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# THE IDENTIFICATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF TALENTED YOUNG DANCERS WITH DISABILITIES

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There is a general recognition of the lack of progression routes for dancers with disabilities. Alongside this, there is a lack of understanding of how best to identify and develop talent among young disabled dancers. The current study sought to address this gap in the literature by investigating criteria that might be appropriately applied when auditioning young disabled dancers and then exploring important practical considerations for training and talent development. To this end, 18 expert dance practitioners working in the integrated dance sector were interviewed about their audition and training methods; this data was supported through the gathering of existing talent criteria which is used to assess young disabled dancers and observations of four specialist dance groups' technique class. Content analysis revealed that movement quality (rather than specific technical skills), creative potential, passion and a strong work ethic are the most important and appropriate criteria with which to identify talent among young disabled dancers. In terms of training, knowing the dancer and his or her support needs before training commences appears crucial, as does adopting an open, flexible approach to teaching. High standards should consistently be set, while pacing and adaptation are key practical considerations. The results of this study offer practical recommendations to educators working in integrated and/or talent settings with young disabled dancers.

# INTRODUCTION

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 (e.g. Charnley 2011; Verrent 2003). As a result, professional disabled dancers often 'learn on the job' rather than follow an established progression route (Verrent 2003). Many practitioners and organisations are keen to change the current land- scape of the integrated dance sector by building clear progression routes and path- ways to the profession. In order to support this aim, research is warranted specifically to explore the identification and development of talented young disabled dancers.

To date, very little research has been conducted addressing notions of talent identification and development among young dancers with disabilities. In fact, very little has been written in the wider arts literature about identifying and developing talented young disabled people. Instead, much of the previous research has focused on the benefits of participation; for example, studies indicate that engagement in the arts can have positive impacts upon self-esteem, psychological well-being and interpersonal skills in addition to promoting enjoyment, self-expression and feelings of competence (e.g. Ehrich 2010; Fuller et al. 2009; Goodgame 2007; Karkou and Glasman 2004; Kinder and Harland 2004; Zitomer and Reid 2011). Literature also exists in dance which explores more philosophical notions such as audience gaze and interpretation of choreography (e.g. Cooper Albright 1997; Kuppers 2006). However, there is a paucity of literature focused on practical considerations for dance training such as developing class content. How do we identify talented young dancers with disabilities? What are the most important considerations when training young talented disabled dancers in order to ensure that the performance potential of every individual is fulfilled? Before addressing these questions, a discussion of dance talent is required.

## TALENT IDENTIFICATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN DANCE

Dance talent is complex and multi-faceted, comprising of at least physical and technical skills, psychological characteristics and artistic abilities (Walker, Nordin-Bates, and Redding 2010). For example, dancers must possess both the technical skills and artistic ability to be able to express a choreographer's intention, must be dedicated and determined, and are often expected to contribute to the creation of new work. A comprehensive review of the literature suggested that dance talent should be considered from a multidisciplinary perspective because weaknesses in one area (e.g. technique) may be compensated by strengths in another area (e.g. creative potential) and indeed no one factor alone can indicate talent or predict future success (Walker et al. 2010).

Recently, an interdisciplinary longitudinal research project investigating dance talent was undertaken in conjunction with the Centres for Advanced Training (CATs) (Redding, Nordin-Bates, and Walker 2011). The CATs form a nationwide talent development scheme in England offering part-time pre-vocational training to young people aged 10–18years predominantly in contemporary dance. Over two years, nearly 800 young dancers from eight CATs around England took part in a range of physical and psychological tests to investigate the characteristics of young talented dancers and observe how they develop over time. The first research project of its kind, findings revealed that many physical aspects related to talent are trainable and can be improved over time, including muscular strength and power, hamstring flexibility, turn-out, balance and aerobic fitness. This suggests that dance talent is not necessarily an innate or static characteristic, but is composed of a range of factors, many of which can change the given right environment. The environment is important in terms of not only technical instruction but also teacher behaviour; students typically reported that their motivational climate (teacher- created learning environment) was highly task-involving, meaning that students perceived their teachers to emphasise self-referenced learning, peer collaboration and effort and hard work (Ames 1992). Among the CAT dancers, perceptions of task-involving motivational climates were related to greater passion for dance, feeling more creative and adherence to the scheme.

In general, CAT students exhibited 'healthy' psychological profiles (e.g. reporting high self-esteem, low anxiety and moderate perfectionism), which was not only a positive finding in and of itself but also helped students to feel more creative. Furthermore, adherence to the scheme was predicted by harmonious passion, a love of dance characterised by a flexible rather than obsessive type of involvement. The high prevalence of harmonious passion among the study participants indicates that young dancers love dancing, but do not have to sacrifice all other areas of their lives in order to develop their talents to a high degree (Redding et al. 2011). While the project had numerous implications, one of the most relevant findings for the current study was that many physical factors associated with dance talent can be trained over time. This raises questions about what should be sought at audition, and perhaps that greater attention should be paid to psychological factors such as passion. Regarding talent development, the creation of a task-involving motivational climate appears paramount, balancing challenge and support (Redding et al. 2011). Overall, it appears that notions of dance talent must take into account not only the individual and his or her attributes, but also the environment in which he or she trains. The extent to which these findings can be applied to dancers with disabilities is however not yet known.

## IDENTIFYING AND TRAINING TALENTED DISABLED DANCERS

While the talent research project reported above has made significant steps towards understanding talent identification and development processes in dance, there is little research literature which recommends talent criteria specifically for selecting young disabled dancers. Moreover, many of the traditional indicators of dance talent are trainable (Redding et al. 2011), further confusing ideas about the extent to which characteristics should be assessed at the audition stage. As such, research is needed to better understand which talent criteria may be most appropriate when auditioning disabled young people for dance training opportunities; this constituted the first aim of the current study.

Despite the lack of research into talent criteria that can be applied to young dancers with disabilities, some writing exists on practical considerations for teaching. It is important to note that the following is a summary of a range of academic papers, project evaluations and non-peer reviewed books and articles aimed at teaching disabled dancers at a range of levels (from recreational to technique classes) and, therefore, does not represent a review of the literature specifically focused on talent development. Nevertheless, two key areas have emerged from reviewing these divergent sources: effective communication and creating a supportive environment. Several authors have highlighted the importance of effective communication before and during classes. Teachers should aim to find out as much as possible about the group before teaching begins (Anjali for Mencap 2010; Edwards 2002; Siddall 2010; Smith 2002; Whatley 2008), including each students' range of motion, their communication and other needs in order to ensure that these needs can be met in the best way possible from the outset (Darbyshire and Nilsen 2001; Edwards 2002; Smith 2002).

In classes, it is important that teachers communicate clear and exact aims in order to facilitate adaptation of material (Benjamin 2002; Darbyshire and Nilsen 2001; Smith 2002; Whatley 2007, 2008). Teachers should focus on the underlying principles or anatomical purpose of the exercise rather than replication of visual or aesthetic form as the basis for appropriate adaptation (Darbyshire and Nilsen 2001; Whatley 2007, 2008). To support adaptation, effective differentiation is essential to ensure that all students are engaged and challenged (Siddall 2010; Verrent 2007). Feedback should relate to the established aims of the exercise (Darbyshire and Nilsen 2001) and language used to direct the group must be carefully considered: for example, teachers might say 'move around the space' rather than 'walk' (Darbyshire and Nilsen 2001; Siddall 2010; Smith 2002).

The second key theme identified in the existing literature is that teachers should endeavour to create a safe supportive environment, where students care for and respect one another and are open to take risks (Ehrich 2010; Taylor 2009; Whatley 2008). Student autonomy should be supported, for example, by giving learners some responsibilities and decision-making roles (Darbyshire and Nilsen 2001; Smith 2002; Taylor 2009). Such suggestions bear resemblance to definitions of task- involving motivational climates (Ames 1992), which previous sport and dance research indicate can result in a range of positive outcomes including greater enjoyment, psychological well-being and adherence (e.g. Ntoumanis and Biddle 1999; Quested and Duda 2009; Redding et al. 2011). An important feature of the learning environment in integrated settings is the support assistant, sometimes known as the dance support specialist or the learning support assistant (Whatley 2008). 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 (Anjali for Mencap 2010; Cone and Cone 2011; Whatley 2008).

Taken together, a range of valuable practical recommendations have been put forward; however, much of the previous literature is based on individual practitioner experience. To date, no study has attempted to pool the expertise of several practitioners to identify common practices in the development of young dancers with disabilities; this constituted the second aim of the current study. Furthermore, the literature reviewed above was written in relation to dance at a range of levels. Specific information regarding talent identification and development of young disabled dancers is required to further knowledge in the field, and support the successful implementation of progression routes for talented young dancers with disabilities. The current study represents a move forward in addressing this gap in the literature.

# METHOD

There were two related components of the study: firstly, investigating talent identification criteria applicable to disabled dancers and secondly, exploring what are the important considerations for training disabled dancers.

The main method of data collection was in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 18 expert dance practitioners from the integrated dance sector. The term dance practitioners is used here to describe participants who are active in the integrated dance sector in terms of teaching and choreographing. Participants worked for independent organisations, gifted and talented youth companies, professional integrated companies and national dance agencies. They were deemed expert due to their extensive experience in, and contribution to, integrated dance; the majority of participants had at least 10years of prior experience in the sector. Three of the participants had a disability although the majority were non-disabled.

An interview guide was employed which was structured into questions around talent identification and talent development. In the section on talent identification, participants were asked broad questions regarding the kinds of criteria they used (e.g. Can you describe what you look for when auditioning for new company/group members?). In addition, talent identification criteria were gathered from four existing gifted and talented integrated youth groups and training programmes. In the section on talent development, participants were again asked broad questions (e.g. What would you say are the most important considerations for teachers when training dancers with disabilities?); this data was supplemented with observations of four dance groups' technique class. Interviews lasted between 45 and 130 min and were digitally recorded with the participants' consent.

All data were content analysed inductively. Firstly, talent criteria cited in the interviews were organised into overarching categories. These categories and criteria were compared to the existing identification criteria that had been gathered to create a coherent set of criteria in four broad categories (see Table 1). Any potential challenges with applying some of the criteria were added as notes in the Table. Secondly, interview responses pertaining specifically to

talent development were content analysed. All transcripts were read thoroughly and sections of relevant text (meaning units) were highlighted. Once all of the text had been highlighted in this manner, similar meaning units were grouped together and assigned a category. Each category was organised under a higher order theme which had emerged inductively from the range of categories created (Patton 2002). This data was triangulated with notes taken during the observations of technique classes so that observational data could support the participants' interview responses (Moran-Ellis et al. 2006).

In order to establish trustworthiness of the data, a sufficient number of interviews was conducted to ensure that theoretical saturation was reached (i.e. little new information was emerging in the later interviews; Patton 2002). The first and second author discussed the emerging findings throughout the analysis process as a form of peer de-briefing (Patton 2002). The data collection and analysis have been described in this section to demonstrate the rigour of the study and quotes are included in the results so that readers can independently assess the appropriateness of interpretations (Sparkes 1998). The results are reported below in relation to the previous literature; quotes are coded (e.g. P1, P2) according to the order in which interviews were conducted.

# RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

## TALENT IDENTIFICATION CRITERIA

The results from the content analysis of talent identification criteria can be found in Table 1. The criteria fall into four broad categories: physical and performance skills; creative potential; psychological characteristics; and approach to working in dance. A fifth category to consider is that of support, to ensure that an adequate system is in place to support students in their endeavours with regard to transport for example. Importantly, it is not suggested that each dancer should exhibit every criteria at audition; rather a combination of some of these factors could indicate talent or potential in a young dancer with disabilities. The broad categories that emerged reflect suggestions that dance talent is multi-faceted (Walker et al. 2010).

Notably, very few of the interviewees mentioned specific physical factors traditionally associated with dance, such as flexibility and strength, as talent criterion. Most practitioners recognised that if such skills are trainable then perhaps they are not essential to assess at audition, particularly among young disabled dancers whose access to prior dance training may be limited: `... if it's trainable then you can't say that people who haven't had any training aren't talented because you haven't given them the opportunity to develop their skills' (P9). Instead movement quality, creative potential, passion and enthusiasm and the young person's approach to working in dance emerged as being far more important. Participants discussed looking for `an exquisite movement quality' (P10) or `something innately interesting in their movement' (P6). Embodiment was also mentioned, so that rather than being able to exhibit certain codified skills, a dancer should inhabit his or her own unique body: `If you're in your body, you can do anything ... it's about bringing the mind and the body together in one moment, no matter what shape your body is' (P14). This combined with creative potential and the dancers' work ethic appeared to form the cornerstones of talent identification. As one interviewee explained: `... performance quality, creativity and approach to working in dance I would match regard- less, disabled or non-disabled' (P11). These findings are in line with new thinking around the physical characteristics of dance talent, many of which are trainable and thus may not need to be honed to a great extent by the audition stage (Redding et al. 2011).

## TABLE 1: TALENT IDENTIFICATION CRITERIA

| CATEGORY | SKILLS | NOTES |
|---|---|---|
| PHYSICAL & PERFORMANCE SKILLS | • Physical potential/ performance raw talent<br>• Dynamic range<br>• Control<br>• Spatial awareness<br>• Movement memory<br>• Coordination<br>• Working to optimum<br>• Performance quality<br>• Embodiment | • Can be affected by dispraxia<br>• Can be difficult for SEN students; depends on the time frame involved |
| CREATIVE POTENTIAL | • Creative response<br>• Able to improvise<br>• Able to problem-solve<br>• Able to communicate ideas | |
| APPROACH TO WORKING IN DANCE | • Able to work as a group / team<br>• Focus / concentration<br>• Able to use feedback<br>• Able to evaluate own performance and be reflective<br>• Openness to new challenges and willingness to try new things<br>• Task persistence | • Can be difficult if on autistic spectrum<br>• Can be difficult and may fluctuate but can be trained<br>• Learning disabled dancers may need support<br>• Can be difficult if on autistic spectrum |
| SUPPORT SYSTEM | • Parents / carers / PA<br>• Transport needs | |

Psychological characteristics and approach to working in dance included passion, commitment, openness, concentration and task persistence. One of the participants reflected on his experiences of auditioning for his own professional company, stating:

> • If I've got two people and I can see one's more gifted than the other, who's more talented and has more facility, but then I see this big drive and passion, and this commitment and real eagerness from somebody, I would more likely go to that. (P12)

Indeed, it may be that young disabled people need to demonstrate even more passion and commitment to dance than their non-disabled counterparts because of the greater number of barriers to training they often face (Aujla and Redding in preparation). The importance of passion and commitment has been highlighted in previous research with young talented dancers (Redding et al. 2011) as well as writing about young disabled dancers (Owen and Redvers Rose 2002). Finally, depending on the dancers' backgrounds and prior training, they may need to show an openness and willingness to not only try new things and adapt material, but also to adapt to an environment focused upon talent development as opposed to the more creatively focused contexts in which they may have previously been engaged.

Some suggestions emerged in terms of the audition itself. Educators running auditions must be open-minded and willing to look at the criteria in their broadest sense. Each individual dancer must be evaluated on his or her potential and practitioners must be able to recognise and apply the criteria on different bodies. Auditions should be multi-modal including a practical session with a creative element, an opportunity for students to work together and an informal interview. Interviews could assess the young dancers' interest and passion for dance, whether they feel able to make the necessary commitment to the training, their willingness to adapt to higher level training and would provide an opportunity for educators to find out more about their specific needs and the level of support they already have in place. In addition, multiple auditions rather than one-off selection sessions should ideally be run, because: `... a good day for you or me is a great day – a bad day, you can get through it. Good days and bad days for young disabled people can fluctuate so enormously' (P1). By holding multi-session auditions, the young people can be assessed on 'good' and 'bad' days and the young people themselves will have an opportunity to experience the training and understand the level of work and commitment involved: `it's giving them an idea of the environment that they're entering' (P13). Such an approach has been recommended in previous research investigating talent identification among other groups of marginalised young people (those from families of low socio-economic status; Baum, Owen, and Oreck 1996). By giving young people the opportunity to work on skills across several sessions, educators can further assess a dancer's potential, work ethic and ability to work with others.

## TALENT DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING

Five key themes pertinent to talent development emerged from the interviews: mechanisms that should be in place prior to commencement of training; the approach of the educator; practical considerations such as the structure of classes and adaptation; whether training should be specialised or integrated; and additional factors that may not directly relate to successful training but may facilitate it.

## MECHANISMS THAT SHOULD BE IN PLACE PRIOR TO COMMENCEMENT OF TRAINING

Analysis of the interviews suggested that ideally, certain mechanisms should be in place before a dancer even begins his or her training. The majority of the interviewees believed that it was important to get to know the dancer and his or her physical and communication needs before training commenced; for example, an understanding of the dancer's physical range and limitations could help to ensure that the dancer is challenged appropriately and also ensure that intensive dance training would not have detrimental effects on the student's physical health. Prior knowledge of the student should include not only physical factors but also: `... the other aspects I guess that we take for granted, you know like movement memory and ability to deal with change' (P2). This supports previous suggestions that educators should find out as much as possible about the student before teaching begins (Anjali for Mencap 2010; Sidall 2010; Smith 2002; Whatley 2008). Such information could be gleaned from physiotherapy screening, doctor's reports and conversations with students, their parents and/or personal assistants (PAs).

It was deemed important to know the dancer before training commenced in order to optimise support thereafter. This support relates to factors in the studio (skilled dance assistants, live musicians and role models) and outside of the studio (expert advice, supportive parents and/or PAs). 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. It was also noted that such assistants could help with finding out more about the student:

- I think probably having dance support in the space so that in initial sessions you find their optimum of extension and mobility so we know where their optimum is ... we're looking for everyone to work to their maximum. (P2)

Assistants often have a more detailed understanding of the students' strengths and limitations, as well as their individual progress, than the class teacher (Whatley 2008). The actual role of the dance assistant should always be established before teaching begins, so that responsibilities are clear from the outset (Cone and Cone 2011; Sidall 2010; Smith 2002; Whatley 2007). For example, students must not become dependent on their assistant but should share responsibility for adapting material; the relationship must be carefully managed so that the student does not become overly reliant on his or her dance assistant: `It's the core of the challenge: dependency-independence. Because the more we support, the more we run the risk of making them more dependent' (P13). 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 (Whatley 2008).

Other beneficial factors in the studio include having access to live musicians and role models. During observations of technique classes, it was clear that a skilled musician can respond to the students, material and pace of the class, and can help students to remember sequences, for example, by emphasising certain counts. Several participants also discussed the importance of having role models in the studio, so that:

- It's not just always non-disabled people teaching disabled people ... because to see that in front of you as well, rather than always the same type of person with the same wonderful body saying this is what you need to do, you need to look like me, and having that balance throughout their training. (P12)

Role models may be particularly beneficial in talent development environments to inspire students and build aspirations. Outside of the studio, one practitioner mentioned how useful it was to have the support of an expert who had extensive experience of working with young disabled people:

- one of the most important factors for me has been the support of an expert in the field, (which has) enabled me to take risks along the way and try things, and if things aren't understood how to make it really accessible. (P10)

Finally, parental support, and/or support from PAs, was deemed as absolutely crucial in the talent development process. The importance of parental support in talent development has been noted in previous literature (Walker et al. 2010); for example, such support may be even more important for young people with disabilities who may not be able to travel independently (Martin and Wheeler 2011). One of the interviewees explained: `As a young person you absolutely need the support and encouragement of people at home ... It's about establishing dance within the routine of a family, where there might be non-disabled siblings' (P3). In fact, parental support is so important that, as noted in Table 1, it may represent a secondary talent criterion during selection processes.

While it is important to have the above mechanisms in place prior to the commencement of training, teachers must recognise what disabled dancers themselves can bring to the process: `... they probably know their body really well, they have to manage physical challenges in their daily lives, and that's how you learn precision and control' (P14). As such, educators should remember that even if a young disabled dancer has had little prior training, he or she can call on daily life experience to enhance the talent development process.

## APPROACH OF THE EDUCATOR

Once such mechanisms are in place, the educator's approach is crucial and emerged as an important theme during analysis. Two key characteristics of this approach were communication and being skilled, reflective and flexible.

Several participants stated that communication was the most important consideration for training young disabled dancers:

- I've always seen it as a two-way street, I go in with 50% of the knowledge which is about dance, and they bring 50% of the knowledge which is about their bodies ... you absolutely have to create that atmosphere where that dialogue can be forthcoming. (P3)

The interviewees described the importance of building a partnership whereby students feel confident in discussing their strengths and limitations with a teacher, and also where the teacher does not feel pressured to 'know everything'. Although such a partnership might be difficult to build initially with young people, who may lack the confidence to speak about their needs, creating a safe and nurturing environment should facilitate open communication. One participant explained: 'I think that's one of the most important things, which is confidence ... as a teacher you're really trying to get them to have that confidence to articulate their needs' (P1). However, there is a balance to strike: 'there has to be that kind of partnership but without making the student feel they are having to teach the teacher how to teach, so a curiosity about how people move and develop is really important' (P6). Use of language was also deemed as important, alongside a willingness to try several different methods of communication in order to connect with students. Effective means of communication may include verbal instruction, visual prompts such as pictures and symbols and shadowing (Block and Johnson 2011). Overall, the importance of communication reflects previous literature emphasising the value of open dialogue in order to optimise training (e.g. Darbyshire and Nilsen 2001; Smith 2002; Whatley 2007, 2008).

Given the importance of partnership in the teacher's approach, many interviewees felt that teachers should be skilled, but also reflective and flexible, willing to adapt and develop their own teaching style to suit the needs of the students. This could be achieved through an open-minded, problem-solving approach and an investment in reflecting on one's own practice. As one practitioner explained:

- You have to really clean your eyes every fortnight and then look at that group again ... look at a class at that moment and work out how to progress them, and then re- assess. You need to have quite an ambitious, inventive, forward-thinking teacher. (P6)

Taken together, an approach which emphasises mutual respect and reflective practice will facilitate open communication, confidence and talent development. The creation of a task-involving motivational climate (Ames 1992) may encompass these suggestions, through an emphasis on self-referenced learning, effort and hard work, peer collaboration and acceptance of mistakes as part of the learning process. Such a learning environment is associated with adherence to dance, indicating that it can encourage young people to remain committed to training, even when such training is technically difficult and physically tiring (Redding et al. 2011).

## PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Several practical considerations emerged during the interviews and were noted in the observations. In a broad sense, where possible the structure of training and classes should mirror 'mainstream' classes so that young dancers 'get used to that regime and that way of working together, building up that stamina' (P12). Similarity in terms of structure would also make it easier for the young person to access other technique classes as: 'it's not going to be completely different' (P13). More specific practical recommendations that emerged included: allowing more time, adaptation, repetition, setting high standards and improving physical fitness.

All of the interviewees recognised that people with disabilities typically need more time to learn and embody skills: 'it's not just the learning, it's the assimilation ... something that enables you to reflect on what you've learnt' (P8). This suggests that training programmes for disabled dancers should be of longer duration than those for non-disabled dancers, which may have resource implications for both the provider and the student. However, while more time may be necessary to work on technical skills, pacing is still important. As one practitioner explained:

- They've also got to have a good time and standing in the space doing the same thing for 20min, our kids aren't gonna come back for that, you know, there has to be an element of pace and fun and creativity, so then you're finding that balance. (P2)

Maintaining pace while meeting varied student needs can be challenging (Darbyshire and Nilsen 2001), but it could be that the focus of the class changes over time to a deeper understanding of technique once the young person is accustomed to the nature of the class. Furthermore, the flexibility of time is beneficial where possible: within daily schedules, more rest breaks might be needed, at least initially, to prevent overuse injuries and 'information overload'. Moreover, as one practitioner explained: 'their own lives tend to be complex so that you come up against unknown scenarios and situations that you just need to have the flexibility of time to work around' (P8).

A second key practical consideration was adaptation. Successful adaptation relies upon setting clear expectations, identifying the essence or aim of the movement (e.g. elevation and rotation) and trying to achieve that rather than a particular aesthetic:

- being clear about what the aims of the exercise are, what are you wanting to achieve, and if that's clearly stated then anyone can take it and make it work for them, and that's not just about it looking the same, it's about trying to adapt. I can achieve that aim with my arms not my legs so teachers need to get out of the idea that it needs to all look the same. (P12)

Setting clear aims and identifying the underlying principle of the exercise or essence of the movement have been described previously as the foundation of appropriate adaptation (e.g. Benjamin 2002; Darbyshire and Nilsen 2001; Smith 2002). Importantly, and related to the idea of being reflective, adaptation represents a means for teachers to develop their own practice: 'it means that we can't be lazy about these terms (e.g. elevation) ... we have always to interrogate and make sense of those ideas, and that's great because everybody has to do it' (P13). In terms of responsibility for adapting material, it could be that initially the teacher and dance assistant set the adaptations and then, over time as his or her confidence increases the young person can work with the dance assistant, or independently, to adapt material (Whatley 2008).

Critically, in an integrated setting: 'you'd just have to make sure that (the disabled student) didn't get lost, or become the focus' (P4). For example, teachers should endeavour to employ effective differentiation to ensure that the non-disabled version of a phrase is not always taught before the adapted version and that the disabled students are not always placed in the same part of the studio. Many participants felt that a general ethos of adaptation is essential: 'to always encourage participation and adaptation and translation for everybody so that becomes the norm' (P13). Ideally, exercises should be the same length so that all students start and finish at the same time, which might mean cutting parts of the sequence or altering pathways, but guarantees a sense of cohesion. Differentiation of teaching methods can also be employed so that 'there isn't just one way of teaching, it's not just demonstrating but maybe a bit of demonstrating, maybe a bit of description, maybe giving qualities or just using music, or sound' (P12). In this way, a variety of learning styles and needs can be met among all students, disabled and non-disabled.

Other practical strategies the practitioners recommended included: 'breaking things down to logical steps so that there can be an assimilation of learning' (P8) and using repetition of exercises across classes. Interestingly, although in the past some dropout dance students have noted that repetition of exercises was de-motivating (Walker, Nordin-Bates, and Redding 2012), for disabled students it may be essential so that technical concerns can be the focus: 'Knowing the sequence and what comes next is better; it allows them to transfer that learning to a deeper level' (P10). While repetition across classes is important, it has been suggested that exercises should not be repeated too often within one class to avoid discomfort and injury (Darbyshire and Nilsen 2001; Whatley 2007). As an illustration, sport research suggests that wheelchair users are at risk of pain and overuse injuries in the upper body (Rice et al. 2011). Therefore, variation in exercises is essential, while supplementary work such as uncovering efficient pushing strategies and stretching may minimise pain and discomfort (Darbyshire and Nilsen 2001; Rice et al. 2011). Furthermore, repetition should be balanced with some opportunities for students to make autonomous choices to maintain interest and promote self-confidence. Autonomy support, challenge and varied opportunities have been cited as enjoyable aspects of training by young talented dancers (Redding et al. 2011); therefore, striking a balance between repetition, variety and creativity appears crucial.

In relation to notions of challenge, from both the interviews and observations it was clear that practitioners had high expectations of their students. Setting high standards was an important part of training; while some teachers may be afraid to push or challenge disabled students (Verrent 2003; Whatley 2007), the expert practitioners were certainly not anxious about doing so. For example:

- these young people have been chosen because they are really, really capable ... they deserve for us to have very high expectations of them ... we won't accept anything less than their absolute best, and we won't accept anything less than for them to achieve their potential. (P7)

Having such high expectations would presumably not only push students to develop their talents optimally, but also increase their confidence. Additionally, the notion of encouraging or expecting a level of professionalism emerged, so that students are engendered with an understanding of the etiquette of class and performance, and the hard work that is necessary in order to improve:

- we used to get some students who had never had to push themselves physically, so it was also learning and being in tune and really were they working with that thoroughness ... sweating and keeping going, to ache is normal ... That rigour that's actually expected. (P1)

A final practical consideration was that building students' aerobic fitness should be an aim of talent development programmes. Many of the practitioners noted that stamina was lacking among young disabled people, which made sustaining energy for an entire technique class difficult. While dance itself can have a positive impact upon physical fitness (e.g. Quin, Redding, and Fraser 2007), extra fitness training outside of the dance class appears to have a greater effect than taking dance classes alone (Redding et al. 2011). As such, supplementary fitness and strength and conditioning work could be a part of talent development programmes. In addition to helping them to cope with rigorous training, increasing fitness levels will also have an impact on students' quality of life and functional capacity for everyday activities (e.g. Heath and Fentem 1997; Johnson 2009). Alongside this, it may be beneficial to incorporate psychological skills training (i.e. goal-setting, imagery, relaxation and self-talk) into programmes: a recent preliminary sport study suggested that among young people with intellectual disabilities, six weeks of psychological skills training increased the participants' confidence and focus not only in physical activity, but also in other contexts such as social and daily life activities (Spassiani and Fraser- Thomas 2011).

## SPECIALISED VS. INTEGRATED TRAINING

One question which provoked much debate was whether or not specialised training solely for talented young disabled dancers should be provided or whether an integrated environment would be 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' (P6). Specialised training may give young disabled dancers with little prior training the opportunity to work in-depth on technique without feeling that they must `keep up' with non-disabled dancers. On the other hand, some participants felt that `if it's a dancer that has the aptitude to take it that step further and are able enough and have the background support, whether that's a PA or parents, then I think they could cope' (P8). Furthermore, integrated settings provide a sense of unity and opportunities for socialising, which have benefits beyond technical development. For example, relationships between disabled and non-disabled students can be hugely beneficial for all involved (e.g. Ash et al. 1997); positive peer relationships are an important source of enjoyment for young people even when engaged in high-level dance training (Redding et al. 2011).

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:

> • is there scope for, you know, work to happen for people with disabilities that's separate so they have that level of detail for their needs and then come together and every- one knows the material because they've been working on it. There is scope – from feedback we've got in the past – yes they want to be in the mainstream but they also want that time with their peers to talk about what's working for them without feeling like they're standing out from the crowd in the mainstream class. (P2)

As such, a talent development programme could offer specialist training, for example in technique or wheelchair skills, as well as times when the students are integrated for technical and creative work. However, the divide between groups would not necessarily have to be disabled/non-disabled, but might better be based on skill. For instance, a beginner's ballet class could include both disabled and non-disabled students with little prior ballet experience, while a wheelchair skills class may be of interest to both disabled and non-disabled young people who want to develop creatively and/or work in integrated settings in the future. Such a structure may be the most effective and beneficial for all involved, because: `it's important to do that

group stuff because that's what everyone wants, that social interaction and that's what makes integrated dance ... but that intensive work is so important' (P4). Future research could usefully investigate the preferences of disabled dancers themselves.

Notably, it has been recommended that integrated groups be small enough for technical training to occur; if the group is too large, the teacher may spend more time attending to social or care needs than on talent development (Benjamin 2002). Furthermore, disabled students may find large groups intimidating as they can reinforce feelings of difference (Whatley 2007). As such, there are several considerations for the structuring of a talent development programme, which may depend to a large extent on student numbers and available resources.

## ADDITIONAL FACTORS

Two additional factors emerged from the interviews which are of interest to explore. First, students should be encouraged to engage with dance in a number of ways, not solely through the talent development programme itself. This might include going to watch performances, learning about the wider field of contemporary dance, taking part in other projects and participating in supplementary fitness training. For example: 'if we're developing the rounded dance artist you have to develop an interest ... you take responsibility for your own learning, go to the gym outside, take other classes outside' (P3). Given that dancers nowadays tend to have portfolio careers rather than long-term contracts (e.g. Burns and Harrison 2009), developing young dancers as well-rounded artists could help them to take on the variety of potential careers in dance that range from performing to choreographing to teaching (Walker et al. 2010). Talent programmes could assist this development by signposting students to enriching opportunities that align with their own interests.

Secondly, as a means of developing the training itself, feedback could be sought from students: 'we're having termly meetings with the kids and their parents to find out what they want' (P5). Recommended for any training programme, seeking feed- back may be particularly important when teaching young disabled dancers because, as noted earlier, there should be a partnership and open communication between staff and students. A successful programme can be built based on the input of both teachers and students to ensure not only that the students' talents are developed optimally, but also that enjoyment and well-being are promoted.

# CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to better understand how to identify and develop talent among young dancers with disabilities. The first study of its kind, results revealed a range of practical recommendations in addition to highlighting the way in which the teacher's approach could be pivotal to a student's experience. Overall, findings suggest that movement quality, creative potential, passion and a strong work ethic are the most important and appropriate criteria with which to assess a young disabled dancer's talent and potential for further training. Regarding talent development, teachers should aim to know the dancer and his or her support needs before training commences and should adopt an open, flexible approach to teaching. Adaptation and differentiation are important aspects of classes, in addition to ensuring that high standards are set. Training programmes may also need to provide both specialised and integrated classes in order to meet a range of student needs. By adopting the recommendations reported here, teachers may be well placed to support and develop their students' talents optimally. Future research should continue this line of enquiry, including a greater number of observations, incorporating students' opinions and ideas and conducting intervention studies to assess the extent to which the findings reported here have practical impact.

# NOTES ABOUT CONTRIBUTORS

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The research project investigated barriers to dance training for young people with disabilities as well as talent identification and development, and was commissioned by Dance4 with funds from the Department for Education.

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