Dance for Special Needs Students: Building Confidence and Motor Skills

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DANCE FOR SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS:
BUILDING CONFIDENCE AND MOTOR SKILLS

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Degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT


Participating in a dance class is influential in the development of young people’s creative, imaginative, individual, and communicative skills. The use of dance within a classroom increases physical fitness, enriches motor skills, coordination, and enhances social skills. Dance also increases muscular endurance, builds balance, as well as encourages teamwork and group skills. Most, if not all individuals crave to be socially accepted on some level. Many individuals with special needs are limited in verbal communication, or they are completely non-verbal. Connecting to individuals with these types of limitations proves to be challenging in comparison with a typical abled bodied individual. All individuals should have equal opportunities to express themselves. The goal of this project was to improve motor skills, self-esteem, and confidence in students with special needs. This research helps advocate for more arts integrated programs to be added into special needs classrooms. The findings of this study supports that dance is a positive influence on students with special needs. Students with varying degrees of disabilities have the potential to become more social, better coordinated, and more confident by incorporating dance into their everyday lives. Being disabled does not mean being excluded from having access to every aspect of life, but rather an enhanced quality of living, with more opportunities available.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Goal of Thesis

As the influential dance pioneer Martha Graham once said, “Great dancers are not great because of their technique, they are great because of their passion” (Collection of Famous and Popular Quotes 11). Passion is what drives individuals to do incredible things while dance provides numerous benefits to individuals no matter the age, race, gender, ability, and or inability. This reasoning is what allows for the possibility of any person to express a passion for dance, making dance a universal art form. Putting that passion and desire in to everything one does adds significance and meaning to their overall quality of life. Participating in a dance class is influential in the development of young people’s creative, imaginative, individual, and communicative skills. The use of dance within a classroom increases physical fitness, enriches motor skills, coordination, and enhances social skills. Dance also increases muscle endurance, builds balance, as well as encourages teamwork and group skills. Creative dance is a social encounter; it “mediates and has the power to construct and deconstruct social meanings” (Hermans 161).

Most, if not all individuals crave to be socially accepted on some level. “The lack of social awareness that students with disabilities may exhibit can lead their nondisabled peers to view them in a negative light, and result in social and physical isolation”
(Munsell and Davis 130). Although able-bodied and disabled individuals want the same things in life such as: social acceptance, communicative skills, problem solving, and maintenance of a healthy lifestyle, the disabled individual has to fight through limitations to conquer their goal.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the definition of the word “disability” is “a physical, mental, cognitive, or developmental condition that impairs, interferes with, or limits a person’s ability to engage in certain tasks or actions or participate in typical daily activities and interactions” (Merriam-Webster). The two most common limitations amongst the disabled population are speech and motor skills. Individuals with disabilities, such as Down syndrome, struggle with accomplishing motor skills, commonly showing poor control of their body movements due to reduced muscle strength and slow reaction times. Many individuals with special needs are also limited in verbal communication, or they are completely non-verbal. Connecting with individuals with these types of limitations proves to be challenging in comparison with an able-bodied individual. All individuals should have equal opportunities to express themselves, particularly those with speech limitations should be made aware of and exposed to the benefits of movement.

Movement helps people with special needs feel more involved in their learning. It increases focus, attentiveness, and instincts in individuals. Movements such as facial expressions and or gestures, can also be a form of self-expression for people with special needs who have difficulty expressing themselves with words. Some activities to help with self-expression would be storytelling through movement, role-playing, and group activities with social interaction. Certain studies have suggested that permitting students
the opportunity to partake in creative activities that involve movement supports students who understand better through visual and kinesthetic practices. “Presenting content in alternative formats is one way to make curriculum more accessible to students with special needs and dance provides an alternative format that is not commonly considered” (Munsell and Davis 130). This style of learning gives children who struggle academically and socially, additional ways to experience a classroom setting. An individual’s disability may hinder how they see their own abilities, which can in fact limit their artistic expression.

Art provides a child, even a non-verbal child, the ability to express their emotions, creatively. Art can provide an outlet for a range of emotions from anger and aggression to joy and beauty. Another benefit is that the arts encourage socialization, which can be difficult to achieve for young people with a disability. The arts can be made inclusionary to give children the ability to be creative in an environment with other children with disabilities or with able-bodied children. The appreciation for the process of creating art, as well as the appreciation for the result, provides shared experiences (The Arts: Dance, Drama and Visual Arts).

The goal of this project was to improve motor skills, self-esteem, and confidence in students with special needs. There were a total of fourteen participants in this study including eight with Down syndrome, one student with Cerebral palsy, one student with Cerebral palsy and paralysis of the right side, one student with Asperger’s, and three students with other forms of Autism within the Autism Spectrum. Down syndrome is a genetic disorder that causes developmental and intellectual delays. Some students with Down syndrome have great speech articulation, while others do not. Cerebral Palsy is studied as a “neurological disorder caused by a non-progressive brain injury or malformation that occurs while the child’s brain is under development.” It primarily “affects body movement and muscle coordination” (The Arts: Dance, Drama and Visual Arts). Autism is one of the disorders that has a wide variety of developmental conditions,
such as poor social skills, repetitive behaviors and speech impairments or non-verbal. This research will help each student with an improvement in their coordination skills and motor skills through movement. The student’s social skills and the building on self-confidence would be activated by participating with other students.

This project will help advocate for more arts integrated programs to be added into special needs classrooms. Being disabled should not mean being excluded from having access to every aspect of life, but rather an enhanced quality of living, with more opportunities available.

**Purpose of Study**

This research helps the increase the motor skills and coordination of people with special needs. An individual, especially one who cannot communicate or feel they are not understood, will be able to feel more comfortable conversing through dance/movement versus speaking. The researcher’s brother, who has Down syndrome, along with his peers, often have difficulty being understood, and the frustration these students experience is very apparent. Subsequently, the researcher is attempting to find effective ways to communicate with students with disabilities while simultaneously building. Dance, a medium of self-expression that does not rely on the use of words, seemed a promising avenue of exploration. One example of what this project can do to support students with speech impairments is to provide opportunities to use dance as a nonverbal form of expression and communication, while also working on a child’s motor skills and coordination.

In her article titled *Dance makes me happy: Experiences of Children with Disabilities in Elementary School Dance Education*, Michelle Zitomer suggests giving
“students a space where they could just be themselves, enabled self-expression, and allowed opportunities for getting to know more about themselves and their personal capacities” (Zitomer 220). The researcher aimed to also create an atmosphere within the classroom that was a safe and inviting environment so that the students may experience their own artistic ability.

Significance of the Study

The significance for this research is that it provides students with additional opportunities to be understood and to be able to communicate. Dance is an outlet for self-expression, and oftentimes for students with special needs, movement can be a more useful communication tool than writing or speaking. Most children are shy and get easily frustrated when not understood. This is often truer for students with speech impairments. The researcher believes that using dance as a medium will offer an alternative method of communication and possibly provide a deeper level of non-verbal communication for these individuals. The researcher hopes to shine some light on the use of dance in a special needs classroom to help students with their motor skills and communication, while building confidence.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Lack of Motor Skills and Self-Esteem within Students with Disabilities

“Low self-esteem is commonly associated with adolescence and this increases if the adolescent has a physical disability” (de Villiers et al. 23). The Oxford dictionary defines the term “self-esteem” as “high regard for oneself/good opinion of oneself.” It can also be defined as “intrinsic value, self-respect, self-reference, and self-worth” (Brown). Children with physical disabilities are prone to develop decreased self-esteem (de Villier et al. 23), but research and anecdotal evidence suggest that participating in dance activities can lead to positive outcomes for students with and without exceptionalities. A wide variety of research confirms that participation in dance may also lead to improved physical fitness, socioemotional gains, and academic gains (Munsell and Davis 129).

Experiments have been conducted to prove that dance is not only a positive outlet for individuals with disabilities, but also a key point in beginning their creative and artistic personalities. Through an 8-week experiment with “neuro-typical children” Quin, Redding, and Frazer conducted a study “to test whether the physiological and psychological well-being of the children was affected by participating in a creative dance program”. They discovered that “three physiological indicators (lung capacity, flexibility, and aerobic capacity) increased” when completing the program. “It was also discovered
that psychological well-being improved, including self-esteem, intrinsic motivation, and positive attitudes toward dance, but to a lesser extent than the physiological factors. From this, the researchers concluded that participating in a dance class is beneficial for many reasons and that creative dance is “instrumental in developing young people’s creative and artistic, personal, and social skills” (Reinders et al. 292).

For all students with and without exceptionalities, failure in social relationships can contribute to poor interpersonal development, rejection by peers and adults, and academic failure. Although dance is usually disregarded as a component to improving these relationships, “empirical evidence suggests that participation in dance experiences can increase students’ cooperative skills, help them resolve conflicts, and enhance their self-esteem” (Munsell and Davis 130).

**Positive Attributes of Physical Activity for Students with Disabilities**

Dance is an artistic form that provides participants an opportunity to learn through use of the body in motion. Movement is a fundamental way of learning and developing one’s ability to perceive oneself and one’s actions (Stolberg 2006) as well as a way to understand and negotiate the surroundings (Zitomer and Reid 139). Dance/movement and exercise routines tend to increase dopamine levels in students with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), and ameliorate inattention, hyperactivity, and distractibility. Evidence has supported the importance of this influential relationship between mind and body, including a neurodevelopmental connection between physical and mental activity, in which increased physical activity supports mental alertness. According to Anderson, “The integration of dance/movement has been shown to enhance student learning and engagement” (Anderson 231).
J. Matzner describes a study conducted by Jenny Seham of the National Dance Institute in New York City, that helped him out of a difficult situation due to an illness, which then motivated him to create and direct the development of an inclusive ballet class for adults and children with mobility impairment. “Seham studied 1,500 children who danced weekly and found measurable academic and social impacts, including positive changes in self-discipline, grades, and a sense of purpose in life” (Matzner 116). Creative dance helps activate the imagination, encourages originality and spontaneity, and promotes freedom of expression.

Dance is a method of learning about one’s own personal strengths and weaknesses, and a means to explore new physical, social, and emotional territories. It encourages innovation and honors individual experience and resources at whatever stage they arrive (Lobo and Winsler 3). All children, regardless of capability level, need to engage in consistent physical activity. Not only does it help the children stay fit and healthy, but it also increases their coordination, and social interactions.

He [Eric Jenson] also asserted that much like the way exercise improves the muscles, heart, lungs, and bones, exercise also improves key areas of the brain such as the basal ganglia, cerebellum, and corpus callosum. Physical activity benefits all children in many ways, and dance is an ideal activity that promotes not only motor learning, but cognitive and social development as well. (Matzner 116)

Some of the benefits from physical activity would be strength, endurance and increased coordination. Motor capabilities such as speediness, steadiness and flexibility will increase as well. Children with physical disabilities will also be able to regain or increase muscle strength and balance while mastering milestones such as bending of the knees while walking, following directions, and hand-eye coordination.
How Dance Affects all Bodies

Presenting information in a different format may make it that much more accessible. Although not common, but dance can be used as a medium to teach and interpret information. “Dance activities appear to provide an alternative way to meet diverse learners’ educational needs. In the general education classroom, weaving dance into daily activities may help accommodate the needs of students who learn in nontraditional ways” (Munsell and Davis 129). Teachers may use movement activities in the classroom to increase students’ academic and social understandings. The Munsell and Davis studies suggest that developing and allowing students opportunities to participate in creative movement activities supports the needs of individuals who learn best through creative and kinesthetic. Through participation in creative movement activities, children who struggle academically and socially have another way to experience classroom success (Munsell and Davis 130). For students with emotional and behavioral disorders who typically struggle with similar needs, including dance and creative movement activities into the curriculum may be beneficial (Munsell and Davis 130). Stacey Skoning, in her studies and research with students who have learning disabilities, stated that “it is common for students with disabilities to experience difficulties mastering linguistic and mathematical tasks. For these students, weaving creative and kinesthetic tasks into the classroom curriculum may result in an increased ability to learn material” (Munsell and Davis 130). Using dance in the classroom appeared to meet the learning needs of a variety of students with disabilities, including those with autism spectrum disorder, emotional disabilities, learning disabilities, and cognitive disabilities (Munsell and Davis 130).
Within a curriculum, there are always assessments and evaluations on the success of each student and their progress. When looking at grading dance and academics, there is hardly a difference. Each subject has its own rubric to ensure that the students attain as much information as possible. Teachers have evaluations, exams, essays, and terminology that each student must learn in order to pass these exams. The only difference would be that dance is more of a physical evaluation to guarantee each student acquires mastery of a particular skill. Teachers complete observations and assessments in both dance and other more traditional academics, but often

…for students with special needs, assessment includes not only a review of end of year exam scores or portfolio performance, but also a review of performance in reference to Individualized Education Program goals. If a teacher chooses to link dance to academic subjects, this should be reflected in the program’s goals. (Munsell and Davis 132)

They have their own methods of evaluations with rubrics and benchmarks to guide them in assuring each student comprehends the information given to them.

The Arts Council of England (2006) states that “anyone can enjoy dancing regardless of their age or background, if they are disabled or non-disabled, whether or not they have danced before, and whatever their shape and size” (Reinders et al. 291). Dance helps the abled and disabled bodied individuals to increase interaction with their peers, learn about personal space, and help students with learning new information in their own creative manner.
Disability and Dance;
How Dancing with Disabilities Enriches the Field of Dance

Although educators have developed numerous structured programs to improve young children’s social skills, few of them have recognized the role of the arts in improving social outcomes. More specifically, the role that dance and movement activities can contribute to the process is frequently ignored (Munsell and Davis 130). Through social interactions, students gain self-awareness and originality when using dance as a form of self-expression. Most programs give “students a space where they could just be themselves, enable self-expression, and allow opportunities for getting to know more about themselves and their personal capacities” (Zitomer 220).

Infinity Dance Theater is a company founded by Kitty Lunn, a professional dancer with the New York City Ballet until an accident ended her dancing career. She slipped on ice, broke her back, and was confined to a wheelchair, which led her to develop a classical ballet technique program for students with a physical disability. She established this company in 1995 as a “non-traditional dance company featuring dancers with and without disabilities” (Martin). Lunn is not a dance therapist herself, and she clearly states that “her work is not dance therapy” and understands that although “disabled people certainly benefit from dance therapy,” agrees that it is a “beautiful thing to help people to express themselves through dance.” She “helps teach people who move differently the techniques of classical dance and instills the knowledge of traditional dance methods in people whose bodies don't operate the way an average dancer's does” (Martin). Consent to move their own bodies in ways they never considered they could, is the first thing Lunn teaches them in class. Learning to accept and embrace your body's
limitations is one of the most important things Lunn believes her program teaches students with disabilities. She proposed this idea to her then teacher, Agnes de Mille, who replied, “You have to learn to dance in the body you have.” Lunn took this mantra to heart and used it to motivate herself and her students who often struggle with their own body perceptions (Martin).

The Karen Peterson and Dancers Inc. company (KPD) integrates abled and disabled bodies in one space to create choreographies without judgement of what one can do or not do. Karen Peterson founded this company, “dedicated to the development, education and presentation of physically integrated dance through workshops and performances” (Peterson). KPD is Florida’s leading company dedicated to the integrating of dancers and students with a range of physical abilities.

Since the incorporation, the company has serviced over 5000 teens with disabilities within the Miami Dade schools, has greeted and performed with over 100 International dance artists abroad and in Miami and has engaged over 10000 dance audience members in formal and informal concerts to the visions of possibilities of inclusion with ideas of dance and disability. (Peterson)

“Slowly but surely, theater programs, visual arts classes, and dance troupes designed specifically for people with disabilities are providing an outlet for inventiveness and creativity” (The Arts: Dance, Drama and Visual Arts). Many companies are now beginning to develop an interest in the arts for the special needs community. With time and research a disabled individual will be able to do the same movement as an abled-body person, yet in their own way/interpretation.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

General Research Perspective

This chapter discusses the methodology of collecting the data from the research. The research methodologies used for this study were a combination of both qualitative and descriptive. The tools used were student individual, parent, and teacher questionnaires; very seldom did the students use journal writing and a final circle interview with all the children at the same time. The researcher had two groups each for the length of an hour. This chapter will specify the process used to answer the following four questions: Does the addition of dance classes in a special needs classroom increase student social activity? Will students have more body awareness after taking dance? How does this impact the students’ self-esteem/confidence level? and How does this research help form new areas of therapy for children with disabilities within the dance community? The research consisted of fourteen participants and one constant researcher.

After developing the purpose of the study and the collection of data, the researcher submitted a narrative detailing the study to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. This application included a brief description of the goals, purpose, methods, data analysis procedures, data handling procedures, risks, discomforts, and benefits. Also included were sample consent forms from the students, their parents, and the teachers who participated in the study. The appendices include all IRB documents.
Parent, Participant and Teacher Questionnaires

The participants for this study attend The Academy (a pseudonym), where the researcher’s brother attends school. The researcher had fourteen student participants in two groups that she taught for one hour each for twelve days. One group consisted of eight students at the high school level, and the second group included six students from the middle school level. The high school group included six boys and two girls; the middle school group had three boys and two girls. These students ranged in age from 14 to 30 years old. The researcher chose to use this school because of her brother who attends it. The researcher asked for volunteers for this research and informed them that in no way would this affect their enrollment in The Academy.

All students needed parent approval either because of their age or their mental disability. Although the latter group was above 18 years of age, the guardianship/power of attorney still remains on the parents. The researcher felt it was necessary to have the student complete a student assent form consenting to participating in the research. This research occurred over the summer for a span of twelve days. Each assent form supplied the student and the parent the reasoning for the research and what it would entail them to do. It also stated this was a voluntary research and there would be no consequences if the student did not participate.

Once the consent forms were collected from the parents and the students, the researcher could have the students, their teachers, and the parents fill out a questionnaire. After receiving the results of the questionnaire from the parents and teachers, the study could begin. Each participant received a pseudonym to protect the confidentiality of the students, parents, and teachers.
The student questionnaire was based on their knowledge of dance, their likes and dislikes about dance, and its meaning to them in terms of communication, and was distributed and completed on the first day of class. It included questions such as: Do you dance? which style do you like most, and do you believe that dance can show real feelings or how you’re thinking? The students were to determine their understanding of the meaning of self-expression. The researcher used the questionnaire to inform herself of the students’ understanding of dance and its importance in their lives. This also helped in finding music the students enjoyed based on their answers towards the style they liked best. It assisted in engaging the students throughout the lessons and allowed for more participation.

The parent and teacher questionnaire allowed the researcher to explore the students’ background and to gain their point of view. The questions given to the parent and teachers served as a starting point for the researcher in knowing what therapies they have tried, their social skills with their peers as well as their siblings if applicable, what progress they have seen in the student, and what they believe the future holds for them.

**Participants and Classroom Settings**

The researcher provided each student with a journal with the pre-questionnaire cut and pasted to the inside cover. Due to their inability to write, she encouraged them to draw pictures if they felt more comfortable expressing their interpretation of the terminology in that manner. Videotaping of the first class and sporadically throughout the rest of the classes helped the researcher not only for recollection purposes but also as a diary aspect to see how each student improved. The post-questionnaire did not happen due to unforeseen circumstances not under the researcher’s control.
Although the researcher did gather students in a discussion circle at the end of the twelve-day period and conversed about what they learned, how they enjoyed the class, what their favorite part was, and whether this was a type of class they would be interested in having every day. The researcher also videotaped the day to catch the responses from each student, including body language and the recalling of each term they were taught. The responses to these questions appear in the concluding chapter.

Organization of Class Context

The class took place in the school Physical Education room, where everyone could fit comfortably and have enough space to move around. Each class occurred for a period of one hour every Tuesday and Thursday, although the school’s summer camp schedules caused some days to be changed. Because of some of the students’ therapy schedules, selected students arrived late to class and/or were not able to participate in every class. The class would start off each day with note taking. Then the students were to write down or draw the words and definitions of the terminology given per class. Some found it more useful and easier if the researcher wrote the definition along with the word on a small dry erase board so they would copy it. They would then adjust the definition to their own liking (drawing pictures and picking their own colors to write with). After they finished the journaling, the students and teacher would stand in a circle and stretch, followed by across-the-floor and center movements such as; jazz walk, jazz run, jazz square and grapevine. When teaching the terminology of jazz hands, the researcher used it as a re-focus moment for when the students would begin off task behavior. When the researcher said “Jazz Hands” the students would freeze and put up their jazz hands. This worked well with the students mainly because it was not only fun for them to do but it
also focused them back to the researcher. The students learned a combination of the same jazz movements previously shown, to a song creating a small choreography to be performed at the end of the twelve-day research. They performed the choreography on video, and a few parents could watch their child perform in person.

**Data Analysis Methods**

The researcher kept a daily journal on the happenings in class and any improvements she saw on each student throughout the duration of the research. She took videos of some classes to reinforce her notes on the progress, improvements, and participation per student from day one. She used the parent/teacher pre-questionnaire mostly as a foundation for the research, to understand the child better before beginning the research. It allowed the researcher to appreciate how to connect more with the child, which allowed for full cooperation. The student questionnaire was designed to understand what each child’s thought of dance was and to collect data on similarities between all the students, separated by boy vs. girl and middle school vs. high school/adult level.

**Summary**

This chapter explains the instruments used to gather information on the twelve classes that took place for this research. The next chapter will discuss the findings and results of the research.
CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

As discussed in previous chapters, this research examined dance as a functioning medium that can remove the need for words while improving motor skills, self-esteem, and confidence within students with disabilities. This chapter draws relationships between the questionnaires from the participants, parents/guardians, teachers, the written feedback from the researcher, and oral feedback from the participants.

Participant Data

*Participant Entry Questionnaire*

The participant questionnaire served to better understand how important dance is in each student’s life. It also gave the researcher data on the likes and dislikes of each student, which in turn provided the researcher with a framework for each of the lessons taught. In order to grasp their attention quickly, the researcher also included inquiries on the style of dance each participant preferred. These responses helped to guide the researcher in the type of music they like to hear and ensure full participation from each participant. Tables 1 and 2 describe the participants’ responses to simple questions on their interest in dance.
In the first meeting, while reading through the questionnaire out loud, the researcher made conversation with the participants on what kind of dance style they enjoyed most. The questionnaire asked the participants to pick from the choices of ballet, hip-hop, jazz, and tap. The majority of the participants answered “hip-hop” as their favorite style of dance, except for two students. One student, Mary, wrote out “salsa” and another student named Henry wrote out “Broadway” as his favorite style although neither style was on the questionnaire. This question provided the researcher with a level of interest the students had in specific styles of dance. The figure shows that all students who participated in the study dance. After discussing the preferred genre, the researcher then asked the participants why they dance.
Figure 2. Why do you dance?

When prompted with the question “Why do you dance?” the boys who answered “for art” may have had more of an understanding of the word art because they participate in musical theater performances with a company that specializes in students with special needs. In the same conversation about what style they enjoy, the students also mentioned how they saw dance as something they do at parties and gatherings; therefore most of those students answered “fun” as their response. The participants who wrote “sports” compete in the Special Olympics and are extremely athletic, therefore, they see dance as comparable to sports.
Figure 3. Do you believe a dance can show real feelings or how you are thinking?

This question was particularly tricky for the students to understand. The researcher rephrased the question so the students could better comprehend the meaning. Figure 3 presents data that supports that the boys felt much more confident than the girls. This may be due to their exposure to theater or perhaps a general sense of high self-esteem.

**Participant Oral Post Feedback**

The researcher, instead of giving the participants a questionnaire to fill out again, decided it would be better to do an oral feedback session in its place. This made the participants more animated because they could express themselves verbally and show off their new moves. The first question the asked researcher during this feedback session was “Did you have fun?” The participants responded with a unanimous “yes.” The researcher then went around the room asking each participant their favorite part of the class. As a group, the participants spoke about terminology they remembered, the definition for each word, and a demonstration of the movement taught throughout the sessions. The words taught in class were jazz walk, jazz slide, jazz hands, jazz square, and the grapevine. After being asked what a “jazz square” is, Henry chose to demonstrate the movement in
front of the class, getting about half of it correct. Another participant, Josh, stood up at the same time and attempted the same jazz square movement, and although his first try was not successful, he tried over and over till he got it right. A student named Johnny stated, “I love to dance. Dance gets me thinking and it helps me get more focused.” Henry mentioned that his career choice was to be performing on Broadway since he loves dancing and singing. He felt dance would help him reach his goal. Another participant, Damian, when asked what was his favorite part of the class was, answered honestly “actually doing something rather than sitting in the classroom.” The participants had some great dedication in helping the researcher. Each participant had their own reasons why they loved the class.

**Parent/Guardian and Teacher Pre-Questionnaire**

*Parent/Guardian Questionnaire*

Each parent, along with the consent forms, completed a questionnaire that answered specific questions about their child. The questions asked were about the types of struggles their child has with their disability, what treatments and therapies the parents have tried to help the progression of their child’s abilities, as well as what they believe their child’s social skills, motor skills, and confidence level were at. This gave the researcher a better understanding of each participant regarding their physical and cognitive limitations. As a collective, they felt their child had about an “average” (5–8 out of a possible 10, with 10 being most confident) sense of confidence. Some parents felt as though their child lacked in social and motor skills compared to other children with similar disabilities. The three most popular types of therapies written in the questionnaire from the parents were occupational therapy, physical therapy, and speech
therapy. Some individuals even had all three therapies at the same time to improve their abilities and skills. Other students had behavioral therapy where they teach them how to behave appropriately and calm aggression especially with those who are on the autistic spectrum.

Teacher Questionnaire

The teachers received the same questionnaire as the parents/guardians did. The teacher only answered the questions she could answer since some questions targeted the parent’s point of view more than a teacher’s. One of the questions applied to both the parent’s and teacher’s point of view: What are the challenges you face as a parent/teacher to a child with special needs?. Each student received the same statement from the teacher, which read, “Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of each individual student and figuring out the best way to teach them.” Another comment the teacher provided was that of a general perspective: the boys in the older group seemed to have a better understanding of their independence and loved to help out their friends or anyone who was in need of it. To a child with a disability, independence is the ability to take care of oneself with little to no help.

Some of the struggles the teacher had with the students was listening to directions, behavioral issues (e.g., talking back, hitting, and off task behavior), shutting down and making it difficult to get anything out of them, speaking too fast and an inability to communicate properly (speech impairment), and retaining of information given by the teacher. The researcher only asked one teacher to answer the questionnaire, since the teacher had each child during different times of the day each day.
**Researcher Feedback**

As soon as the researcher walked into the classroom, the participants jumped up from their seats to run to dance class. They seemed excited and eager to start class. The researcher wrote notes in a journal as well as observed the students per class. Although she did not have a rubric to follow, she saw the improvement in everyone’s ability. When discussing terminology, which included definition and movement, she allowed the student to write or express their understanding of what was being taught through drawings. The next two figures are sketches that Damian used to help him remember what the terminology and movements were and what they looked like.

![Figure 4. Student Drawing 1 (Damian)](image-url)
These illustrations are only some of the drawings Damian created throughout the research. Damian has high functioning Asperger’s, which is on the Autism Spectrum. Writing out the definition of the terminology showed the researcher that he not only understood the material, but also, by drawing a picture for his own recollection of the information received by the researcher, reinforced the material taught. Damian had better movement retention than some of the other participants. He has been home schooled all his life and will be entering ninth grade at a private high school with non-special education teachers, a new experience for him. The researcher’s dance class was the first class Damian had ever taken outside of home schooling.
The researcher near the beginning of the class, after stretching, would review each term and its movement before continuing to the next lesson for the day. She would speak the term, and the students would have to demonstrate them, or vice versa. The first student to jump up and answer the question would be (Pamela). She has Down syndrome, with communicable speech skills, and her memorization skills for dance are remarkable. Her favorite step was the grapevine which she consistently remembered every class. Pamela remembered the term because it was such a tough word for her to comprehend but with time grew accustomed to it.

Each student took something from this research, whether it was terminology they did not know already, new moves, a better understanding of jazz dance, more security and confidence when performing, or a sense of coordination they did not have prior to the research. In the next chapter the researcher will discuss other findings, limitations that occurred, and future recommendations for research.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

As discussed in previous chapters, this research studied dance as a functioning medium that can eliminate the need for words while improving motor skills, self-esteem, and confidence within students with disabilities. The final chapter of the thesis gathers the results and draws conclusions based on feedback from the participants, parents/guardians, teacher, and the researcher. The study consisted of a group of fourteen students with disabilities ranging from Down syndrome, ADHD, Cerebral palsy with and without paralysis, and Asperger’s on the Autism spectrum. The students took a dance class with the researcher during the summer for a total of twelve days, one hour each day. The students learned terminology and movement phrases, and then rehearsed choreography that the researcher created. The researcher implemented the terminology that they learned in class into the choreography learned. At the end of the study, the participants performed the choreography for their parents.

This study helped to answer the essential questions originally posed regarding whether the addition of dance classes increases social activity, if students have more body awareness after taking dance, how this has an impact on their motor skills and coordination, and how the research aids in advocating for dance within special needs classroom. This segment also considers some limitations linked with the research study and provides suggestions for future research in this area of dance and special needs.
Interpretation of Findings

The interpretations of this study derived from the feedback from the students, parents/guardians, teacher, and the researcher. The first essential question the researcher hoped to answer was whether the addition of dance classes increases social activity. This was evident in some of the videos taken during the classes. The students would interact with each other, learn how to take turns, and help each other to learn new steps. The second question, discusses how dance has impacted the students’ motor skills and coordination. One scenario that points to increased motor skill development and coordination is that of a student who has Cerebral palsy with paralysis on the entire right side of his body. When the researcher first began discussing and demonstrating the grapevine, the student had a troublesome time understanding the motions of the legs and the crossing over and under movements of the feet. By the last class, the researcher could see a major improvement with his coordination in completing the grapevine. He took it very slowly to make sure he mastered the step, which in turn made him look more confident.

The third question asks how this research helps to form more advocacy for dance within special needs classroom, as a daily regimen. In seeing the videos, watching the progress, and seeing the students faces light up when they got the step correctly, the researcher could see how much of a difference dance can make in such a short time. Although there was no parent exit questionnaire, some parents came to praise the researcher because their child was coming home happier and actually wanted to come to school in the morning knowing they had dance that day.
In conclusion, this research had a positive outcome in advocating for more dance programs within special needs classrooms. It helps their social skills, motor skills, coordination, and overall confidence in knowing they did something right and had fun while doing it.

**Limitations of Study**

Although the study did have an efficacious influence on the students, it is important to also acknowledge a few limitations from the research including: potential bias of the students because the researcher’s brother attends the same school, limited responses in the parent/guardian and teacher exit evaluations, limited time for conducting the research, and lack of a control group.

Since the researcher did the study at her brother’s school, she knew eight of the fourteen participants from prior meetings, yet has only worked with four of those eight within the aspect of dance. Since the study took place in the summer, the timing for the study was interwoven with prior vacations planned with the participants and their families. It was difficult to give the parents an exit questionnaire due to time constraints and unforeseen circumstances that the researcher had no control over. Twelve days with special needs students is not enough time to see a significant change. The researcher recommends that to document additional results, this study should take place for a longer duration, and a there would need to be a more complete comparison of the entrance and exit surveys to compare levels of change and growth. Originally, the agreement with the principal of the school was to have the first fifteen students interested in the study join. After given approval by IRB, the principal realized, it was in the researcher’s best interest
to work with scholars based on behavioral aspects and whom she thought would cooperate the most.

**Recommendation for Future Research**

The researcher believes there is still much to learn about disability, dance, and the affect dance has on anybody. This study has provided some advocacy for dance within special needs students. The researcher used jazz because that is her preferred style. Attempting research on the same subjects but with a different style of dance would provide a different perspective. Having a randomly selected class with a variety of disabilities instead of having a control group of students with cooperative behavior would help illustrate how dance affects students with more behavioral issues. Additional research on the topic of dance and special needs can further advise teachers, parents, administrators, and students on the positive affects dance has on the body and brain.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, it is evident that dance is a positive influence on students with special needs. Students with varying degrees of disabilities have the potential to become more social, better coordinated, and more confident by incorporating dance into their everyday lives.
Works Cited


APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL LETTER
DATE: January 3, 2017
TO: Jennifer Dabalsa, Masters
FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB
PROJECT TITLE: [971919-3] Dance for Special Needs Students: Building Confidence and Motor Skills
SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: January 2, 2017
EXPIRATION DATE: January 2, 2018
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB has APPROVED your submission. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on applicable federal regulations.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of January 2, 2018.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Sherry May at 970-351-1910 or Sherry.May@unco.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.
APPENDIX B

PRINCIPAL CONSENT LETTER
November 22, 2016

Dear Institutional Review Board:

The purpose of this letter is to inform you that I give Jennifer M. Dabalsa permission to conduct the research titled *Dance for Special Needs Students: Building Confidence and Motor Skills* at [redacted] as well as assurance that this school complies with requirements of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) (see back for specific requirements) and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of this research.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Cristina Cartaya
Principal
APPENDIX C

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD CONSENT FORMS
CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Thesis Title: Dance for Special Needs Students: Building Confidence and Motor Skills

Researcher: Jennifer M. Dabalsa, Graduate Student at the University of Northern Colorado

Contact Information: (xxx) xxx-xxxx, j_dabalsa@hotmail.com

Dear Mrs. Cartaya,

My name is Jennifer Dabalsa. I am a graduate student at the University of Colorado. I would like to use some of your students at [redacted] to participate in a research project for completion of my thesis. The purpose of this thesis is to provide insight on the effects of inclusion of dance in special needs classrooms. This study will provide teachers with modifications for teaching students with special needs when it pertains to the arts, specifically dance. This project will attempt to answer the following questions: Does the addition of dance classes in a special needs classroom increase student social activity? Will students have more body awareness after taking dance? How does this impact the students’ self-esteem/confidence level? How does this research help form new areas therapy for children with disabilities within the dance community? As part of a graduate research project, this research will help advocate for more arts integrated programs in special needs classroom as well as provide information and data on what tools or lessons can be used to enhance social skills, motor skills, and self-esteem in students with disabilities. Please feel free to email me any questions you may have. If you do consent to this research, please email me a letter of confirmation and permission to conduct the research project at [redacted].

Sincerely,

Jennifer M. Dabalsa
CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO
PARENT/GUARDIAN

**Thesis Title:** Dance for Special Needs Students: Building Confidence and Motor Skills

**Researcher:** Jennifer M. Dabalsa, Graduate Student at the University of Northern Colorado

**Contact Information:** (xxx) xxx-xxxx, j_dabalsa@hotmail.com

**Research Advisor:** Christy O’Connell-Black, University of Northern Colorado, Christy.OConnellBlack@unco.edu

Your child is being asked to take part in a research study to provide insight on the effects of inclusion of dance in special needs classrooms. The goal of this research is to answer the following questions: Does the addition of dance classes in a special needs classroom increase student social activity? Will students have more body awareness after taking dance? How does this impact the students’ self-esteem/confidence level? How does this research help form new areas therapy for children with disabilities within the dance community? I am asking for your permission for your child to take part because your child attends [Redacted], Miami, FL and have shown interest in this topic. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to allow your child to take part in the study.

**What the study is about:** This study will provide teachers with modifications for teaching students with special needs when it pertains to the arts, specifically dance. Students will receive a jazz class, learn terminology, and perform a combination. With the use of repetition of movements, I intend to answer the questions previously stated above. Most students feel more comfortable and confident when they have the information given to them. Results will be made into a video to see the effects of their understanding in the first class and their last class. Comparisons will be made after watching the last class. As part of a graduate research project, this research will help advocate for more arts integrated programs in special needs classroom as well as
provide information and data on what tools or lessons can be used to enhance social
skills, motor skills, and self-esteem in students with disabilities.

**Risks:** The risks correlated with this research are those risks typical of participating
in a dance or movement based activities. The teacher will make every effort to warm
students up properly in order to avoid injury. Students will be instructed to let the
teacher know ahead of time if they have an injury or other reason they cannot
participate in a particular activity. All participants, parent and student, will sign a
waiver of liability and understanding of physical risk associated with dance prior to
partaking in the research. Students will be given feedback in a positive manner in
order to build confidence within their movement. Extreme care will be taken to
conserve a safe and positive working atmosphere that is reverential to the learning
process of all participants. The student teachers will be present throughout each class to assist the researcher. If students choose to participate, they
agree to take on all risks involved, and the teacher, university, and school are not
liable.

**Your answers will be confidential.** Every effort will be made to protect your child’s
identity. The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report, I make
public, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify your
child. A code system will be used to identify all participant responses including the
pre-interview, journal and post-interview information. No actual names will be used
and pseudonyms will be assigned. The goal of the research is to simply document the
success of dance integration in a special needs classroom. I will be using surveys and
interviews with teachers, parents and students. Observations will include my own
personal journal/self-assessment and videotaped interviews to gather data. Consent
forms and dates of the classes will be emailed to the parent/guardian prior to the
research beginning. The students will begin with a multiple choice survey attesting to
what they like and do not like to do based on their prior knowledge of dance.
Accommodations will be made based on the students’ disability (504 plan and IEP’s).
Teachers and parents/guardian of the student will be interviewed prior to the research
entrance and an exit interview to see the change in the student through socialism,
motor skills, and self-esteem. The students will be participating in a jazz technique
mini curriculum session. All documents pertaining to this study will be stored in a
locked cabinet in Crabbe Hall, room 308, the office of Dance Education MA co-
ordinator Christy O’Connell-Black. The notes will be destroyed after the
completion of the thesis.

**Taking part is voluntary:** Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. Your
decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which your child is
otherwise entitled. If you decide to allow your child to take part, you are free to
withdraw your child at any time.

**If you have questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Jennifer M. Dabalsa.
Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact
me with the information listed above. Please retain one copy of this letter for your records.

Thank you for assisting me in my research. Sincerely,

Jennifer M. Dabalsa
CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO
PARENT/GUARDIAN

Thesis Title: Dance for Special Needs Students: Building Confidence and Motor Skills

Researcher: Jennifer M. Dabalsa, Graduate Student at the University of Northern Colorado

Contact Information: (xxx) xxx-xxxx, j_dabalsa@hotmail.com

Research Advisor: Christy O'Connell-Black, University of Northern Colorado, Christy.OConnellBlack@unco.edu

Participation is voluntary. Your child may decide not to participate in this study and if your child begins participation you or your child may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you and your child are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like your child to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future references. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Sherry May, IRB Administrator, Office of Sponsored Programs, 25 Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910.

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

_____________________________________________________
Child’s Full Name (please print) Child’s Birth Date (month/day/year)

_____________________________________________________
Parent/Guardian’s Signature Date (month/day/year)
Researcher’s Signature  Date (month/day/year)

Printed Name of Researcher Obtaining Consent  Date (month/day/year)

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for at least three years beyond the end of the study and was approved by the IRB on (date).
CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO
STUDENT

Thesis Title: Dance for Special Needs Students: Building Confidence and Motor Skills

Researcher: Jennifer M. Dabalsa, Graduate Student at the University of Northern Colorado

Contact Information: (xxx) xxx-xxxx, j_dabalsa@hotmail.com

Research Advisor: Christy O'Connell-Black, University of Northern Colorado, Christy.OConnellBlack@unco.edu

You are being asked to take part in a research study to provide insight on the effects of inclusion of dance in special needs classrooms. Questions looking to be answered are the following: Does the addition of dance classes in a special needs classroom increase student social activity? Will students have more body awareness after taking dance? How does this impact the students’ self-esteem/confidence level? I am asking for your participation to take part in this study, because you attend [redacted], Miami, FL and have shown interest in this topic. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

What the study is about: This study will provide teachers with modifications for teaching students with special needs when it pertains to the arts, specifically dance. You will receive a jazz class, learn terminology, and perform a combination. With the use of repetition of movements, I intend to answer the questions previously stated above. Most students feel more comfortable and confident when they have the information given to them. Results will be made into a video to see the effects of your understanding of the material in the first class and your last class. Comparisons will be made after watching the last class. As part of a graduate research project, this research will help advocate for more arts integrated programs in special needs classroom as well as provide information and data on what tools or lessons can be
used to enhance social skills, motor skills, and self-esteem in students with disabilities.

**Risks:** The risks correlated with this research are those risks typical of participating in a dance or movement based activities. The teacher will make every effort to warm you up properly in order to avoid injury. You the student, will be instructed to let the me know ahead of time if they have an injury or other reason they cannot participate in a particular activity. All participants and parents will sign a waiver of liability and understanding of physical risk associated with dance prior to partaking in the research. You will be given feedback in a positive manner in order to build confidence within your movement. Extreme care will be taken to conserve a safe and positive working atmosphere that is reverential to the learning process of all participants. The student teachers at Our Pride Academy will be present throughout each class to assist the me. If you participate, you agree to take on all risks involved, and the teacher, university and the school are not liable.

**Your answers will be confidential.** Every effort will be made to protect your identity. The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report, I make public, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. A code system will be used to identify all participant responses including the pre-interview (parents and teachers), student survey, journal entries and post-interview information. No actual names will be used. I will use pseudonyms. The goal of the research is to simply document the success of dance integration in a special needs classroom. All documents pertaining to this study will be stored in a locked cabinet in Crabbe Hall, room 308, the office of Dance Education MA co-coordinator Christy O’Connell-Black. The notes will be destroyed after the completion of the thesis.

**Taking part is voluntary:** Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time.

**If you have questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Jennifer M. Dabalsa. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me with the information listed above. Please retain one copy of this letter for your records.

Thank you for assisting me in my research. Sincerely,

Jennifer M. Dabalsa
CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO
STUDENT

Thesis Title: Dance for Special Needs Students: Building Confidence and Motor Skills

Researcher: Jennifer M. Dabalsa, Graduate Student at the University of Northern Colorado

Contact Information: (xxx) xxx-xxxx, j_dabalsa@hotmail.com

Research Advisor: Christy O'Connell-Black, University of Northern Colorado, Christy.OConnellBlack@unco.edu

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you and are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future references. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact Sherry May, IRB Administrator, Office of Sponsored Programs, 25 Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1910.

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

___________________________________________________________
Child’s Full Name (please print)     Child’s Birth Date (month/day/year)

___________________________________________________________
Parent/Guardian’s Signature          Date (month/day/year)
This consent form will be kept by the researcher for at least three years beyond the end of the study and was approved by the IRB on (date).
APPENDIX D

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS
Parent/Teacher Interviews:

*Day 1 Interview:*

- What are the challenges you face as a parent/teacher to a child with special needs?
- What are the child’s strengths?
- What does the child enjoy doing?
- What kind of struggles does the child have because of his/her disability?
- How does having a child with a disability affect your other children?
- What progress have you seen in the child since his/her initial diagnosis?
- What treatments or therapies have been successful for the child?
- What concerns do you have for your child’s future?
- How do you prep the child for social situations?
- On a scale from 1-10 please rate the child’s social skills.
- On a scale of 1-10 please rate the child’s motor skills
- On a scale of 1-10 please rate the child’s confidence level.
**Student Survey Questionnaire:**

**Day 1**

Gender: Female \ Male  
Age: ____.

1. Do you dance?  
   - Yes.  
   - No.  
   - I would like to learn how to dance.

2. Which style do you like most?  
   - Ballet.  
   - Jazz.  
   - Hip Hop.  
   - Tap.

3. What style do you like least?  
   - Ballet.  
   - Jazz.  
   - Hip-Hop.  
   - Tap.

4. Do you think dancing is just for girls?  
   - Yes.  
   - No.

5. Do you believe that a dance can show real feelings or how you are thinking?  
   - Yes.  
   - No.

6. Are you uncomfortable with dancing?  
   - Yes.  
   - No.

7. Which one from the list describes why you dance?  
   - For fun.  
   - An art.  
   - A sport.

8. Which dance do you think is the most important?  
   - Ballet  
   - Jazz  
   - Hip-Hop  
   - Tap