

## **The identity of dancers with disabilities**

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This project dialogue summarizes the responses from an international survey of dancers with disabilities. This survey was conducted in 2015 by the author. The seven respondents came from Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Croatia, New Zealand, and Australia. The aim of the survey was to unpack the challenges faced by dancers with disabilities to identify themselves as dancers with different abilities.

Dancers were invited to talk about themselves and describe themselves as dancers. The themes that emerged from the responses were: the essence of the dancers' identities, attitude to life, entry point to dance, what matters in dance, and outcomes of engagement with dance to date.

Five dancers described themselves as wheelchair users. Three were born with a named disabling condition. Two dancers identified themselves as artists with disabilities. Other key factors of identity were being gay and married, a master's student, a PhD graduate, and a creative director/researcher. Travel, working with international dance companies, sharing with others who have a disability, developing diverse artistic communities, hobbies, sports, arts, and independence all featured as integral to identity.

One respondent began dancing as a young child and one as a teenager. Two dancers began dancing due to parental involvement in dance/theatre. Two dancers began dancing as a response to a car accident, another as part of a fitness regime, and one as a shift from sports training to dance.

Descriptions of being a dancer were “discovering a body that wants to express [its] whole self,” “hard work,” “a way to connect my overexposed head to my under-stimulated and under-prioritized body,” “a life passion, my freedom, my challenge, my oxygen,” and “Shangri-La, being present in my emotions and injuries.” Responses also focused on dance as a means of

communicating the dancers' present state and of connecting with others in a way that was only possible through dance.

As a result of their involvement in dance, three respondents gained postgraduate degrees related to empowerment in dance for people with disabilities and public policy related to artists with disabilities. Two respondents also became dance administrators and three were choreographers for dancers with and without disabilities. One dancer was researching improvisation and "multiple bodies." Another respondent developed a unique movement-scoring system. Several responses included extensive global travel as a direct outcome of involvement in dance.

Respondents claimed they were empowered through dance to challenge perspectives for people living with disabilities, stereotypes of dancers, and aesthetics of dance. Others identified a desire to open spaces outside of inclusive discourses in dance. One described himself as acting as a "militant" for professional artists with disabilities.

Several respondents believed an earlier discovery of dance would have given them more time to connect body, mind, and spirit, and gain confidence early in life through movement and dance. These responses present a direct challenge to organizations like Dance and the Child International to listen to dancers with disabilities, to extend what it is to be a dancer, and to promote more opportunities for children and young people with disabilities to embrace dance.

*Keywords:* disability, ability, identity, communication, empowerment

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**Lesley Ovenden** obtained her MA 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 previously trained as a ballet teacher and gained her Licentiate of the Royal Academy of Dance. She has

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