



Dance
Without
Limits

Special Delivery

Three approaches to teaching students with disabilities **By Christina Raymond**

Imagine a typical ballet class: a teacher demonstrates a combination of steps while her students watch. The students then perform the steps, mimicking the qualities they observed in their teacher's movements. For a visually impaired student, this teaching model is, at best, only moderately effective, for the success of this approach depends chiefly upon the abil-

ity of the student to see her instructor. That's only one example of the complexity of making dance classes available to all students, including those with special needs. Even with the best intentions, a dance teacher may be unable to give students with disabilities the tools they need in order to thrive. "It takes more than heart to do justice by this

special group of students," says Misty Lown, a veteran dance educator and frequent contributor to *Dance Studio Life*. "Teaching special populations requires time, planning, knowledge, and a willingness to adjust." The modalities and goals of an average dance class largely overlook the needs of differently abled dancers. So what is the ideal environment

Photo by Maria Davis



Danceability volunteer Melanie Koch and student Audrey Guzzo dance *Cowgirls*.
OPPOSITE: Instructor Judith Nelson engages with students in a Special Kids Dance Fundamentals class at Mark Morris Dance Center.

Photo by Krystal Sondel

in which to teach dancers who have disabilities? Should they be taught alongside typical students, or are they better served when they learn in separate classes? There is no hard-and-fast answer; however, inclusion programs and individualized classes—both of which address the particular needs of differently abled students—may offer distinct advantages over the practice of mainstreaming, which involves teaching typical students and those with special needs using the same curriculum and methods.

Inclusion programs

Legislative changes and evolving views on disability rights have led to increased inclusion and mainstreaming in schools—that is, the integration of students with special needs into general education classrooms. This shift is mirrored by the dance world, where highly regarded organizations such as Mark Morris Dance Group and National Dance Institute have developed inclusion programs that bring together typical students and those with special needs.

Inclusion programming differs

from mainstreaming in that its curriculums take into consideration the varied learning styles of differently abled dancers and the challenges they face. In the context of dance education, to mainstream students is to enroll them in classes designed for typical students. While there can be modifications to the way differently abled dancers participate in such classes, in essence these students are expected to learn alongside their classmates without substantial changes to the classes' structure and progression.



Free 2 Be Me Dance founder Colleen Perry leads a class designed to accommodate the needs of students with Down syndrome.

Sarah Marcus, the director of education at Mark Morris Dance Group (MMDG) has observed in her community a growing appreciation for the benefits of inclusive education. In fact, her son was recently assigned to an inclusion classroom at a New York City public school, where he's learning alongside children who have special needs.

Special Kids Dance at MMDG provides creative movement, dance fundamentals, and tap classes designed for students with special needs ages 4 and up. The classes are held at Mark Morris Dance Center in Brooklyn and are offered in conjunction with Extreme Kids & Crew, a local non-profit providing free and low-cost arts, movement, and play programs to children with special needs. "We believe dance is essential to a child's education and development," Marcus says. "Dance classes instill life skills such as confidence, collaboration, and communication, and inspire children to be lifelong learners. This is true of young people of all abilities."

This September, MMDG also began an inclusion dance class for 4- and 5-year-olds, the first of its kind there. Half the students enrolled in

the class have special needs, and the other half are typical students; the curriculum, which focuses on creative dance, was developed with that 50/50 ratio in mind.

An inclusive learning environment allows students with disabilities to engage with their peers—to practice social skills and, in the process,



Jenny Seham uses touch and other cues when working with visually impaired dancers at Filomen M. D'Agostino Greenberg Music School.

develop friendships. This experience can help them better navigate relationships and social situations as they mature and grow into adulthood.

Jenny Seham, PhD, says inclusion classes also inspire a sense of belonging and connectedness: "To join a group of dancers with a range of abilities, to be able to say, 'I'm a dancer,' is a powerful thing for kids with special needs."

Seham, a former dancer and choreographer, is the director of teacher training of special populations at National Dance Institute (NDI) and an attending psychologist at Montefiore Medical Center. She leads dance classes for visually impaired students at Lighthouse Guild International's Filomen M. D'Agostino Greenberg Music School in New York City, one of many schools that partner with NDI to provide dance education for students with special needs.

Seham's classes at Lighthouse pair dancers who have visual impairments—some of whom face additional challenges such as autism and reduced mobility—with sighted dancers. Using touch and auditory cues, the sighted partners (including youth volunteers from NDI's advanced

Top photo by Chris Perry; bottom photo by Jill Levine



A Free 2 Be Me Dance student performs *Thriller* at the 2014 Los Angeles Special Olympics.

dance programs) guide the students with visual impairments through exercises and choreography. This form of peer-partner learning is common in NDI's classes for special populations.

Children and teens with disabilities are often excluded from physical education and sports—activities that could improve their mobility, coordination, and overall health. NDI enables Lighthouse students to experience the joy of dance in a safe and supported way. But the benefits of peer-partnered learning are not one-sided, says Seham: “When our typically learning students dance alongside students who have disabilities, they witness resilience, courage,

and creativity. All our kids develop a deeper understanding of empathy and compassion and learn respect and appreciation for differences in ability. This is a lesson they will always carry with them, inside and outside the dance studio.”

A drawback of a self-contained class—a class only for dancers with special needs—is that its students may be held to a different, sometimes lower, standard than their typically learning peers. An inclusion classroom, however, raises standards and challenges students to reach their maximum potential. All kids respond positively to high expectations, according to Seham, and participation

in a class with dancers who demonstrate a wide range of potential and ability can motivate students to perform to the best of their abilities.

“Give these kids the support and tools they need to succeed, and then set the bar high,” says Seham. “Challenge them to do their very best in every class, at every performance. And then watch what they can do. It's extraordinary.”

Mainstreaming

Lown, who owns Misty's Dance Unlimited in Onalaska, Wisconsin, believes mainstreaming can be a good fit for some dancers. “At my studios, several kids with processing and

“Because dance is a nonverbal form of self-expression, it's an ideal medium for people of all abilities.” —Colleen Perry



Disabilities don't stand in the way of Danceability students, whether they're in a Fitness Frenzy class or, like Marcus Hamilton (below), a performance.

physical challenges have participated successfully in regular classes," she says. Students who have been mainstreamed at school may feel at home in a typical dance class, and extending the structure of their academic classes to their dance lessons might be helpful in maintaining consistency and furthering the development of social skills.

However, Lown says that some disabilities, such as sensory-processing disorders involving vision and hearing, can be difficult to accommodate in a mainstream setting. For instance, a dancer with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may experience discomfort or even pain when exposed to sounds above a certain decibel. This level of sensitivity could make participation in a mainstream or inclusion dance class unbearable.

"Coming into a studio on a night when there are six classes going on and hundreds of kids in the building could be sensory overload for a student with ASD," Lown says. This kind of student would be better served in

a quieter, calmer environment.

MMDG, too, has found ways to accommodate students who require a controlled learning space. A dancer with auditory sensitivities would be placed in a class that specifically caters to such students, with a



soft-spoken instructor and a musician who has an appropriate playing style. Musicians are utilized in all Special Kids Dance classes (with the exception of tap), allowing the volume, tone, and rhythmic qualities of accompaniment to be tailored to auditory sensitivities.

It can be difficult to make these types of accommodations in a mainstream setting without compromising the experience of typical students. And yet the ability to adapt the various elements of a class—its modalities, accompaniment, pace, and goals—can be crucial when teaching special populations.

Self-contained classes

Depending on the nature of a dancer's disability—its severity and impact on the student's cognition, behavior, and mobility—participation in separate, individualized dance classes may be the most appropriate option. Danceability in Buffalo, New York, and Free 2 Be Me Dance in Southern

(continued on page 130)

Photos by Krystal Sondel



Free 2 Be Me Dance students get funky while rehearsing for a performance of *Thriller*.

(continued from page 96)

California are two organizations that provide such classes.

Danceability, co-founded by Robin Bishop and Christine Dwyer, offers a variety of classes exclusively to dancers with special needs. The nonprofit studio serves a large group of students ages 3 to 75, including those with visual and hearing impairments, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, ADHD, and ASD.

"We identify our students' needs but also their strengths and interests," says Bishop, "and we design our classes around what our students can do—not what they can't." In a mainstream dance class the goals of linear progression usually relate to learning increasingly advanced choreography and moving up to the next grade or level. Instead, Danceability's goals include increased mobility, improved cognitive function, greater body awareness, and higher self-esteem. "Instead of fitting one differently abled student into a class of 15 typical learners, we're designing a curriculum around the needs and interests of people with disabilities," says Dwyer.

Mainstream dance instructors

are usually not trained in teaching methods for special populations—a deficiency that could inhibit these students' potential and even put them at risk for injury. Most of Danceability's teachers hold advanced degrees in fields such as special education, physical therapy, and social work. With this extensive experience, and with the help of more than 80 trained volunteers, the studio gives its dancers the individualized attention they need.

Bishop and Dwyer point to another benefit of self-contained learning: the boost of confidence their students experience when they dance and socialize among people they perceive to be like them. This is keenly beneficial to nonverbal students, who may have difficulty communicating with others and feel disconnected as a result. "By empowering our dancers to express themselves in a way in which they are comfortable and confident, every student has the opportunity to enjoy dance," says Bishop.

"All children should be enabled to express themselves, regardless of barriers to communication," says Colleen Perry, LMFT, a former ballet dancer and the founder of Free 2

Be Me Dance. "Because dance is a nonverbal form of self-expression, it's an ideal medium for people of all abilities."

Free 2 Be Me Dance is a nonprofit, adaptive-dance program for people with Down syndrome. The organization provides ballet, creative movement, and hip-hop classes to more than 50 students, ages 2 to 30, at several locations, including Westside School of Ballet in Santa Monica and Down Syndrome Association of Orange County.

While some dance educators have been successful in mainstreaming students with Down syndrome, there's a risk of such students struggling to keep up with the pace of neurotypical learners, says Perry; this may not be problematic for all students, but some can become frustrated or discouraged. Free 2 Be Me's classes are designed to accommodate the learning style, developmental pace, and auditory preferences of dancers with Down syndrome, and each student is paired with a volunteer who supports the dancer during class. This approach ensures that the students feel secure and confident. "At all times our students know they are safe, loved, and respected," Perry says, "and that allows them to shine."

A common goal

Many factors go into choosing the right dance class for students with disabilities, but overall, inclusion programs and self-contained classes appear to offer benefits that mainstreaming lacks the flexibility to match. Common among all three approaches, however, is an underlying commitment to making dance accessible.

"The impact of dance, its ability to transform a child's life, is unequivocal," says Seham. "Dance makes such a profound difference in the lives of children with special needs; we should no longer think of it as a luxury—it's essential. Every child should have the opportunity to dance." 