

## **Dance for children and young people with disabilities**

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This project dialogue summarizes the responses from an international survey of dance teachers working with children and young people with disabilities. This survey was conducted in 2012 by the author. The eleven respondents came from Brazil, Portugal, Denmark, Germany, New Zealand, and Australia. The aim of the survey was to begin a network of teachers/facilitators working with young people with disabilities and to begin to explore what daCi can do to support dance for young people with disabilities.

The teachers described their students' disabilities as physical, intellectual, and learning disabilities or handicaps; Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder; Autism; Cerebral Palsy; hearing and speech disabilities and impairments; deafness; Down's Syndrome; severe multiple disabilities, including undiagnosed, epileptics, brain trauma, and Fragile X. This list highlights the different terminology used by respondents. Terms such as disabilities, handicaps, impairments, differently abled, impaired, inclusive, and integrated reflect how we approach our work as dance teachers and facilitators, and thus affect the outcome for our students. One of 11 respondents described themselves as having a disability. This finding raises questions of access and leadership opportunities for dancers with disabilities.

Students with disabilities are taught as an exclusive group and also as part of an integrated or inclusive class. Venues included public schools, dance companies, community workshops, private dance studios, special schools, community venues, under a tree in Papua New Guinea, and on a farm in Denmark. Communication needs are accommodated by using Sign Language and Makaton, audio description for the visually impaired, visual aids for hearing impaired, emphasis on the development of internal cues, music "as a way of communicating that takes away the need for verbal instructions," drawings, and floor markings. Learning outcomes included development of physical skills and body awareness, exploration of elements of dance, development of "own movement reality," processing of instructions, emancipation of students and freedom of choice, development of life skills, communication skills (body as communication), social skills, and team work. Teaching methodologies were described as being interactive, teacher-led, child-centered, facilitated, and "exploring and extending dancers' movement without changing its essence." Content included Laban-based work, principles of dance improvisation, body games, fun games, dance skills, choreographed dances, folk dance, hip hop, and "cultural dance." Methods of evaluation and assessment included checklists, observation, feedback, and discussion.

Under the headings of networking, advocacy, visibility, and accessibility, respondents suggested the following actions be undertaken by daCi: Consult people with disabilities when planning events and list access as a high priority, invite speakers with disabilities to speak at conferences, deepen understanding of the contemporary body by breaking old ideas of the hegemonic ideal body for dance, influence education systems to provide dance for students with disabilities, present integrated dance performances that reflect the perspectives of people with disabilities,

and develop relationships with leading artists with disabilities and with organisations dedicated to changing perceptions and attitudes related to disability.

Discussion following the presentation resulted in the formation of a group of practitioners dedicated to realising the aforementioned actions on behalf of daCi.

*Keywords:* disabilities, special needs, education, communication, advocacy

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**Lesley Ovenden** (nee Hogg) completed her M.A. in Dance Studies at the University of Surrey, England. Her dissertation is titled *Dance for Dyspraxic Children: An Investigation into the Potential for Dance Tuition to Improve the Abilities of Dyspraxic Children*. Her case study focused on the Special Needs Dance Project of the Royal Academy of Dance in London, where she trained as a ballet teacher and gained the Licentiate of the Royal Academy of Dance in 1976. Lesley was the New Zealand representative of daCi from 1994 to 1998. She lives in New Zealand, where she is a primary school teacher and has two daughters, one of whom has dyspraxia.

All citations of this paper from this source should include the following information:

In S.W. Stinson, C. Svendler Nielsen & S-Y. Liu (Eds.), *Dance, young people and change: Proceedings of the daCi and WDA Global Dance Summit*. Taipei National University of the Arts, Taiwan, July 14th – 20th 2012. <http://www.ausdance.org/> [Accessed on xx date]  
ISBN 978-1-875255-19-1