



Developing and Sustaining an Inclusive Dance Program: Strategic Tools and Methods

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Developing and Sustaining an Inclusive Dance Program

Strategic Tools and Methods

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In the 1980s, mixed ability or physically integrated dance companies, such as AXIS and Dancing Wheels, began with professional performance goals, aimed at producing high-quality choreographic work involving individuals with and without disabilities. Those companies are pioneers in the integrated dance field and serve as beneficial models of development. Generally speaking, dancers with disabilities began learning movement expertise through choreographic explorations initially (McGrath 2012). There were no studios or training venues preparing young dancers or adults for the potential of professional or preprofessional dance. The realization that there were no consistent, well-developed training programs caused these companies to create opportunities for training. These companies now hold workshop intensives and community classes to attempt to fill the gap. Still, more consistent training opportunities in different locations are needed, especially for young students (Aujla and Redding 2014). Efforts at codification of training techniques for individuals with disabilities are also relatively new and in need of further development to address varying disabilities. One notable effort can be seen in the Dancing Wheels manual, *Physically Integrated Dance Training: The Dancing Wheels Comprehensive Guide for Teachers, Choreographers and Students of Mixed Abilities*, published in 2012. Another may be seen in Alito Alessi's Dance Ability International (2008), the first teacher training certification program for integrated and inclusive dance, focusing on contact improvisation methods. Additionally, in the area of wheelchair ballroom dance sport, codification of expectations has occurred for wheelchair dancers in a competition frame (International Paralympic Committee wheelchair dance sport 2014). These are beneficial efforts in the field, and we need more of these efforts, especially for youth, to make dance accessible to diverse populations and enable professional preparation. Recognizing the lack of training options in our area for any type of integrated dance that was not simply recreational, the company founder, also a dancer with a disability, founded the training program discussed in this article.

BRIEF BACKGROUND AND PROGRAM STRUCTURE

The inclusive training program is part of the mission of a nonprofit 501(c)(3) mixed ability company founded in 2005. The company's mission includes producing professional dance integrating dancers with and without disabilities, building a viable training program for children and adults with disabilities, and engaging in community advocacy and education efforts for dance and disability. The training program was initiated five years after the company was founded. It has been consistently active for approximately four years and involves a weekly one-hour dance class of nine or ten students, ages 6 to 11, as well as several performances throughout the year requiring additional rehearsal and practice time. Classes are held in another dance studio's space on Saturdays, and the company pays a monthly rental fee. The studio space location is centrally located and effectively accommodates parents traveling from differing parts of town. The

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program is particularly unique in spanning a range of ages and a variety of disability types. Disability types include autism spectrum disorder, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, visual impairment, and Down syndrome. Individuals without disabilities are also a part of the class, and we have encouraged this integrative style; however, the class majority is comprised of students with disabilities. Initially, the classes began as free offerings to the community with one student in attendance. Gradually, word spread and the persistent and consistent visibility efforts of the company founder enabled the growth of the program to its current point of sustainability with regular paid attendance of nine or ten students weekly. Additionally, there is a once-weekly adult class and a teen class that is a part of the training program, but these are in a younger stage of development and currently have minimal regular attendees. This article focuses primarily on the children's class. The program is sustained through individual and organizational donations, fundraising efforts, class fees (minimal), and dedicated volunteers.

CURRICULAR DEVELOPMENT

To begin effectively shaping the program and developing our curriculum, fundamental choices about what to teach and how to teach became paramount. These questions led to larger questions that revealed and defined our philosophical base and sculpted what we envisioned as outcomes. We asked ourselves what we valued in terms of dance training and education, and those values then guided our subsequent curricular and programmatic choices. In addition to dance and dance education, our teachers' backgrounds include special education and behavioral psychology, bringing multiple perspectives to the conversation. In our discussions, what emerged was a vested commitment to a holistic dance education practice—one that valued, nurtured, and recognized the way in which dance experience lends itself to learning important life and social skills while training important physical skills and fostering creative growth. We also shared a commitment to approaching our students with disabilities with similar rigorous expectations as we would approach any other typical student. We have recognized that at times there is a tendency to expect less or make assumptions about what students with disabilities can do, rather than push them to their fullest potential in the same manner a teacher would push "able-bodied" students. Also, we have found a great deal of commonalities in how one developmentally approaches any beginning dancer in the learning of dance at particular ages. Depending on the level and type of disability, the approach might generally be very similar between individuals understood as able-bodied and disabled.

Here the term *able-bodied* is employed with reservation and reluctance, acknowledging the inherent problem of binary differentiation it implies with "disabled" bodies who are equally or more able in differing ways. There is no universal agreement on the type of language to use regarding

disability, and it is a sensitive area of discussion. For the purposes of this article, people-first language is used, in which the person is recognized before the disability (i.e., person with a disability vs. disabled person). The term *differently abled* is also employed as a language choice that recognizes and values all forms of difference and places the emphasis on ability, rather than on "dis"ability. In our training program, we often use terms such as seated and standing dancer to create language equality, but it is best to check the personal preferences of individuals and enable open discussions about these language issues.

Our collaborative educational philosophy and curricular structure is influenced by and shares commonalities with the work of Adam Benjamin (2002), Rudolf Laban and Irgard Bartenieff (Bartenieff and Lewis 1980), and Anne Green Gilbert (2005a). Benjamin's seminal text supplies a practical guide to working with dancers with and without disabilities in an inclusive, effective way. His philosophy embraces the respect of individual differences and supports individual freedom of choice. Benjamin uses improvisation-based techniques in implementing this philosophy. We align with Benjamin's philosophy and practice and use improvisation-based exercises in our classes.

Gilbert's "Brain Dance" is used as a common beginning movement warmup, useful for any age and any ability. Gilbert draws on Bartenieff's fundamental movement patterns: breath, core-distal, head-tail, body-half, upper-lower, and cross-lateral movement (Hackney 2003; Gilbert 2005b). Additionally, tactile and vestibular movement are incorporated into the Brain Dance. Its purpose is to effectively warm up and enforce mind-body connections. Gilbert stated of her dance education philosophy, "I also strongly advocate a conceptual approach, rather than a steps-only approach. All the literature and research on best practices in education for the past 20 years have advocated a move away from receiving knowledge and replicating ideas (or steps) as the sole method of learning" (Gilbert 2005a, 34). Our approach aligns with this conceptual approach as well.

We focus more on helping the student access the principle concept of a movement, in his or her unique way, rather than matching or mirroring a uniform visual image. For instance, when teaching a "tendu" movement, we are interested in teaching the concept of lengthening, resistance, and gradual articulation, which can be experienced through differing parts of the body—not just in the form of a traditional ballet tendu of the foot. Similarly, in a jumping movement, the goal is to have the student access the feeling of weight assertion or pressure and suspension. This could occur in different parts of the body and might occur differently for students with physical disabilities. When teaching first position of the arms, we emphasize the use of the back musculature for holding the arms (hands to shoulders with elbows lifted side initially can help this sensation of back muscle engagement). We also emphasize the rounded shape and spatial placement of the arms in front of the body, but there is not one set, perfect position. We work with the students to find their own tendu, their own jump, their

own rounded arm shaping, with basic conceptual principles enforced.

We have established the following overarching learning objectives for our training program, and we share them only as possibilities for other programs, recognizing that other educators configure their choices and goals according to their existing community and experiential backgrounds. The dance classroom and performance experience is structured to cultivate the following important life skills through dance experiences:

1. Social skills—interpersonal development.
2. Respect of self and others/boundary setting.
3. Trust.
4. Confidence and development of a healthy self-concept or image.
5. Joy of movement and play.
6. Independence.
7. Leading and following.
8. Listening skills.
9. Problem-solving skills and creativity.
10. Self-awareness.

The inclusive dance classroom is an opportunity for establishing social skills for the dance student by structuring and enabling peer relationships in addition to the instructor relationship. Students participate in movement experiences both in pairs and in larger groups and learn to develop a certain responsibility for moving at the same time with their partner or cooperating in a group exercise. In these peer activities, the students learn how to participate as a partner, including leading and following, and the etiquette of waiting their turn while observing others. Due to the unique disabilities present, the students also learn to create and discover ways of connecting with each other in new ways in a partnered situation. To move together, they must become attuned closely to their partner, who might differ physically or intellectually from them. The partner might use a wheelchair, have a visual impairment, or have autism. These peer engagement opportunities support empathy, encourage social awareness, and engage the students' creative thinking and problem-solving abilities.

Movement and training goals include the following:

1. Language of dance—basic dance vocabulary (ballet/modern).
2. Postural control and correct posture.
3. Organization and shaping and form of the body (using Bartenieff fundamentals and Laban Movement Analysis concepts).
4. Traveling skills—mobilizing through space.
5. Development and integration of varying movement dynamics (space, time, and weight).
6. Musical and rhythmic awareness.
7. Exposure to seeing and participating in professional dance environments and working with guest artists.
8. Movement invention.
9. Improvisation and partnering.

Ballet and modern with improvisation are the primary backgrounds of our four current core instructors, so we use these forms as a movement vocabulary foundation, but are open to exposing the students to other movement techniques and styles. We have found, similar to other practitioners, that modern dance and improvisation, philosophically, are particularly conducive to training differently abled bodies (Benjamin 2002; Gilbert 2005a; Charnley 2011). Our training goals and practices share similarities with basic standards in the dance education field, and we also point to several key training aspects relevant to the integrated dance class.

CLASSROOM PRACTICES

Rotation of Instructors and the Use of Teaching Assistants and Guest Instructors With and Without Disabilities

Our teacher rotation involves four teachers, three without disabilities and one teacher with a disability who works in a wheelchair. The rotation of teachers encourages versatility as the children adapt to different teachers and produces “newness” for the children in being exposed to different teachers' styles. As many dance educators often discover, one teacher for an extended period of time with one group of students can become rote and predictable for students and cause them to disengage, but challenging them with new teachers and guests can be a means of restimulating their engagement. The teacher rotation is consistent enough, and consistency in the curriculum is maintained so that students are still working with familiar material and concepts and the teachers share a common vision. For instance, after two to four weeks, we might rotate teachers but focus on the same core material. Teachers stay in communication regarding curriculum. Three to four teachers are often present in each class, with one leading.

Usually, the lead teacher is assisted by the other teachers and additional assistants in terms of visually showing material, enforcing classroom etiquette, working with students one on one, and engaging students with tactile cues. Because of the uniqueness of bodies in the inclusive classroom, we have found it very important to have virtually a one-to-one ratio of student to assistant. This structure is similar to other mixed ability dance training programs (Goodwin, Krohn and Kuhnle 2004; Aujla and Redding 2014). For instance, often the teacher or assistant using a wheelchair, if not leading the class, will work one on one to address one of the students in a wheelchair in understanding a particular movement with the chair. The hands-on, personal assistance in the classroom enables the lead teacher to move the whole class forward with an energetic, orderly flow and focus.

We have also found it particularly important to have teachers with and without disabilities as part of the teaching team. It is impactful for students to see a diversity of bodies as representative models for them to emulate as they

explore their own unique bodies. The students with disabilities and, in particular, the students using wheelchairs, identify with the teacher with a disability differently than they do with the “able-bodied” teachers, and this must be recognized. Perceived shared commonalities naturally create bonds. However, all of the teachers become important as role models and leaders to help shape the students’ experience of dance and help them discover their movement capacities. It is important that all of the teachers invest in an adaptable, discovery-oriented, collaborative teaching approach when working with students with disabilities, as the bodily and cognitive uniquenesses are particularly variable. The studio becomes a place for creative invention and shared learning for all. For instance, in working with one of our students with a visual impairment, an instructor attempted one tactile technique to help the student move in a circular path, but it seemed to be working only minimally well. Therefore, another instructor made a suggestion in which the student would circle around the instructor while holding her arm out, connecting to the instructor as a stable point of reference. This second approach seemed to work much better, and the student was able to re-create the circular path on her own.

In the integrated dance class, established or traditional “norms” of dance training must frequently be deconstructed, even as important principles and artistic rigor are maintained. Not only do differing disability types require different teaching strategies, but one student with autism will vary from another with autism, and similarly, a student with cerebral palsy might vary significantly from another with cerebral palsy. Like any preprofessional or seriously minded dance program, benchmarks and standards for these students should be developed and enforced, and students should be pushed and empowered to their fullest capacity.

Guest instructors are also brought in periodically to expose the students to differing dance genres, movement material, and arts experiences. Close relationships developed over time with two university dance programs, several local dance studios, multiple arts organizations, performing arts middle schools, high schools, and professional dance companies have enabled beneficial collaborative exchanges. These experiences have included aerial dance, yoga, and contact improvisation classes and workshops with dancers with and without disabilities. The guest artist experiences broaden the students’ training and aid their further exposure to the professional dance arena.

The Use of Props and Devices in the Movement Experience

Technology often plays an important role in the students’ disabilities and the way in which they use and access their body. We seek ways in which the dance exploration encompasses the students’ assistive device in embodied beneficial ways. They must learn to power their body and direct their energy through, not simply with, the devices they use.

Intentional practice in how to initiate and coordinate an impulse for moving the device is necessary. In the same way a dancer might learn to embody a toe shoe through continued practice of rolling through the foot, the dancer using a manual wheelchair should work on arm- or hand-to-wheel tactile relationships with varied dynamics and types of phrasing. Likewise, it might be helpful for a student using a power chair to work with smooth transitions to and from the joystick and different forms of movement initiation and follow-through. For example, initiating joystick movement with not just the hand, but the forearm as a leading body part can create a different type of device integration.

We also explore differing types of wheelchairs and assistive devices for the students that might be less cumbersome for the students’ bodies to facilitate their abilities in dance. The instructor who uses a wheelchair has often brought in different types of manual chairs with better turning action and improved seating, based on his experiences in dance. For instance, manual wheelchairs with smaller caster wheels and thin rear wheels create less friction, aiding the maneuverability of the chair. Sports wheelchairs also have advantages in turning and stability due to the wheel camber (angle), and the lightweight frames can ease transportability issues.

Novel assistive devices such as a prototype smartphone-controlled chair, which has been developed by one of our instructors (Association of University Technology Managers 2014; Morris 2015), and a standing wheelchair have also been explored in the class as a means of broadening the creative movement capacities of the individual and exploring new movement possibilities. Teachers might want to discuss technology options with parents. Similar to the ways in which specific dance footwear technology is commonly used for a class (e.g., toe shoes, tap shoes, ballet slippers), dancers with a disability should be encouraged to use a technology that best supports the goals of dance and best fits their bodily needs. We have regular dialogue with our parents regarding the chairs and devices the students are using. In dance, the “medical aid” becomes a performance device and should be addressed as such. We have found that parents are usually more than willing to help find the best technological fit for their child to participate in dance. It simply requires a conversation and creative collaboration.

We also encourage the use of other props and tools such as yoga balls and therabands to aid the students’ physical conditioning and kinesthetic understanding of the movement, and we use these types of tools in class. Some educators have voiced concern that more attention be paid to the conditioning needs and physical readiness factors dancers with physical disabilities require to effectively and healthfully participate in dance (Aujla and Redding 2014). Therabands, for instance, are easy to use and help build strength through resistance. Students can also easily practice theraband exercises at home, and there are different levels of resistance. Additionally, we have had both instructors and students alike all sit in chairs for certain exercises to focus attention on particular upper body movements as well as validate the dancers using wheelchairs in the room who are in

seated positions already and often have lower body movement restrictions. At times, the nonwheelchair users, both instructors and students, have also worked in wheelchairs, as we have extra wheelchairs available in the studio. This exploration encourages a collaborative creative ethos and revises traditional notions of separation between able and disabled bodies. New dance technique discoveries are made in these types of shared experiences, and we have found this way of working empowering for all involved.

Floorwork

Floorwork is very valuable for all of the students, and they enjoy this portion of the class significantly, as it enables them to be out of their chairs or away from their mobility devices to simply explore and traverse space with their bodies. It is in the floorwork portion of the class that we can hone important developmental movement patterns (i.e., Bartenieff Fundamentals patterns) such as upper-lower and head-tail connectivity (Hackney 2003). By having the floor as their point of contact to yield, press, and push their bodies against, the students begin to naturally understand the physics of their motions, which is empowering and invigorating. In particular, we have found that the students with autism benefit from finding the grounding connection with their lower bodies and feet and the freedom of propelling the upper body through the lower body connection. The floorwork also offers opportunities for students to roll and experience body-half connections that later facilitate turning movements. We have found that it is beneficial to have some of the students perform seated floorwork while their back is supported against a wall or other device. Students with cerebral palsy, for instance, are often negotiating very complex balancing postures with their spasticity and unique neuromuscular patterns. Thus, it becomes counterproductive to the movement or conceptual goal if they lack basic support to begin to access and initiate a movement idea.

Classroom Ritual

Maintaining a consistent classroom ritual enforces the students' focus and discipline and is a resonant practice with other dance education and education literature for students with disabilities (Kaufmann 2006). To begin class, all of the students learn to be "dance-ready" by finding a particular place in the classroom facing the teacher. Class does not begin until all students have found their "dance-ready" placement or posture. Often cues, such as "Let me see your eyes," are used to help enable the students' attention. Assistants and other teachers also help guide the students to their place if needed. For students with autism, who are having difficulty focusing into the class, we use the cue, "First dance, then _____" (whatever it is they want to do afterward) to support their engagement in the activity. For instance, we might say, "First dance, then home," or "First dance, then car." If they seem to be fixated on doing a particular dance activity, we might say, "First warm

up, then jumps." An opening warmup of joint mobilization with elements of Bartenieff Fundamentals and Gilbert's "Brain Dance" is often used to begin the class and might involve floorwork (Hackney 2003; Gilbert 2005b). The students have also learned to create a variety of forms and motions with their bodies through a repetitive nature dance, performed early in the class in which nature imagery helps them embody the movement idea (e.g., "tiny like an acorn"). The midportion of class involves a more specific "technique" focus in which arm and body positions, dynamic movement experiences (i.e., time, weight, and space), and traveling exercises are practiced. The class often closes with a quiet, cool-down circle holding hands and a guided imagery experience where the students have the opportunity to use their imaginations. They describe what things they see or feel in the sky and under the sea. This experience heightens their listening skills and their internal focus while they learn the etiquette of taking turns to talk with their peers. To create positive enforcement and peer support and connectivity at the end of the class, the students hug themselves and their peers, verbally expressing, "What a good job they did today."

Play and Creativity

Given that we have very young children in the class, it is important to address the play aspect of dance and allow them opportunities for less structured exercises in which play and joyful exploration is the goal while still teaching movement-related skills. The students at these ages have fanciful imaginations and short attention spans; thus, their imaginations should be engaged to support movement goals (Strong 2008). For example, we often use metaphors for shape-making such as "grow tall like a pine," "wide like an oak," or "make yourself tiny like an acorn." Vivid imagery as a cue for igniting the dynamic of the movement or the form of the movement can be highly effective for students at any age (Franklin 1996). For students who lack the ability to visibly produce certain movements, we still encourage them to imagine the movement connection in their bodies as an effort to support mind-body connections. Improvisation games in partners where one student is "clay" and the other the "sculptor" is another example of engaging students' imaginations. In this leader-follower activity, one student allows his or her body to be malleable, and the other student works at creating a sculptural form. The experience is creative and playful while heightening students' attention to form and shaping of the body. At times, we ask them to form their partner into a particular shape—such as forming first or second position of the arms.

Repetition and Appropriate Progression

As teachers we sometimes have the tendency to move too quickly through material or feel that we are overly redundant or pedantic. For students with disabilities, in particular, it is important to maintain repetitive reinforcement, and adequately break the movement down into manageable

chunks as they might be cognitively or physically different in processing and solidifying the connection. Structured repetition, manageable chunks, and predictable formats are particularly important for students with autism. Also, beginning dancers in general need to learn material in simple segments and at slower speeds first, with regular repetition, before layering more complex coordination (i.e., separate upper body and lower body movements first, then synthesize). We often have the students say the movement while they are doing it as a verbal reinforcement and assessment check, and we also have students clap or count with the music to address their rhythmic awareness. At times, we will ask one of the students to describe to the others what the movement sequence is and demonstrate it, placing him or her in a leadership and modeling role, and eliciting his or her memory recall abilities. Additionally, one successful strategy has been to introduce and teach a movement correctly, then show the students the movement incorrectly and ask them to verbally tell us when it appears “correct.” For instance, if teaching students a jump on two feet to the side, the instructor might jump front or back or jump side on one foot and have the students describe why the movement is not correct. When the instructor performs the correct movement, the students are expected to identify it. Often after this experience, students are more accurately able to produce the desired movement idea. We regularly encourage the students to verbally express ideas, count, and ask and respond to questions during the class. These techniques help make the practice of repetition effective—refining and solidifying the appropriate kinesthetic connections so that we might then add progressively more challenging material.

KEY PROGRAM ELEMENTS

Consistency

The value of consistency on all levels cannot be underestimated or overemphasized. By consistency, we refer to consistency in curricular philosophy and content, class offerings (times and days), teachers, and communication to students and parents. Consistency is a key factor in building and sustaining relationships and building trust with students and parents. It is important to have a person in place who is responsible for preparing parents and students in advance for upcoming performance opportunities or other special dance opportunities and letting them know of any changes in the class schedule. For students with disabilities, often parents have to make special transportation arrangements ahead of time and navigate around health and therapy appointments and commitments, so preplanning is highly important. Frequently there are other time considerations with individuals with disabilities in terms of time required to load and unload, dress and undress, and navigate assistive devices or prosthetic devices. In rehearsal and performance situations, these logistics should particularly be taken into account. When a consistent professional program structure and communication pattern is maintained,

it models the expectations for students and parents as they learn what is required for responsible participation in the dance environment.

In early iterations of the training program, there was difficulty maintaining consistent teachers and consistent assistants. Also, the curricular content varied with differing teachers. In part, this issue was due to the voluntary nature of the positions, but, largely, it also related to communication. Once intentional and regular communication began involving the necessary commitment level of teachers and curricular philosophy and direction, the program solidified. Teachers began discussing their perceptions of students’ progression, as well as the challenges and discoveries they had experienced, and common goals emerged. Collaborative consistency among teachers and assistants in terms of training content is highly important, but it is even more critical that they develop a shared vision that drives the curricular development, goals, and overall educational approach.

Parental Involvement

Initiating and maintaining an active role with the parents is important to ensure the sustained involvement of the students as well as to enforce the material and concepts learned in class. Our parents often are invited to observe the hour-long classes as an educational opportunity. In this manner, goals for the student can be triangulated—involving the teacher, parent, and student’s active involvement in retention and progression. Parents then could also work with their children at home to reinforce the material explored in class and use it as a therapeutic tool. This shared experience also produces another meaningful bonding opportunity for students and parents, promoting healthful emotional connections through shared movement and tactile experience. For students with disabilities, parents often serve as caregiver to their children’s needs, and it is important that critical information about a student’s unique disability issues is shared with dance teachers so that they also may play a reciprocally beneficial role in the child’s development and be aware of any health-related concerns. In addition to being a professional training atmosphere, dance serves a therapeutic as well as recreational role for these children; and, if dance teachers are more informed about the disability issues, dance and movement goals can be geared to simultaneously benefit the children’s other mental or physical rehabilitative therapies.

There is an important boundary, however, to be maintained in the level of parental involvement during class time. We enforce that class time is an opportunity for the students to experience independence from their parents and work in primary relationship to the teacher and peer students. The clarity of reinforcing the studio and classroom space as a “special place” with certain expectations and rituals is important so that the students adopt a respectful attitude and create a distinct focus in the classroom that is geared to professional performance readiness and attentive engagement with the teacher.

Collaboration and Integration with the Surrounding Dance and Disability Community

The program and company director has made it a priority to engage with the local professional dance and arts community, including the university dance programs in the area and opportunities therein. These relationships have taken time to build and develop, and we attribute these relationships to part of the reason for the program's current sustainable status. Three years before the company was founded and eight years before the training program was developed, the company founder worked with an instructor and choreographer from a nearby university in mixed ability performance. This collaborative relationship has been sustained over time, and it has had a domino effect of creating other linkages involving university students and dance companies and studios in the area. Additionally, the company founder's teaching work in a children's museum and in the public schools as well as his linkages in the disability community have helped recruit interest and support.

The relationships established with local dance and arts organizations and programs serve as an important resource to facilitate performance and outreach opportunities for the students in the training program as well as expose the students to the professional world of dance. Because the program does not have significant monetary support, these partnerships enable performance and educational experiences in venues that would otherwise not be possible. Additionally, a larger audience base is more likely when partnering with an existing, established company or arts organization for an event. Recently, students in the training program participated in a performance with a professional modern dance company in the community. One of the four teachers is also a dancer in this professional modern dance company, enforcing this professional relationship. The university-level dance educator regularly partners with the program in research, teaching, and choreography and creates advocacy, performance, publicity, and outreach opportunities for the students and company.

Another university dance program in the area has a focused degree in dance education and regularly sends their undergraduate dance students to the classes to learn how to teach students with disabilities and serve as assistants. Recently, a graduate student joined the program as a teaching assistant in the classroom and is now also using the training program as part of her graduate research work in applied behavior analysis. These networking relationships also result in growing the classes as more people are informed and spread the word about the company's work and training opportunities. The company also has developed mutually beneficial relationships with arts and disability organizations in the area, such as VSA (formerly Very Special Arts) of Florida, facilitating common disability advocacy opportunities and general support through collaboration. VSA of Florida is a statewide arts and disability organization affiliated with the international arts and disability organization

based out of the Kennedy Center. Affiliate VSA organizations exist worldwide.

CONCLUSION: ONGOING QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGES

In conclusion, we hope to have provided some useful tools to other dance educators in the field, and we look forward to continue learning and collaborating with others pursuing this valuable and much needed work. We have described and highlighted curricular development, the use of an instructor rotation with teaching assistants and guests, technological considerations, floorwork, classroom ritual, play and creativity, and repetition and appropriate progression. Key program elements that have been significant are consistency, parental involvement and role, and collaboration with the surrounding dance and disability community. We continue to self-reflexively evaluate our choices and consider how we can improve our existing methods and approaches.

Lingering questions and challenges continue to include: How do we provide adequate training that connects to current mainstream dance practices while pioneering new ways of viewing and training differently abled bodies? To what extent do we teach common dance vocabulary and terminology so that these students have a foundation of dance knowledge consistent with their able-bodied peers who are at studios taking ballet, tap, jazz, and the like? To what extent do we invent and solidify new techniques informed by the use of assistive devices and different bodies? How can we create more professional opportunities for students with disabilities who are interested in pursuing such a path, and how do we prepare them adequately? How "integrated" can the classroom become while still creating a pedagogically sound and manageable structure for all students? For instance, should there be a wheelchair-only dance class? How could programs become more financially sustainable?

We believe we have made some progress in grappling with these questions through our intentional curricular reflection and consistent commitment to the training program goals. Our efforts to create linkages with professional dance companies and venues have manifested in new possibilities for our students and have helped sustain the program. Thus far, we have seen the value in an integrated class with a wide diversity of disabilities, and we have been able to manage the differences well through our use of teaching assistants and multiple teachers in the room. We advocate and encourage dance educators to embrace the rigorous expectations of dance and training for dancers with disabilities, translate existing techniques, and pioneer entirely new dance techniques for unique bodies.

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