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Confidence in the Classroom: A Guide for Teaching Dance to Exceptional Learners

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

CONFIDENCE IN THE CLASSROOM: A GUIDE FOR
TEACHING DANCE TO EXCEPTIONAL LEARNERS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

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Dance Education

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This Thesis by: Brianna Janae Denmark

Entitled: *Confidence in the Classroom: A Guide for Teaching Dance to Exceptional Learners*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Master of Dance Education in College of Performing & Visual Arts in Department of Theater & Dance, Program of Dance Education.

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ABSTRACT

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This study focuses on highlighting the need for proper training for dance educators faced with teaching classes that include students with exceptional needs. Few dance classes will openly welcome or properly accommodate exceptional learners, which means that these learners are presented with minimal opportunities to participate in this extracurricular activity that promotes self-expression and socialization with their peers. Wanting to create more opportunities for exceptional learners to participate in dance, the researcher sought to find a solution that could be applied to multiple programs or organizations. The researcher realized that teaching exceptional learners can be viewed as daunting or uncomfortable to teachers who may not have had prior experience or exposure to interacting with these learners and recruited one volunteer participant who did not have prior training in teaching students with exceptional needs. Using qualitative methods of research, including administering pre- and post-surveys and conducting classroom observations, the researcher observed and recorded data on one participant and was able to answer the question of whether providing dance teachers with guidelines would be beneficial and raise their confidence when teaching exceptional learners. These findings will provide information that dance teacher of all experience levels can apply to their own teaching methods.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Goal of Thesis

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines dance as “moving one’s body rhythmically, usually to music” (“Dance Definition & Meaning”). In many aspects, dance is much more than that. Dance is also a popular form of storytelling, communication, and self-expression of thoughts and emotions. In “*Dance is something that anyone can do’: Creating dance programs for all abilities,*” Reinders, a PhD Candidate at Wilfrid Laurier University focusing on the physical effects of recreational physical activity and dance programs for disabled individuals, states that “the body is not just an instrument to create a dance, but a tool for languaging experiences beyond words” (257-274). This form of non-verbal communication would be beneficial to those with exceptional needs who do not know how to express their needs and wants through verbal language and should be openly available and accessible to all individuals.

Opportunities for participation in dance are scarce for students with exceptional needs. This is a disservice to the individuals who are within the exceptional needs community since there are many benefits that can be reaped from participating in dance classes. Exceptional learners benefit from dance by using it as a form of expression to understand complex emotions and feelings. Along with learning how to navigate self-expression, dance offers the opportunity for socialization with peers. For an activity that is so beneficial to a large, consistently growing demographic of students, why is there such limited availability for it? A primary reason for the scarcity of opportunities in dance for exceptional learners stems from the pillar of the studio, the

teacher: most dance teachers lack the experience and/or knowledge to educate and guide students with exceptional needs. The inability to connect with and provide quality instruction to students with exceptional needs not only removes the sense of inclusion but will also compromise the quality of dance education being delivered.

Any hindrance to a student's education should warrant a solution, which usually entails further training or providing reference materials relevant to the situation. When an issue arises that involves exceptional learners in a dance environment, it can be difficult to find relevant information. Research materials concerning Special Education in schools can be found, as well as separate information in multiple areas of dance research. However, information about exceptional learners in dance is practically nonexistent. Without available information, how are dance teachers expected to learn how to best modify their teaching methods to better support their students? The lack of informational or experiential support can cause a decline in a teacher's confidence in their ability to truly teach a diverse population of students. The effect of low confidence in teachers causes the absence of dance classes that are inclusive for all abilities, which in turn deprives exceptional learners of the chance to participate in an activity that promotes self-expression and socialization. The goal of this thesis is to increase the confidence of dance teachers who have little to no experience or exposure to teaching exceptional learners, which will help create more opportunities for students with exceptional needs to access dance classes that are openly accommodating.

Purpose of Study

Teaching those with exceptional needs sometimes requires different approaches than teaching neurotypical students. For example, students with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) have more difficulty in social situations, such as bonding with their teacher. Reinders et al. state

that “in order to build this relationship, the therapist utilizes techniques such as mirroring, touch, props, and music to connect with the child in a non-intrusive way” (257-274). These four techniques are already used in a typical dance class. Mirroring and touch are used to demonstrate and correct movement with music being used to accompany the learned movement and teach students about rhythm and timing. Props are not as commonly found in weekly classes, but they do start making appearances when practices for recitals and showcases begin. While this execution of these techniques works for most students, it may not be beneficial for exceptional learners. Each one of the listed techniques can be used in another way to help students with exceptional needs comprehend and excel in dance. Finding alternative ways to teach the same concept is key when teaching a diverse group of students. Not every student learns the same way, whether they learn best through literal or abstract concepts.

The purpose of this research is to provide guidelines to teach and train dance teachers on how to successfully teach a class with exceptional learners. The research will focus on creating a set of guidelines for dance teachers to better understand how to construct and implement different instruction methods for exceptional learners, which will create more opportunities for these students to participate in dance. The study will also track and compare each teacher’s confidence level and skill growth before and after the guidelines are presented to the teacher. In addition to analyzing teacher competency and confidence, the research sought to answer the following questions:

- Q1 Will providing a set of guidelines help dance teachers understand how to teach exceptional learners?
- Q2 Will an in-person workshop help dance teachers better understand the guidelines given to them?
- Q3 In what ways will the dance teacher’s mindset or opinions of teaching these classes change?

Q4 How will these guidelines affect the confidence of dance teachers teaching exceptional learners?

Significance of Study

What will creating these guidelines mean for teachers and their classes? It is important to remember that teaching students with exceptional means keeping an open mindset in the classroom as well as properly preparing to actively include these students in lesson plans instead of excluding them. In her article, *Dancers with Disabilities: The Case for Mainstreaming Disabled Students in Dance Education*, Lea Marshall, the associate chair of Virginia Commonwealth University Department of Dance and Choreography, shares her thoughts on the importance of teacher preparedness in a dance class:

Integrating disabled and typically abled students in class means actually thinking it through, she says, as opposed to just opening the door to disabled students and saying, “Good luck.” But when teachers and students are prepared and open, dance can work its particular transformative magic. (Marshall)

The preparedness of dance teachers determines the success and confidence of exceptional learners in their classes. Not only does preparation benefit the student, but the instructor as well. Their own thoughts of dance and its limitations can be expanded through creative thinking and figuring out different ways to incorporate students of all abilities in the same classroom. In her article, Marshall quotes Merry Lynn Morris about how teaching an inclusive dance class can benefit the instructor:

Teachers, too, can grow their own practice and expand their understanding of what dance can be by integrating disabled students into their classes. Morris says, “I love the way

teaching in this context pushes me creatively and makes me think differently about definitions of dance and dance training. It's an opportunity to innovate." (Marshall)

Learning how to teach exceptional learners is crucial if a dance instructor wants to integrate these students into their classes. How can teachers effectively learn how to teach exceptional learners? The significance of this study is to provide dance teachers with a guideline to use when teaching exceptional learners. These guidelines are meant to help dance teachers structure their lessons and learn how to interact with their students with exceptional needs.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

What are Exceptional Needs?

Uniquely challenged. Differently abled. Special needs. These terms were all created to describe learners who think, learn, and live differently than what society deems as “normal” or “typical.” The term “exceptional needs” is simply another way of labeling these learners to establish this difference between neurotypical and neurodivergent learners. Found in Merriam-Webster, the official definition of exceptional needs is classified as “any of various difficulties (such as a physical, emotional, behavioral, or learning disability or impairment) that causes an individual to require additional or specialized services or accommodations (such as in education or recreation)” (“Special Needs Definition and Meaning”). When a typically abled person describes a person(s) with a disability or disorder, the term “special needs” is commonly used. However, for this research, the term “exceptional needs” will be used. The reasoning behind using this certain term stems from the stigma that the term “special needs” carries with it. Using “special needs” instead of “exceptional needs” typically implies that the person or community being mentioned as helpless, unintelligent, or unable to do anything independently. These pre-notations are anything but true. Any individual who has an exceptional need is more than capable of doing anything that their neurotypical peers can accomplish. Special or exceptional needs refer to any additional needs that an individual might require to accomplish typical tasks or goals. As explained in an article by James River Wealth Advisors, “Exceptional needs can apply to any child who has needs outside of the norm. And using the term exceptional needs does not

come with the same stigma that special needs does” (“Bridging the Gap”). The term “exceptional” has an overall positive connotation so the terms “exceptional needs” or “exceptional learners” will be used throughout the project to ensure proper positive inclusivity for every type of learner.

What makes these learners exceptional? An exceptional learner has one or more disabilities that can cause limitations in certain areas of comprehension or physicality. As listed on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website, disabilities can affect certain skills, which include the following: vision, movement, thinking, remembering, learning, communicating, hearing, mental health, and/or social relationships. These disabilities can include, “disorders in single genes (for example, Duchenne muscular dystrophy), disorders of chromosomes (for example, Down syndrome), and the result of the mother’s exposure during pregnancy to infections (for example, rubella) or substances, such as alcohol or cigarettes” (“Disability and Health Overview”). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), a disability has three dimensions:

1. Impairment in a person’s body structure or function, or mental functioning; examples of impairments include loss of a limb, loss of vision or memory loss.
2. Activity limitation, such as difficulty seeing, hearing, walking, or problem solving.
3. Participation restrictions in normal daily activities, such as working, engaging in social and recreational activities, and obtaining health care and preventive services.

It is true that this community of learners experience limitations or restrictions when experiencing day-to-day life. It is important to view these limitations positively instead of negatively. While there are many specific disabilities that can be explored, the availability of classes for exceptional learners is limited in the area that the research is being conducted. For the sake of

this project, there will be a focus on dance classes for exceptional learners with learning and/or movement disabilities.

Why Should We Teach Exceptional Learners?

Benefits for Teachers

Why is it important for instructors to learn to teach exceptional learners? Aside from creating a welcoming environment for all learners, studying how to teach exceptional learners will help teachers become more effective. An article from Point Loma Nazarene University states, “by understanding the best way to teach all types and levels of learners, you understand the way that more students learn, not just those with exceptionalities” (Why Every Teacher Needs to Study Special Education). In addition, teachers will also have access to a lifetime of learning. Teaching exceptional learners means realizing that there are multiple ways to teach a concept. “if you learn to focus on person-centered education, you will understand each student’s unique goals, challenges and needs, requiring you to continuously change and adapt” (Why Every Teacher Needs to Study Special Education). By learning to accommodate the different needs and learning styles found in the classroom, teachers are utilizing their creative and critical thinking skills to ensure the success of their students.

Benefits for Typical Learners

Like instructors, typical learners benefit from taking classes with peers who have exceptional needs. When in a classroom with diverse learners, typical learners will encounter peers who seem “different” than them. “Inclusion gives kids a way to talk about how everyone learns in their own way...This can go a long way in helping kids know that difference is just a normal part of life” (“4 Benefits of Inclusive Classrooms”). Overall, this exposure will teach

children that “different” does not necessarily mean scary or uncomfortable. In addition, inclusive classrooms teach typical learners empathy and acceptance of others.

How to Create an Inclusive Classroom

What is Inclusion?

Inclusion is a “distinct process that requires us to look beyond traditional diversity metrics and into the multiple spaces in which inclusion exists and can be built: inside people (perception), between people (relational and behavioral), and outside people” (Brix et al. 267-275). In other words, inclusion is the ability to look beyond traditional societal constraints regarding physical or intellectual labels. It is also the ability for others to engage in the process of accepting and accommodating people outside of these constraints. The acceptance of a more inclusive environment also aids in building diversity. As stated by Brix et al., “the understanding and practice of inclusion are critical to realizing the full benefits of diverse representation” (Brix et al. 267-275). In relation to this project, an inclusive environment will incorporate students of all abilities in dance classes. Creating an inclusive environment is not restricted to only accepting students of all abilities into an existing dance class. To create this environment, dance instructors will have to structure a class that is challenging yet accommodating for all students involved.

Mixed Ability Classes

Creating an inclusive environment means creating a space that is safe and accessible to those with exceptional needs. One way to create an inclusive classroom is to create and offer a mixed abilities class. “Mixed-abilities dance refers to dance groups, classes or companies that combine people with and without disabilities. It is also known as integrated dance, inclusive dance, mixed ability dance” (“FAQ”). Creating mixed abilities classes offers an array of benefits for the students participating. These benefits can include:

- “Overall physical fitness”
- “Improvements in flexibility, strength, and motor skills”
- “An increase in confidence and self-esteem”
- “An outlet for creativity and imagination”
- “Excellent stress relief” (The Studio Director Team)

While the benefits of a mixed-ability class can easily be researched, the success rates of these classes are not yet available. In the researcher’s personal experience, any mixed-ability classes that are offered are barely successful and usually retain only two to three students. As additional research is completed, more information regarding successful mixed-ability classes will be available in the future.

Why is Inclusion Important?

Inclusion is a value that is becoming more prominent in the modern world. In a dance class environment, inclusion can be beneficial for students of all abilities. In her article *Values, Attributes, and Practices of Dance Artists in Inclusive Dance Talent Development Contexts*, Elsa Urmston and Imogen Aujla state the following:

In an inclusive setting, dancers with and without disabilities are taught together in an environment that nurtures creativity, aids development of specific motor skills, uses improvisation and set material, enables self-expression, and fosters a sense of belonging... Inclusion allows everyone access to dance and equitable opportunities for everyone to flourish and reach their potential (14-23).

In addition to these benefits, inclusive dance classes also allow students to “increase self-esteem, social and communicative skills, and physical health” (Suppo 17-23). “Just like their typically developing peers, individuals with disabilities deserve to have opportunities to choose to

participate fully in a variety of life and leisure activities, like dance, so they can reach their maximum potential” (Suppo 17-23). Overall, dance classes benefit exceptional learners physically, socially, and mentally.

While inclusive dance classes greatly and benefit exceptional learners, typical learners are also affected by this type of class. Boswell et al. conducted a study on the experiences of dancers with and without disabilities in inclusive dance with a professional company. In this study, they found that three different themes developed: a fascination with inclusive dance, a supportive environment, and differences in perspectives. From the findings of this study, Boswell et al. found that both abled and disabled dancers were fascinated by the professional dance company’s creation of inclusive dance. “Both dancers with and without disabilities stressed that the inclusion of dancers with disabilities was an essential ingredient of creating this company’s inclusive dance” (Boswell et al. 508-521). Also, the dancers without disabilities recognized the supportive environment that was created for everyone involved. Boswell et al. state, “dancers in this study described an environment that exceeded acceptance by offering both social support and emotional engagement between dancers with and without disabilities in this collaborative dance community” (Boswell et al. 508-521). Finally, Boswell et al. noted the differences in perspectives between the dancers with disabilities versus the dancers without disabilities. While the dancers with disabilities presented strong motivations for continuing to perform in inclusive dance, the dancers without disabilities were more hesitant and worried about potential injury. One of the dancers without disabilities states, “I’m not used to being next to people with physical disabilities so I didn’t know how to react. I wasn’t sure what to do when we were dancing” (Boswell et al. 508-521). However, the same subject goes on to state that “(this company) did a very great job of putting us into exercises that would allow us to explore not only

the work between different persons but also to explore listening to each one...Gradually, that awkwardness I was feeling at the beginning was gone” (Boswell et al. 508-521). Overall, the dancers without disabilities found the class awkward at first, but slowly became more comfortable and accepting of the dancers with disabilities. While these themes are directed towards adults experiencing inclusive dance, they can still be translated into an inclusive dance class for children.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Preparation for this Study

The purpose of the study is to provide guidelines to teach and train dance teachers on how to successfully teach a class with exceptional learners. Providing these guidelines will provide a pathway for creating more opportunities for students with exceptional needs to participate in dance classes. In preparation for this study, the researcher sought approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Requesting this approval included submitting copies of the research instruments that the researcher planned to use, as well as copies of consent forms for the participants, the owner of the studio being used, and the parents of the students taking class during the project. The researcher also included the goal, purpose, and significance of this project to explain why the researcher wanted to conduct this project and what the benefits would be. Once the IRB approved the researchers proposal, the research could begin.

Research Instruments Used in the Study

Pre-Interviews

Prior to the beginning of the initial class observation, volunteers participated in a pre-interview designed to evaluate each volunteer's current mindset, opinions, and comfort level with teaching a class with exceptional learners. Each volunteer answered the following questions:

1. Do you have any prior experience or exposure in interacting with individuals with either physical or developmental exceptional needs? If yes, please explain.
2. How confident are you in your ability to teach exceptional students? Please explain.
3. Do you have any concerns about teaching exceptional learners?

4. If you were provided with a set of guidelines meant for learning how to teach these learners, would you be more willing and confident to teach them? Why or why not?

This interview provided the researcher with a general idea of how to develop the guidelines that would be given to each volunteer before the start of the second classroom observation. The answers to these questions were recorded and later compared to the answers given by the same volunteer in the post-interview.

Classroom Observations

A total of two classroom observations were conducted during the research project. The first observation was conducted immediately after the participant's pre-interview. During the observation, the researcher utilized a checklist in the form of a chart to evaluate the participants and how they interact, teach, and structure the class. The chart also addressed different tactics and implementations that are commonly found in a classroom specialized for exceptional learners and if the participant attempted to use them. The chart presented in Figure 1 shows what teaching methods the researcher is looking for from the participants. By keeping track of what elements are already being used or are absent, the researcher will be able to determine what needs to be included when creating the guidelines for the workshop.

After the distribution of the guidelines and before the post-interview, a second observation was completed with the volunteers. In this observation, the researcher used the same chart (Figure 1) as before and kept track of what elements each participant decided to implement into their teachings. The secondary observation was used to determine what new teaching methods were added in as well as if there was a difference in the participant's personal interactions with the students.

Post-Interviews

After their second classroom observation, each volunteer participated in a post-interview. This interview was like the pre-interview and assessed how the volunteers felt about their ability to teach exceptional learners after receiving the guidelines and if the guidelines were viewed as a beneficial tool. The post-interview covered the following questions:

1. After being provided with the guidelines, do you feel more prepared to teach a class with exceptional learners? Why or why not?
2. Were the guidelines overall helpful?
3. Would attending a masterclass help provide a better understanding of the guidelines? Explain.
4. What did you learn from this experience?
5. Are the guidelines a tool that you would use in future dance teaching endeavors?

Developing the Guidelines

The guidelines were created by the researcher by reflecting on their personal experiences of living with and teaching individuals with exceptional needs, as well as conducting any further research that was needed. Recognizing that not every teacher or individual has the training that they received at the beginning of their ABA therapy career, the researcher aimed to produce the guidelines in a way that could be understood by anyone who read them. The guidelines were created with this in mind and made to be easily readable and understandable. Furthermore, the researcher made sure to cite the information provided if any of the participants wanted to conduct further research. The researcher also ensured the participants that they were free to ask any questions that arose or make any other suggestions that might prove useful to the project. If the researcher did not know any information off-hand, the participants were assured that the subject would be researched, and the information would be provided to them shortly.

Participants

For the study, a total of one participant was observed. Offers of participation were extended to a local dance studio in Louisiana that provides a class for exceptional learners. Three instructors showed interest and were asked to sign consent forms before the researcher could continue with the project. One of the interested participants was the owner of the dance studio, who also signed a form giving consent for the researcher to observe the classes held at the studio. During the process of collecting participant signatures, one of the instructors failed to attend both classes and was removed from potential data collection. Another instructor explained after signing the consent form and filling out the pre-interview that they would not be teaching that class again, that they were only acting as a substitute for the owner, who regularly taught the class. As a result the instructor decided to pull this participant's data as well, which left one participant to observe. The researcher also decided to have the parents and/or guardians of the students enrolled in the class sign consent forms. Before each class observation, the researcher made sure to receive the permission and signature of each parent or guardian who had a loved one in the class. The researcher provided the consent forms to receive consent for conducting an observation while the student was present and to ensure the anonymity of the students.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS

Beginning of the Study

On the day of the first observation, the researcher held a pre-interview with Participant A. This interview covered four questions that were aimed at gathering the participant's background information with teaching exceptional learners. The questions included the following:

1. Do you have any prior experience or exposure in interacting with individuals with either physical or developmental exceptional needs? If yes, please explain.
2. How confident are you in your ability to teach exceptional learners? Please explain.
3. Do you have any concerns about teaching exceptional learners?
4. If you were provided with a set of guidelines meant for learning how to teach these learners, would you be more willing and confident to teach them? Why or why not?

Participant A seemed very open-minded and motivated while they were filling out the pre-interview questions. They first listed any prior experience with teaching exceptional learners that they had, which seemed to be a lot. While filling out the questions Participant A noted that these experiences did not come with any training or preparation and that they were simply teaching exceptional learners as though they were neurotypical. Participant A further explained that they were confident with teaching exceptional learners as long as the students were dancing and having fun. There were no concerns since they personally taught with the mentality that dance is for everyone. The last question was answered with a resounding "yes." Taken aback by the confidence and extensive experience that Participant A had, the researcher asked for them to

further explain. Participant A answered that they would love more information that would help their students in dance class. They also stressed that more information like this for acting classes would be beneficial as well. With these answers in hand, the researcher and participant moved on to the observation portion of the day.

Before continuing with the observation, the researcher obtained the signatures of the parents and guardians of all students participating in the class. Even though the students were not the ones being observed, the researcher wanted to ensure the parents and guardians that their loved one's identity would remain anonymous, and that the researcher was not taking data on the students. After receiving the signatures of the parents and guardians present for the first class, the researcher started their observation on Participant A. The researcher observed Participant A and took down notes on their teaching style and methods by using the chart found in the Appendix. The researcher noticed during this observation that Participant A provided an abundance of support, patience, and understanding to their students. The students did not react negatively to any environmental stimuli, but one student started to become overstimulated due to heightened levels of excitement and anticipation. Participant A noticed the student's overstimulation and called for a small break. This awareness and flexibility of teaching are key factors when teaching exceptional learners. Another positive teaching method that the researcher noticed was the lack of Participant A engaging in highly repetitive movement in hopes of trying to get the students to follow along. Instead, Participant A only performed a normal amount of repetitive movement that one might see in a classroom with young students. Participant A also talked their students through each movement to engage any auditory learners present in the room. As the class progressed it became noticeable that the students were starting to get restless. In response, Participant A used redirection and attempted to use the "first, then" method of teaching to bring

the students back to the current lesson. They did not use a punishment procedure or engage in bribery to get the students to attend to the lesson and continued to hold the students to any original task demands that were given. Participant A seemed to have overall instructional control over the students. The only physical element that the researcher noticed was absent was the visual schedule mentioned in the chart. The researcher also took note of other absent teaching elements that were not included in the chart. Participant A seemed to rely heavily on verbal directions and having the students mimic choreography to teach the class. The class might benefit from watching videos of different movements or dancing along to music that verbalizes the movements that the students are to be engaging in. The researcher also noticed that Participant A used one type of sensory stimulus, colored dots, to help keep the students engaged and stay in one place on the dance floor. From personal experience, the researcher recalled how successfully some students learn when they have different types of sensory items to create stimulation, and wondered if it would also work in a dance environment. Having completed the first interview and observation, the researcher was ready to develop the guidelines that were to be given to Participant A.

Middle of the Study

The goal of this project was to develop guidelines that dance teachers could use to gain further information about different teaching methods and elements that could be used to help teach exceptional learners and ensure their success in class. The researcher took the information gathered from the first observation to decide what should be included in the guidelines. Creating the guidelines could go into great detail and provide so much information that it would be impossible to go through it in just one day, let alone absorb the information well enough to remember it. The researcher decided to simplify any information they planned to provide and

format it into a PowerPoint presentation. The goal was to provide Participant A with information that could be used immediately and not overwhelm them with anything that would not apply to their class. With this in mind, the researcher only included information that would further support the elements found in the chart, as well as the few additional notes they took about the lack of sensory items being used. Included in these guidelines was the explanation of who exceptional learners are and the different types of disabilities that one might encounter when teaching students with exceptional needs. The guidelines then list the different types of learning and examples of how a dance teacher can deliver information to each type of learner, as well as different elements that could be used to enhance learning such as a visual schedule, Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), videos, and sensory items. The researcher included a few key points at the conclusion of the guidelines that would also benefit Participant A but were not necessary for the second observation. These points highlight the importance of kindness and empathy in an inclusive classroom, remind the reader that there are many more teaching methods that could be used, and always ask questions if there are any uncertainties. The last note about asking questions was one of the most important highlights in the guidelines. Any individual can read a packet of information and implement it. A good dance teacher should not be afraid to ask questions, especially if it concerns students with exceptional needs. Questions should be asked if there are uncertainties about a student's sensitivities, triggers, or fixations. On this final note, the guidelines were completed and ready to be given to Participant A for review.

End of the Study

Participant A received a copy the completed guidelines one week before their next class to give them enough time to look over it and decide which elements they wanted to include. To avoid any unproductivity during this one week of waiting, the researcher decided to create a

visual schedule and purchase some sensory items that could be used if Participant A chose any of these elements for the upcoming class. The researcher arrived at the studio early on the next class day and asked Participant A if they had read the guidelines and chosen something from it to implement. Participant A regretfully informed the researcher that they had not read the guidelines due to unforeseen circumstances. With this realization, the researcher was concerned about moving forward with the project. The researcher then realized there was still time before the class was scheduled to begin and decided to quickly go through the guidelines and let Participant A choose which teaching methods or elements they would use for this class. Participant A chose the visual schedule and the sensory items after looking through the guidelines with the researcher. The researcher provided Participant A with the visual schedule and sensory items that were brought and was ready to complete the final observation.

The researcher immediately noticed a change in the environment that could test the value of the new teaching elements that were being implemented. As they walked into the room, the researcher noticed an abundance of costumes that lined the entire front of the dance room. Participant A explained that these were for the students to “shop” through and take whatever they would like for an upcoming costume ball. The costumes became a distraction to the students and their parents and caused the class to start quite later than usual. As the researcher was waiting for the class to begin, they noticed Participant A trying to gain the students’ attention through different methods. Participant A first attempted to make an announcement to the parents in the room to prepare their children for class, which was ultimately ignored. Then Participant A tried corralling all of the students by going up to each one to explain that it was time for class. When this method also failed to gather the students, Participant A thought of another method that caught the researcher’s attention. Participant A verbally announced that everyone had two more

minutes to look at costumes and that they would be starting a timer and then displayed the timer for the students to view. The researcher noted that Participant A was already implementing the use of other visuals that were discussed in the guidelines, even though it was unplanned. At the sound of the timer's alarm, the students immediately stopped what they were doing and gathered around their teacher. It was finally time for class to begin.

Participant A started class with an explanation of the visual schedule displayed on the wall. They went through the entire schedule, telling the students what each card and picture meant, and where they were starting for class. The researcher noticed Participant A keeping track of the schedule throughout the entire duration of the class and making sure to show the students where they were timewise and what activity would be next. Toward the end of class, Participant A made the decision to give the students ribbons to dance with. This decision surprised the researcher since Participant A previously explained that they do not typically use sensory items during class. After distributing the ribbons, Participant A realized that they had forgotten about the sensory items that the researcher brought, which were rubber facial brushes. Participant A expressed interest in using these facial brushes before class began and decided to use them before letting the students dance with the ribbons. Participant A then grabbed the facial brushes and explained to the students that they would do stretches while using the brushes before dancing with the ribbons. The students, excited about the novelty of the brushes, were ready to play with and explore the new textured item. However, Participant A needed to keep instructional control of the class while passing out the brushes. They did this by implementing the "first, then" method of instruction. Participant A told their students, "First, we need to put our ribbons on the floor by our feet. Then, we can have a brush." Wanting to retain instructional control, Participant A held to the initial task demand of each student placing their ribbon on the floor before they

could receive a brush. Again, Participant A demonstrated the correct execution of a popular teaching method with exceptional learners without intending to implement such. Soon each student received a brush and was taken through a short stretching exercise that utilized the brushes to stimulate and “wake up” different senses or parts of the body. After completing the exercise, Participant A collected the brushes and allowed the students to pick up the ribbons to close class with choreography. The ribbons were brought out to be a fun end-of-class activity to boost the students’ moods before they departed but turned out to be a very beneficial tool for working on motor skills, direction change, balancing with an object, and visual tracking. Ending on this note, the researcher was prepared to give Participant A the final interview questions.

The post-interview covered five questions that were designed to evaluate the participant’s experience with the information provided in the guidelines and how it affected their teachings.

The interview consisted of the following questions:

1. After being provided with the guidelines, do you feel more prepared to teach a class with exceptional learners? Why or why not?
2. Were the guidelines overall helpful?
3. Would a master class help with further understanding of the guidelines? Explain.
4. What did you learn from this experience?
5. Are the guidelines a tool that you would use in future dance teaching endeavors?

As with the first interview, Participant A was very eager to share their opinions about the study and how implementing the different tactics and teaching methods affected their teachings. It was made clear by Participant A that the guidelines helped with preparations for the class and created an environment that provided more novelty and stimulation. During the study, Participant A learned that the use of sensory items is beneficial for keeping exceptional learners engaged with

the lesson presented to them. Participant A further explained that the visual cards and sensory brushes were helpful for both themselves and the students and are items that will continue to be used in future classes. When asked if attending a master class would provide a more detailed understanding of the guidelines, Participant A emphatically agreed and stated that they would be open to receiving more information regarding how to better structure classes for exceptional learners. They explained that this would be beneficial to other classes offered at the dance studio and would open more opportunities for exceptional learners to participate in different dance and performing arts genres. Overall Participant A was grateful for the opportunity to learn and receive new ideas, and the guidelines were a beneficial tool that would be used in future classes.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The goal of the study was to provide guidelines to teach and train dance teachers on how to successfully teach a class with exceptional learners, which would help create more opportunities for these learners to participate in dance. The researcher looked to fulfill the purpose of the study by creating a set of guidelines that would provide further training and information that pertains to different methods of instruction or the implementation of various tactics to ensure successful and equal teaching to students who may need more aid than others. Completing the study meant also finding the answers to the following research questions:

- Q1 Will providing a set of guidelines help dance teachers understand how to teach exceptional learners?
- Q2 Will an in-person workshop help dance teachers better understand the guidelines given to them?
- Q3 In what ways will the dance teacher's mindset or opinions of teaching these classes change?
- Q4 How will these guidelines affect the confidence of dance teachers teaching exceptional learners?

Overview

The study was created to find a way to increase the confidence of dance teachers who have little to no experience or exposure to teaching students with exceptional needs. The researcher conducting the study decided to create guidelines that would explain the different types of learners, examples of how to deliver instruction in multiple ways, and examples of visual or sensory stimuli that could be used in a class. Qualitative methods of gathering information and data were used to support the findings that emerged from the study. These

methods included pre- and post-interviews and two classroom observations. The pre- and post-interview were used as a gauge of the participant's comfortability and confidence with teaching exceptional learners before and after they were presented with the guidelines. The two classroom observations were used to determine how the lessons were structured, how the participant interacted with their students, and what teaching methods/tactics were being used before and after the guidelines were distributed.

Results

The data collected suggested that the guidelines had a positive outcome with the participant. During the pre-interview, it was discussed that Participant A had minimal experience with teaching exceptional learners. This experience included sporadic volunteer work and teaching swim and dance classes without any prior training. Participant A expressed confidence in their ability to teach students with exceptional needs, all that mattered was that the students were having fun. Participant A showed great interest in any additional information or teaching methods that would benefit them, the students, and the studio and in learning how to become more inclusive and accommodating for the students who may need extra aid. The post-interview revealed an increase in enthusiasm and a desire to create more structure for exceptional learners. Participant A explained how the visual schedule and use of different sensory items helped tremendously with the students' focus and that further observation, information, and implementation of the different types of learning would benefit all students in the studio, not just the exceptional learners.

Limitations

There were many limitations present throughout the study based on continuous downsizing and inconsistency with participants. First, the recruitment of volunteers proved to be

more difficult than the researcher realized. After months of reaching out to multiple organizations and studios, there were only three companies that responded to the researcher. Even then, only one studio followed through with their interest in the study while the other two companies abruptly ceased communication. The researcher then gladly met with the singular studio still wanting to participate and prepared for at least three individuals to take part in the research. The first individual that the researcher received permission from and conducted the first interview on wound up being only a substitute for the class that day. This inconsistency caused the researcher to drop their volunteer number to two participants. The next week, the researcher met with the two volunteers and gained their permission to observe their class and conduct the first interview. One of the participants, who was an assistant teacher, did not return for the second observation. This unexpected absence caused the researcher to further limit their volunteer participation to one individual.

Conclusion

The study concluded that the availability of the guidelines increased the confidence of a dance teacher's ability to teach dancers with exceptional needs. After receiving the guidelines, Participant A was more aware of implementing different teaching methods and using different types of stimuli that would help their students succeed in class. Participant A was also very eager to learn more information and attempt to apply it to other genres and performing arts classes that their studio currently offers so that the current class of exceptional learners would have the opportunity to try different classes. This eagerness to apply guidelines and training to performing arts classes other than dance contributes to the overall goal of this study. The researcher's overall goal for this study was to find a way to teach or train instructors to teach exceptional learners instead of hoping for an individual with experience to come along and take charge of these

classes. Guidelines such as the ones the researcher created could greatly benefit instructors of all extra-curricular activities and help create more opportunities for exceptional learners to join such activities without fear of exclusion or failure. It will instead create inclusive and welcoming environments for students of all abilities.

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APPENDIX A
RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION TABLE

Question	Yes or No	Example (If applicable)
Is the subject providing support to their students?		
Is the subject showing patience and understanding?		
Does the subject have a visual schedule for their students?		
Does the subject engage in repetitive movement to try and get students to follow along?		
Does the subject redirect students instead of telling them “no?”		
Does the subject implement a punishment procedure when attempting to discipline the		

students?		
Does the subject implement the “first, then” strategy?		
Does the subject attempt to bribe students into completing a task?		
Does the subject uphold task demands given to the students?		
Are there students reacting negatively to environmental stimuli?		
Are breaks provided if a student becomes overstimulated?		

FIRST INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Do you have any prior experience or exposure in interacting with individuals with either physical or developmental exceptional needs? If yes, please explain.

2. How confident are you in your ability to teach exceptional students? Please explain.

3. Do you have any concerns about teaching exceptional learners?

4. If you were provided with a set of guidelines meant for learning how to teach these learners, would you be more willing and confident to teach them? Why or why not?

SECOND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. After being provided with the guidelines, do you feel more prepared to teach a class with exceptional learners? Why or why not?

2. Were the guidelines overall helpful?

3. Would attending a masterclass help provide a better understanding to the guidelines?
Explain.

4. What did you learn from this experience?

5. Are the guidelines a tool that you would use in future dance teaching endeavors?
