

**“It’s my dream come true”: Experiences and outcomes of an inclusive dance talent
development programme**

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Abstract

There are few opportunities for young disabled dancers to develop their talents, and even fewer studies investigating their experiences of such opportunities. The aim of this study was to explore the perspectives and outcomes of an inclusive talent development programme, and how these were facilitated. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups with one teacher, four young dancers, and four parents revealed that participation in the programme yielded multiple benefits for the young people involved. These included high levels of enjoyment, improved technical and creative ability, greater independence and confidence, and opportunities for socialising with like-minded peers. A range of factors facilitated these benefits such as the inclusive and caring ethos of the programme, its comprehensive development and teacher training, particular teaching strategies, and relationships between staff, students and parents. Taken together the study attests to the value of programmes designed for young disabled dancers who wish to develop their talents.

Introduction

Dance talent is generally understood to be multi-faceted, comprised of various skills and abilities including technical skills, physical fitness, psychological motivation and resilience, and artistic ability (Walker et al., 2010). The most comprehensive study of dance talent development to date indicated that many factors associated with talent (e.g. muscular strength, flexibility) improve over time, demonstrating how at least certain aspects of talent are trainable given good quality training and a supportive environment (Aujla et al., 2014b; Redding et al., 2011). As such, it appears that research efforts should focus on the content and delivery of training, rather than talent indicators. This may be particularly true in inclusive talent development settings, which to date have received little research attention, perhaps because of their scarcity. A number of new inclusive talent development initiatives are currently in development or underway in the UK, designed to bridge the gap in provision between recreational participation and the profession (Aujla & Redding, 2013; Charnley, 2011; Verrent, 2003). The aim of this study was to explore the experiences and outcomes of one such programme from the perspectives of the students, staff and parents involved, and to glean understanding into how such outcomes were facilitated in the training environment.

Two studies have shed some light on dance talent development in inclusive settings (Aujla & Redding, 2014; Urmston & Aujla, 2019). In these qualitative studies, expert practitioners were interviewed about their approach, values, and practices when teaching talented young disabled dancers. Firstly, Urmston and Aujla (2019) found that the practitioners in their study were characterised by qualities of humility, honesty, patience, kindness and confidence; these underpinned their beliefs about disability, values around diversity and equality, and informed how they planned and delivered classes. The practitioners were driven by a desire to continuously learn, improve their practice, reflect on their work, and forge strong

relationships in their dance communities. Interestingly, the practices adopted by the participants were similar to those reported in more recreational settings (e.g. Zitomer, 2016, 2017) suggesting that teachers' approaches do not vary according to context. It is possible that once talent pathways are more established for young disabled dancers, a more differentiated understanding of teaching practices and philosophies could be gleaned (Urmston & Aujla, 2019).

The practitioners in Aujla and Redding's (2014) study highlighted the importance of open communication and reflection. They explained how teachers working on progression in inclusive settings must be skilled and flexible, adopting an open approach to teaching. Learning assistants could provide invaluable assistance alongside lead teachers, while parental support was also crucial in relation to not only emotional support and encouragement, but also practical assistance with transport and care needs. Many practitioners expressed the value of knowing the dancer and his or her needs before training commenced, in order to adequately prepare for and optimise each class. This idea has been supported in more recent studies (Reinders, Fletcher & Bryden, 2015; Whatley & Marsh, 2017), as detailed knowledge of each student can not only inform how a session is planned, but can also be used to set individual goals and deliver feedback to students, parents and carers.

In terms of dance classes themselves, translation and differentiation are crucial, as are allowing more time and repetition than in mainstream classes, to ensure skills are embedded and assimilated (Aujla & Redding, 2014; Band, Lindsay, Neelands & Freakley, 2011; Morris, Baldeon & Scheuneman, 2015). Finally, a key theme in relation to talent development among young disabled dancers is setting high expectations and striving for excellence (Aujla &

Redding, 2014). Rather than underestimate the potential of disabled young dancers, teachers should set standards and expectations that are suitably rigorous and challenging (e.g. Morris et al., 2015; Jung & Chang, 2017).

Positively, these studies form a body of research evidencing effective teaching practices in inclusive talent development settings, and offer useful strategies for artists and practitioners engaged in such contexts. However, with the exception of the work of Michelle Zitomer, most previous studies have focused solely on the experiences of teachers, rather than incorporate the perspectives of the students themselves. The current study aimed to address this gap by interviewing those directly involved, namely the teacher, students and their parents. Given the lack of research in this area, the study focused on both the characteristics of the programme and its impacts and outcomes.

Young disabled people can benefit from dance activity in areas such enjoyment, identity development, self-expression, confidence, competence, and social interaction (Reinders, 2017; Zitomer, 2016, 2017; Zitomer & Reid, 2011). This previous research tends to have focused on recreational dance; however one recent study reported high levels of subjective wellbeing among disabled dancers enrolled on a talent development programme (Aujla & Needham-Beck, 2019), with the participants scoring particularly highly for personal relationships, standard of living, and feeling part of the community. However, the study was focused on overall quality of life and thus the specific impact of the dance programme on the young dancers' wellbeing could not be ascertained. Aujla & Needham-Beck (2019) recommended that researchers conduct qualitative studies to further assess wellbeing and affective outcomes of dancing among young disabled people; therefore, the second aim of

this study was to explore the specific outcomes of an inclusive talent development programme, IRIS.

IRIS is a contemporary dance syllabus created by Stopgap Dance Company to further the growth of dance provision for young disabled people and to ensure equal access to development opportunities. As the first programme of its kind, it seeks to give disabled young people the same level of structure and rigour of dance education as their non-disabled peers and provide the opportunity to build the skills and experience necessary for the profession.

IRIS is structured into four levels of increasing complexity, with the expectation that students will take part in an increasing number of classes over time, similar to mainstream routes:

- Include: builds foundation dance competencies such as technical skills and contact dance
- Respond: a smaller, specialised class working specifically on translation of technique material
- Integrate: skills learned enable students to attend mainstream classes in addition to Include and Respond sessions
- Specialise: individualised support tailored to the students' ambitions such as performing, teaching, or choreographing

Teachers are trained in the syllabus by Stopgap and receive comprehensive training packs including videos, descriptions of translations and a glossary of terms. Assessments are included within the syllabus to ensure students understand the movement principles and to maintain a high standard of teaching. IRIS was piloted over two years with five groups in the south of England. Given that an eventual aim is to roll the syllabus out further both nationally

and internationally, Stopgap recognised the importance of rigorous research into the programme during the devising phase to inform its longer-term development. The current study was part of a larger project investigating IRIS in its pilot two years (Aujla & Needham-Beck, 2018).

Method

Participants

In order to ascertain views and perspectives on IRIS, one teacher was interviewed and focus groups were conducted with four dancers, and four parents. The teacher (aged 25 years) had been working with Stopgap for five years, first as a volunteer, then working her way up to teaching assistant then lead teacher. The dancers (aged between 15 and 16 years, all female, all with a form of learning disability) were recruited from the Include group that the teacher worked with, and had been attending for two years, since the programme began. Two of the dancers also participated in one other dance class per week. The four parents were female and also from the same IRIS group; some of their children had taken part in the dancer focus group.

Procedure

The research project was approved by a Higher Education ethics committee and all participants provided informed consent before taking part; parental consent was also provided for participants under the age of 16 years. Ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society were followed. There were no conflicts of interest to be declared by the author.

Information sheets were distributed to dancers and their parents outlining the aims of the research. Interested participants signed informed consent and were invited to take part in a

semi-structured interview or focus group at the IRIS dance studios, so that they were in a familiar environment. The procedure was explained fully to participants alongside the aims of the study and assurances of anonymity, confidentiality, and data protection. To encourage honest responses and to minimise acquiescent responding among the dancers, the researcher assured participants that there were no right or wrong answers, they could be honest about their experiences, ask questions, and decline to answer a question if it made them feel uncomfortable. Three separate interview guides were developed for each group of participants (teacher, dancers and parents), but each guide included questions on how IRIS was structured and taught, ways in which the dancers responded to it, and benefits and challenges of the programme. The teacher interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, the dancer focus group approximately 30 minutes and the parent focus group 45 minutes. Interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded and then transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

The transcripts from the interview and focus groups were first read and re-read for familiarisation. Each transcript was initially content analysed separately. As there is little existing research in the area, an inductive process was considered most appropriate whereby relevant meaning units were identified from the text, rather than created prior to analysis (Kvale, 1996). Meaning units were organised into larger themes, from which higher-order themes relating to the teacher, dancers, and parents, emerged (Patton, 2015). The themes were arranged into three hierarches that were then triangulated, to combine the findings from each group of participants, allowing for both areas of cross-over and areas uniquely mentioned by a particular group (see Figure 1). This final version of the hierarchy was frequently evaluated and refined in relation to both the research question and the data

(Creswell & Miller, 2000). Quotations are included in the text to provide illustrations of particular themes and allow readers to evaluate the author’s interpretations (Sparkes, 1998). Quotes are coded and numbered to identify the participants’ membership of a particular group (T = teacher; D = dancer; P = parent).

Results

The interviews with the teacher, dancers and parents yielded rich data revealing a number of themes that highlighted the affective, technical and social outcomes of IRIS, and how such outcomes were facilitated (see Figure 1).

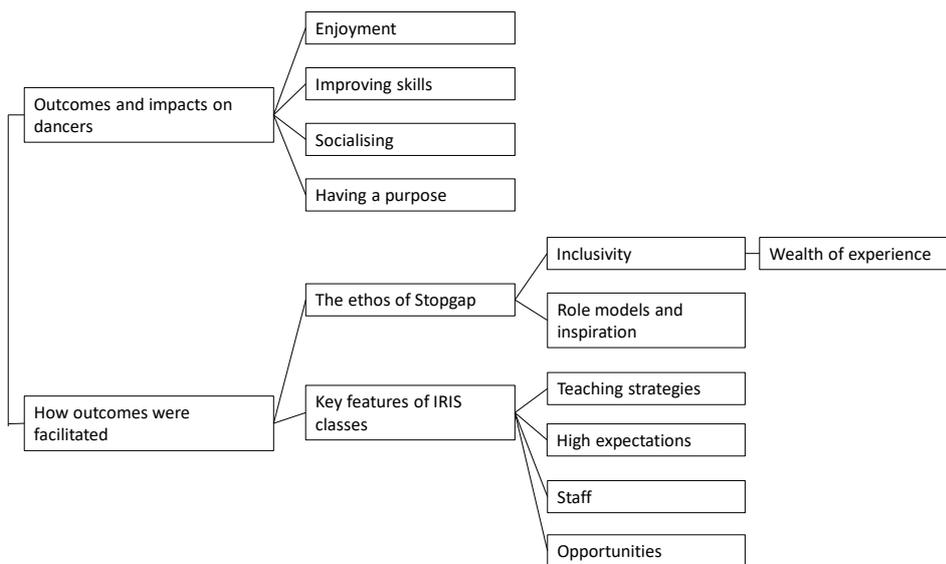


Figure 1. Hierarchy of findings from the interview and focus groups.

Outcomes and Impacts on the Dancers

The participants reported a number of ways in which IRIS had an impact on the dancers. Benefits included enjoyment, improving skills, socialising, and having a purpose. It was

noteworthy that the social aspects of the programme, while a key motivating factor, also came with particular issues and challenges.

Enjoyment.

First and foremost, enjoyment was a key theme reported by dancers and their parents.

Positive affective responses were given when dancers were asked how they felt when they attended IRIS. One dancer said: “I feel happy. I feel excited here actually and I like dancing here, it’s really good...it’s amazing” (D2). Such positive statements were reinforced by the parents, who described how much their children enjoyed dancing and the IRIS classes, for example: “this is just her thing, and she just loves it. Absolutely loves it” (P3). The parents also noted that the dancers enjoyed the routine of a regular class, which they looked forward to every week.

Improving skills.

The dancers recognised that attending classes regularly was an opportunity to enhance their technical skills. The thorough approach to training in IRIS was apparent: “I come here to, like, improve my dance skills...I feel happy but it’s overwhelming sometimes...lots to remember” (D4). Two of the parents also commented that the intensity of the activity was quite tiring for their children, although this was not perceived negatively. These findings provide indirect evidence of the rigour of IRIS and the high expectations staff had of students.

The teacher also gave examples of the students’ improving skills. She was positive about the technical and creative development of the dancers, feeling that progress was being made. The teacher had also observed improvements in the students’ memory of exercises and their

associated terminology: “they’re starting to pick up the vocabulary as well as remembering the dance moves” (T). Another indicator of progress was that the students had passed their first assessment and while some had already been invited to the next level of IRIS, the teacher felt that all of the dancers in her group “definitely” had the potential to progress to Respond. Finally, the teacher commented on a number of additional improvements:

I’ve definitely seen a change in a lot of them actually also to do with their concentration, stamina, their willing to want to be involved in the lesson, and working independently or with the group (T).

This suggests that classes focused on talent development have a number of benefits in addition to technical improvement. The parents highlighted further positive outcomes, particularly greater independence and confidence. Because they were able to drop their children off at IRIS rather than needing to stay with them, the children had become more independent. This promoted greater confidence in the dancers, who subsequently coped well with various challenges such as multiple costume changes during performances. Confidence was also developed from the way that the dancers were treated: “I think because she’s been shown a kind of belief here, I do think it would give her confidence to kind of keep on going” (P3). There was a sense that this confidence may encourage the dancers to try other forms of dance or physical activity. One parent explained, “If I’m trying to get [her] to experience something – you can use the positiveness of Stopgap to encourage her to give something else a go” (P1).

Socialising.

It became clear from interviews and focus groups with teachers, the dancers and their parents that social factors played a critical role in the success of a session. The opportunity to socialise with like-minded peers of the same age was an important part of IRIS. The dancers enjoyed “dancing with my friends” (D2) and “dancing together as a group” (D1). The parents also highlighted this: “I think [she] loves it for the combination of the dancing and the socialising” (P2). Dancing and working together with peers of the same age appeared to provide transferable skills around forming relationships, communication, and behaviour. One parent explained, “they’re not just learning things for dance, I think they’re learning a broader, you know, like social skills, how to interact with others” (P2).

Although social relationships were a key source of enjoyment and motivation for the dancers, the intensity of these relationships meant that they could also be problematic if the dancers had a disagreement. Instances of the students falling out with one another were mentioned, the consequences of which were both emotional (“I feel angry...all my friends upsetting me”; D1), and motivational (“If all my friends hate me, I just give up”; D1). At times other dancers’ behaviour could be disruptive to the lesson, although some dancers were able to cope with such disruption: “Some people here talk a lot so I focus on my own work” (D2). Many of the dancers attended the same college, and the teacher noted that issues and disagreements that had occurred outside of IRIS could make classes challenging, noting: “where one person you know kind of walks off, storms off, or is in a bad place, it sometimes creates this domino effect, and it’s kind of like fighting a losing battle [laughs]” (T).

Having a purpose.

Some of the parents explained how coming to a regular class which provided opportunities to build both technical dance skills and social relationships gave their children a sense of purpose. The following quote illustrates this well:

that makes a big difference...to have a purpose...our kids generally don't go out on their own, generally aren't necessarily that able to organise themselves and need an adult to do it for them, and so to have something to look forward to that they know they've got to go to, I think that makes a difference (P1).

This participant reflected that such purpose could have a positive impact on the dancers' mental health, going on to explain:

they're being active whereas otherwise what would they do, be sat at home on their phones, there's little else out there, and then there's, they're being part of something aren't they, and you know getting out and doing stuff is positive for your mental health isn't it. Not being isolated (P1).

How Outcomes were Facilitated

The interviews and focus groups provided insight into how such beneficial outcomes were facilitated. Firstly, it is important to consider the general ethos of Stopgap and how this was reflected in the teacher's approach. Secondly, the key features of IRIS classes are discussed.

The ethos of Stopgap.

The parents spoke very highly of Stopgap, frequently making comments such as, "In case we didn't say, they're amazing!" (P1). The ethos of the company was apparent in the interviews

in terms of inclusivity, respect and care, which was based on the company's wealth of experience.

Inclusivity.

Inclusivity is a key component of Stopgap's mission and overall aims, and this was clear in the teacher's and parents' understanding of the general ethos of the classes, the respect and equality afforded to all, how well the teachers knew individual students, and the level of care given to the dancers. Throughout the teacher interview it became clear how deeply she cared for her students and wanted them to achieve their best. Knowing each dancer as an individual was critical to ensure that communication and translations of material were appropriate: "we always take that time to know the individual and work out how we can best support them" (T). The dancers commented on the support, saying: "there's always someone around to ask" (D1). The parents had also observed this, for example: "The staff all get the individual kids, they really do understand them, you know, so it really fills you with confidence" (P3). They noted how each dancer was respected and celebrated; the teacher explained how each dancer had "their time to shine" and be in the spotlight. This positive, respectful approach was also apparent in how the dancers were spoken to: "I was really impressed with Stopgap because they talk to them as adults as well, which is so important, there's no baby-fying or you know, patronising, and that's really key I think for me" (P2).

The support offered by the teacher was holistic in nature, not just focused on dance: she described having a 'girlie bag' with items such as hair bobbles and menstrual products, as she appreciated that her students were young women with often complex lives and needs. Furthermore, inclusivity was reflected in the level of care offered not only to the dancers but also to the parents. Assistance was given with practical matters such as sourcing costumes,

and emotional and social factors, such as disagreements between the dancers. The parents noted that staff were “very accommodating” and that they “just make things easy” (P1). This led one parent to comment, “I feel like they’re almost a part of the family...I’d be lost without it” (P2).

Mirroring these comments, the teacher highlighted the importance of her relationship with the parents. Parental involvement and support was seen as crucial to optimising the students’ attendance, engagement and development; for example, parents could inform her of any issues that had occurred during the day which may affect their children’s behaviour. It also meant that she could discuss what had happened during classes with parents where appropriate: “if anything did happen in the session I can feel confident to go to whoever’s parent and go, like, this happened today, we really need to work on this” (T). As such, the reciprocal relationship between teacher and parents supported the inclusive, caring ethos that underpinned IRIS.

Wealth of experience.

Stopgap’s established history of work in inclusive settings ranges from recreational classes to its professional performance company. This wealth of experience meant that the teacher received in-depth training from members of Stopgap in preparation for her work on IRIS. Practical studio-based training was accompanied by comprehensive packs detailing each exercise in terms of “the kind of movement and feeling and exploration that the exercise is about” (T), a glossary of terms, how support assistants could help, and multiple versions of each exercise for lying, sitting or standing dancers. Videos of exercise variations were also available which she could cross-reference with the written guides. Specific translations were a critical part of this in order to foster inclusivity and ensure that all dancers could achieve the

same outcomes in terms of the overall aims or principles of the exercises. As a result the teacher felt there were “a lot of tools and support” in her work teaching IRIS. She was highly motivated and driven by a desire to do her best so that her students could achieve their potential: “I want to make sure that I’m in a good place and I know what I’m doing so I can deliver it to them and they can do the best that they can do” (T).

Role models and inspiration.

Stopgap’s ethos and wealth of experience was also apparent in the presence of role models for the students. In this particular IRIS group, one of the teaching assistants, a dancer with Down syndrome, had performed professionally with Stopgap for almost 20 years and more recently was choreographing for the company. Having progressed from apprentice to Senior Dance Artist, parents could see how he had been nurtured through a clear pathway to the profession, which “gives you hope, which is important” (P3).

Key features of IRIS classes.

The key features of IRIS that appeared to facilitated the dancers’ skill improvement and affective and social development were particular teaching strategies, having high expectations, the number of staff in the space, and the availability of enrichment opportunities that complemented the regular programme.

Teaching strategies.

The teacher employed a number of strategies in her classes that helped the students to learn material, stay motivated, and adhere to appropriate studio behaviour. Classes were structured so that creative warm-up explorations led into technique-based exercises and phrases. Exercises were taught by breaking down sections and using ample repetition. Imagery was

used to help the dancers understand the principles and key points of an exercise, to find the correct movement quality, to use their breath, and work together as a group. The consistency of the class structure, repetition, and clarity of instructions were appreciated by the dancers, one of whom noted: “I always understand what they’re saying and I follow the rules and I learn from the teachers” (D2).

At the end of the class, the dancers sat in a circle and were asked to give a ‘word of the week’ which exemplified their experience that day. The teacher explained this was an opportunity to “reflect on how we’ve been during the session, so I feel that shows the development as well... getting their judgement on what they enjoyed and what they struggled with” (T). After this, the teacher and teaching assistants would choose a dancer of the week, to recognise a student who had worked particularly hard, been particularly focused, or had supported their peers well. Dancer of the week was seen as “a big motivator, to try and get to be chosen” (P3). At the end of the summer term, the dancer who had received this the most over the academic year was awarded dancer of the year. The teacher explained that these forms of recognition helped to motivate the students because “they know it’s good and it’s something to be proud of” (T).

The structure of the class and strategies used within it were supported by the rules which the group had created in collaboration with the teacher. These included avoiding using mobile phones in class, being kind and respectful towards others, and not talking over the teacher. The students had taken ownership of the rules and would remind their peers about them where appropriate.

High expectations.

The teacher believed that all of the students had the potential to progress to the next level of IRIS, and had high expectations of them: “we are inclusive but we need to be rigorous as well” (T). She was confident that they were all capable of achieving and improving: “we do work them really hard I think because we like to push them, we know that eventually we will get there” (T). High expectations were in relation to both their technical development and their behaviour: improving technically would be difficult without staying focused and being willing to work hard. One dancer explained:

if you work hard in the session it can help you get better and it can help your dancing skills, to help you to learn...it means stay focused only on your dancing, not your friends (D1).

Staff.

In the group’s IRIS session there was typically one lead teacher, two experienced teaching assistants, and at least one volunteer, working with ten young dancers. Sometimes there were also interns and work placement students in classes. These provided invaluable support during classes and the teacher was particularly positive about the two experienced teaching assistants, saying, “[we] have worked quite closely together for quite a while now so we kind of bounce off each other in what we need.”

Opportunities.

Dancers not only learned new skills as part of IRIS, they were also offered additional opportunities and experiences, including learning different dance styles, being part of teacher training schemes for IRIS, summer classes, and performing, which the students particularly enjoyed: “I love dancing and being onstage, it’s my dream come true” (D1). These

opportunities appeared to provide further enjoyment and motivation, offering students insight into the professional industry.

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to explore the experiences and outcomes of an inclusive dance talent development programme, and to glean understanding into how such outcomes were facilitated. Interviews and focus group responses from an IRIS teacher, four dancers, and four parents suggested that the dancers had gained positive affective and social experiences and improved in multiple ways, and revealed how this had been facilitated.

These are now summarised in turn.

Outcomes

Multiple forms of improvement among the dancers were reported including those related to their technical and social skills, stamina, independence, and increased confidence both within IRIS and potentially outside of it. Studies of recreational disabled dancers similarly reported improved confidence and social skills (Reinders, 2017; Zitomer, 2016, 2017; Zitomer & Reid, 2011), and the teacher's perceptions of the students' technical skills were supported by quantitative measures of their dance ability (Aujla & Needham-Beck, 2018). Interestingly, one of the dancers mentioned that the programme could be "overwhelming" at times, reflecting the intensity of IRIS and its ambition to mirror mainstream training. Aujla and Redding (2014) reported that disabled young dancers need time to develop the sufficient stamina to cope with more technical and rigorous training than they may have been accustomed to in more recreational settings; it would be interesting to assess how the dancers cope with the more challenging levels of IRIS as they progress through the programme.

The dancers and their parents expressed how much they enjoyed being part of IRIS in terms of positive affect, socialising and improving their skills. They also enjoyed having dance classes as part of their weekly routine. In previous dance talent development research, high levels of enjoyment were found to underpin non-disabled young dancers' commitment to rigorous training (Aujla et al., 2014a), suggesting that positive experiences in dance are important for motivation and long-term persistence. In addition, one of the parents felt that dance provided the young people with a sense of purpose, which could have a positive impact on their wellbeing. A sense of purpose and meaning, in addition to factors like achievement, and positive social relationships, are critical to wellbeing (e.g. Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2011), and appear to be provided by IRIS. Taken together, this indicates that progression-focused dance programmes can have beneficial impacts on young disabled dancers' affect and wellbeing, and that training can be holistic and support the development of an individual not just as a dancer but as a young person. Indeed, Band and colleagues (2011, p.905) noted that findings like these "...bring into question whether the value of training in the arts should be measured solely by its success in providing a route to employment or whether personal development is sufficient in itself". There is no reason to believe that talent development programmes for young disabled people should be restricted to focusing on either technical *or* personal development; the current study suggests that programmes like IRIS can promote improvement in both.

How Outcomes were Facilitated

There were numerous ways in which such positive outcomes appeared to be facilitated by IRIS, which were encompassed by Stopgap's ethos and wealth of experience, and informed teacher training, individual teaching strategies and approaches.

The ethos of Stopgap centred on a culture of inclusivity and care. Parents noted that the emphasis on inclusion and translation was apparent at every level of the company, and were therefore confident that their children were looked after and respected. The teaching staff ensured they knew each student well in order to understand their particular needs, to assist with planning and giving feedback (Aujla & Redding, 2014; Reinders, Fletcher & Bryden, 2015; Whatley & Marsh, 2017). Dancers were treated as individuals while the parents' needs were also taken into consideration. These findings support recent research highlighting the altruistic and compassionate nature of dance artists who work in inclusive settings, valuing and celebrating diversity and individual differences (Urmston & Aujla, 2019).

This ethos of inclusivity and care underpinned the comprehensive training in the IRIS curriculum described by the teacher. The rigour of the teacher training and accompanying materials, based on years of experience, was an essential aspect of the programme. Practical workshops to learn the movement material were supplemented by packs including a glossary of terms, the key elements of each exercise, translations and teaching notes, and videos of upright, seated or lying versions of exercises. Such detailed information meant that there was parity in the syllabus across the different pilot groups, while the pressure was removed from teachers to create translations in the moment.

Like the practitioners in Urmston and Aujla's (2019) study, the teacher was humble, kind, and strove to continue learning and developing her practice. Importantly, this caring approach did not prevent her from challenging the students. She had high expectations of the dancers in terms of their technical progress, behaviour, and growing independence. The teacher was confident in the dancers' ability to improve and expected a level of rigour in how they approached their work in order to fulfil their potential. These high expectations were

reinforced by particular strategies such as the use of specific movement terminology, and were understood by the dancers as requisites to improving their skills. The role of teaching assistants in the space should not be underestimated as they can provide one-to-one attention, offer solutions to problems, and may act as role models (e.g. Whatley, 2007). Indeed, having disabled teaching assistants was inspiring to students and evidenced how the company had nurtured disabled dancers who are now practising professionals.

There is extensive writing on teaching strategies in recreational inclusive settings (e.g. Benjamin, 2002; Cone & Cone, 2011), and indeed some of the strategies described by the teacher have been reported elsewhere (such as high expectations; e.g. Aujla & Redding, 2012; Morris et al., 2015; Jung & Chang, 2017). As such it appears unnecessary to discuss these in great detail; however the idea of ‘dancer of the week’ and ‘word of the week’ are interesting and apparently novel strategies. Crucially, ‘dancer of the week’ was not solely about technical or creative development, which could potentially undermine students’ self-confidence or motivation. ‘Dancer of the week’ allowed the teacher to recognise broader factors such as work ethic or supporting others, ensuring that each dancer had the opportunity for their individual strengths to be acknowledged. This idea reflects Ames’ (1992) task-orientated motivational climate in which teachers recognise and encourage hard work and effort, peer cooperation, and self-referenced learning as critical teaching tools which can positively impact achievement, wellbeing and adherence (see Harwood et al., 2015, for a review).

While the relationship between teacher and students was critical, that between teacher and parents was also perceived by both parties as being important to the success of the programme. This mutually supportive relationship supports previous suggestions that parental

support could be almost a secondary talent identification criteria for selective programmes (Aujla & Redding, 2014), as parents provide the emotional and logistical support required for rigorous training. The final crucial relationships within the talent development context were those between the dancers, which at their best provided dancers with a like-minded peer group that could provide enjoyment, support and motivation (Aujla et al., 2014a). However, the intensity of these relationships also resulted in conflicts, negative affect and behavioural disruption and/or disengagement. It appears that teachers need to be flexible and open in their strategies for positively nurturing social relationships while monitoring their intensity and influence. Again, the relationship between the teacher and parents was helpful in this regard as parents could inform the teacher of any issues between dancers that might affect a class. It is important to note that participants are not necessarily obliged to disclose such information (Cheesman, 2012); therefore, a trusting relationship between dancers, parents and teachers may be essential in order to minimise potential conflicts related to such disclosures.

Conclusion

IRIS is an inclusive talent development programme designed to bridge the gap in provision between recreational classes and the profession. The aim of this study was to explore the experiences and outcomes of IRIS from the perspectives of a teacher, four dancers and four parents. Numerous beneficial outcomes were reported including high levels of enjoyment, improvements in technique, stamina and social skills, and impacts on wellbeing. Insights into how such outcomes were facilitated were also gleaned, including the company's ethos of inclusivity and care, the comprehensive approach to teacher training and development of IRIS, particular teaching strategies, and strong supportive relationships between the teacher and parents. Future research could explore how the dancers cope as they progress through the

subsequent levels of IRIS, and the extent to which teaching strategies are modified according to the different levels of the programme.

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