research aims were to:

- Explore the barriers faced by disabled dancers to opportunities and recommend mechanisms for greater provision and access
- Develop a greater understanding of best practice in relation to talent development for disabled dancers
- Assess the application criteria of the existing UK Centres for Advanced Training (CAT) for identifying talented dancers with disabilities

These aims were explored through a range of research methods including:

- A comprehensive search of databases for published literature worldwide
- An internet search for web based project evaluations
- Interviews / meetings with key dance leaders in the sector
- Observation of dance activity with young disabled people
- Interviews and focus groups with young disabled dancers and their parents

To conclude these findings we have created 2 detailed publications:

- BARRIERS TO DANCE TRAINING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES
- THE IDENTIFICATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF TALENTED YOUNG DANCERS WITH DISABILITIES

A summary of both publications can be found within this report.



BARRIERS TO DANCE TRAINING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Young dancers with disabilities are clearly passionate; one dancer interviewed described herself as *"absolutely dance crazy!"* Parents also recognise the role of dance in a young disabled person's life: *"it's just the main thing in her life, yes, she loves it, always has"*.

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 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.



WHAT ARE THE ISSUES AND HOW CAN WE ADDRESS THEM?

OPPORTUNITY, ACCESS AND PROGRESSION

- Dance provision for disabled people in the UK is not consistent between regions. In the South East region there is more provision available for learning disabled dancers than those with physical disabilities.
- Many existing opportunities do not appear to focus on optimising individual potential through progressive and systematic training, but rather on a more general approach to integrated group learning.
- Logistical barriers to dance training include transport, care and support needs and financial costs.
- Dancers with disabilities tend to require a greater length of time to learn. This has obvious financial implications for both parents or guardians of the student as well as training institutions.
- Whilst some regions in the country are developing progression routes, many young people with disabilities live too far from that provision to access these opportunities.

HOW CAN WE ADDRESS ISSUES OF OPPORTUNITY, ACCESS AND PROGRESSION?

- Developing local and nationwide dance and disability networks target the barriers that dancers with disabilities face.
- Improved communication to enhance awareness, share good practice, build bridges between dance participation, training and the profession and offer mentorship and professional development.
- Initiating relationships with schools and specialist arts disability organisations to foster and extend opportunities.
- Building networks between professional integrated dance companies, vocational schools and universities where companies can provide enrichment opportunities such as shadowing and mentoring.



ATTITUDINAL DIFFICULTIES

- Attitudinal barriers can come from disabled young dancers themselves, from peers, parents and carers, teachers, companies, audiences, and critics. "it seemed quite a big deal that I was different. They [dance teachers] didn't really accept it." (dancer interviewed)
- Discouragement may come from a lack of knowledge and understanding of the thriving disability arts scene.

HOW CAN WE ADDRESS ISSUES RELATING TO ATTITUDINAL DIFFICULTIES?

- The visibility of disabled people in the arts must increase, while dance providers should offer both disability awareness training and specific teacher training in integrated practice for their staff.
- Non-disabled students will benefit from disability awareness training in order to participate more confidently in integrated classes, and ensure that the future generation of dance artists are aware of inclusion and access issues.
- Dance providers could offer advice to parents about the opportunities for dance training and for a career in dance.
- Many recommend constructing new images, language and ways of moving based on disabled bodies rather than attempting to replicate non-disabled bodies.
- Given the level of family support essential in talent development programmes, engaging parents in the training process will increase their understanding of disability dance.



THE IDENTIFICATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF TALENTED YOUNG DANCERS WITH DISABILITIES

CURRENT PRACTICE

- Young disabled dancers are passionate about dance and keen for opportunities which focus on progression.
- Talent can be identified and nurtured among disabled dancers however there is a lack of available technical training.
- There is a lack of regular classes focused on progression, accredited courses, and vocational training available to dancers with disabilities - 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 have value, many disabled dancers may wish to improve their technical competence and artistry.
- Ad-hoc and idiosyncratic routes into the dance profession are currently the norm.
- There is a lack of teacher specialist knowledge regarding how best to train young people with disabilities.
- Teachers may lack knowledge in how to deliver effectively to learners with diverse needs. For example, dancers with physical disabilities must plan their time carefully to conserve energy and minimise bodily stress, which teachers may not anticipate.
- Teachers often lack confidence and report anxiety with regards to integrated work and adapting the curriculum, which can result in them being reticent to challenge students with disabilities.



HOW CAN WE BETTER IDENTIFY AND DEVELOP YOUNG TALENTED DANCERS WITH DISABILITIES?

- Talent identification criteria should emphasise movement quality, creative potential, passion and a strong work ethic rather than specific technical skills. These suggestions are in line with new thinking around the physical characteristics of dance talent, many of which are trainable.
- Ideally auditions should be multi-session, to allow for 'good' and 'bad' days, and should incorporate an interview to establish the young person's commitment to training and identify his or her support needs.
- Important considerations for talent development include knowing the dancer and his or her support needs before training commences; students must be encouraged to communicate their needs.
- Practitioners should be willing to communicate openly with students, without feeling that they must know everything, and take a flexible, open-minded and problem-solving approach. In order to promote adaptation, clear aims and objectives should be set, and the underlying principle of the exercise or essence of the movement identified.
- High standards should consistently be set and teachers should not be afraid to push students with disabilities.
- Dance training typically entails working on the technical and artistic aspects of dance by learning codified 'set' techniques. These codified techniques tend to have been created on a certain type of body - dancers with disabilities are often left to adapt material to their own bodies when there could be a more effective method of fulfilling their own technical potential.
- 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.
- An important feature of the learning environment in integrated settings is the support assistant. In the studio, skilled dance assistants can support individual dancers in terms of exercise adaptation and giving detailed feedback and can set the standard in terms of behaviour and etiquette. Support assistants need dance knowledge, a creative, curious attitude to help disabled students to adapt material and the ability to give constructive feedback in order to optimise the student's development. Initially, the dance assistant may take a lead role in adapting material, but over time should 'step back' so that the student takes greater responsibility.

SPECIALISED VS. INTEGRATED TRAINING

One question which provoked much debate within the research was whether or not specialised training for talented young disabled dancers should be provided or whether an integrated environment is more effective. For example, one practitioner stated: "I really am pro-integration for everything but I really do wonder whether specialisation is the way forward just to give people the facilities to compete equally". Rather than provide one or the other, it may be most beneficial to have both specialised and integrated classes as part of the same talent development programme.



SUMMARY

It is clear that we need to work together to increase the visibility of disability dance in the UK and the range of opportunities that exist for dancers with disabilities. However we also need to look systematically at what is available in terms of progressive high-quality training for those wishing to pursue a career in dance. We need to undertake further research into how best to identify and train young dancers with disabilities and we need to develop our teachers' skills and knowledge so that effective, supportive learning environments exist.

Dance training organisations, gifted and talent programmes and professional dance companies must take responsibility to address accessibility issues and we need to work collaboratively to create robust and long-lasting links between dance training organisations and professional companies nationally.

Dancers with disabilities deserve better!



ADVOCACY PARTNERS INFORMATION

DANCE4

Dance4 is an international centre for the development of extraordinary 21st century dance. We are an internationally recognised, experimental dance organisation with a strong regional programme and a unique voice in the UK dance sector. Dance4 supports international and UK artists who are interested in the development of dance.

www.dance4.co.uk

TRINITY LABAN CONSERVATOIRE OF MUSIC AND DANCE

Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance is the UK's only conservatoire of music and contemporary dance. Leaders in music and contemporary dance education, we also provide exciting opportunities for the public to encounter dance and music, and access arts health programmes. The unequalled expertise and experience of our staff and our world-class facilities are housed in landmark buildings.

www.trinitylaban.ac.uk

DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION

Our vision is for a highly educated society in which opportunity is more equal for children and young people no matter what their background or family circumstances.

MUSIC AND DANCE SCHEME

National Dance CATs are supported through the Government's Music and Dance Scheme. The aim of the scheme is to help identify, and assist, children with exceptional potential, regardless of their personal circumstances, to benefit from world-class specialist training as part of a broad and balanced education, which will enable them, if they choose, to proceed towards self-sustaining careers in music and dance.

www.education.gov.uk

NATIONAL DANCE CENTRES FOR ADVANCED TRAINING (CATS)

National Dance CATs deliver accessible, non-residential, professional training programmes for young people aged 10 to 18 years who demonstrate exceptional potential in dance. Centres are pioneers in pre-vocational training and research, promoting best practice and providing exceptional and innovative tuition to young people. National Dance CATs are supported through the Government's Music and Dance Scheme and operate from host organisations recognised for their excellence and commitment to the arts and vocational training.

www.nationaldancecats.co.uk



Copies of both publications:

- BARRIERS TO DANCE TRAINING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES
- THE IDENTIFICATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF TALENTED YOUNG DANCERS WITH DISABILITIES

Available to download from www.dance4.co.uk



PHOTOS:
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Pages 3 & 6: Chris Parkes (www.christophotographic.com) courtesy of StopGAP Dance Co.
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