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Beyond Words: Fine Arts and Performance Art as Self-Expression for Developmentally Delayed Students

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BEYOND WORDS: FINE ARTS AND PERFORMANCE ART AS SELF-EXPRESSION FOR DEVELOPMENTALLY DELAYED STUDENTS

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Abstract

This thesis explores the research behind the implementation of special education curriculum in dance and music. Music education and dance have been shown to be effective means of self-expression, a necessary component of child development. Recent research in both areas has shown that including SPED students in both music and dance classes has shown a positive effect in their social emotional skills, ways to show self-expression, and ways to improve their communication both in an academic setting and a social setting. The results are most effective when the music or dance class shifts focus from skills-development and mastery, to creative, experiential encounters with music and movement. Existing work makes a case for continued and expanded inclusion of dance and music as part of the overall educational plan for SPED students. However, there is also a pervasive need to prepare the existing population of educators to accommodate these new educational aims into the existing curricula and educational landscape. In many cases, such transitions will require partnership and expertise. Successful implementation yields positive social and communicative benefits for SPED students with diverse DCD educational needs.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The fine arts and performance arts are non-verbal means of human expression; they are a common part of the human experience, and their presence in school curricula is beneficial. However, a comprehensive approach to the arts is largely absent from the Special Education Department (SPED) curriculum, especially for students who are developmentally and cognitively delayed. How can the fine arts be presented, instructed, and cultivated among students with Developmental Cognitive Disabilities (DCD) in a school setting as a way of developing the student's sense of self and self-expression? What will this look like from the standpoint of curriculum planning, district resource requirements, educator training, student involvement, peer / 'general education setting' interactions and involvement, family interactions and needs, and student benchmarks for social, psychological, and educational growth? And (why) should this be pursued; what are the benefits to the student, the school, and our society when students with DCD learn and use the fine arts to communicate?

Rationale

Humans are social beings. Human families, groups, and societies exist and thrive through communication, and as individuals, it is important to have a way to communicate and express oneself to the world. Communication is needed partly for survival; being able to communicate is vital to getting basic needs met and asking for help. Since the human species is social by nature, their mental health is more positive when having positive social interactions with others (Ono et

al., 2011). Speech and writing are generally accepted, especially in Western cultures and in developed nations, as the default, primary, or even the superlative means of communication (Gary B v. Gretchen Whitmer, 2020), but this narrow viewpoint creates a society that marginalizes several demographic groups, including infants, some aged or ill people, those with physical disabilities in the area of speech or hearing, and those suffering from developmental or cognitive delays that limit their ability to communicate complex thoughts and emotions through speech and writing (Perez v. Sturgis Public Schools, 2023). Although speech and writing have clear advantages, human communication and self-expression does not need to always be in the form of spoken (or written) word. Humans can express thoughts and feelings through artistic media, including painting, drawing, sculpting, and architecture, or through performance arts, including dance and vocal and instrumental music (Hanna, 2008).

One of the primary goals of education is to teach children how to express themselves, and fine arts are a universal, non-verbal means of self-expression. This is not a topic that is currently emphasized in curricula for developmentally or cognitively delayed students, and non-verbal communication skills are, therefore, an unmet need for SPED / DCD students (Daveson & Edwards, 1998). Teaching these students self-expression through fine arts will provide a group of students who often struggle with complex verbal communication a non-verbal means of interacting with the world and with sharing their thoughts and emotions (Standley & Jones, 2007).

The arts carry added academic benefits and synergies as well. Involvement in fine arts, especially structured group settings such as band/orchestra and choir, has been shown to help students perform better over time within their core academic subjects. When students are engaged with the arts, they are using more of their brain, and their ability to retain information in their long-term memory increases (Ashton, 2019). Students who are empowered to use creative, artistic expressions for school assignments develop a greater understanding of abstract concepts and have a greater ability to focus on school. Students involved in fine arts as part of their course of study score statistically higher in core classes and standardized tests compared to non-artistic peers (Doyle, 2013).

The arts provide measurable physical benefits for children and adolescents. Music (band, choir, and choreographed dance) requires rhythm; many types of music require oral-motor skill development, and instrumental music requires hand-eye coordination (Karkou et al., 2017). Dance provides structured movement opportunities for students to develop gross motor control and balance (Munsell & Bryant, 2014). If general education students benefit so clearly from the use of the arts, would the same benefits be seen for students with disabilities? In fact, the arts may be the very ‘tool kits’ needed to make occupational-therapy types of breakthroughs with these students while also establishing a means of communication and self-expression (Kartasidou et al., 2012). The performing arts, including theater, band, choir, and dance, generally involve small or large groups of student performers, which requires group collaboration. Additional

benefits can be seen when children with special needs have a collaborative, non-competitive venue for interacting with their peers (Hammel & Hourigan, 2011).

There is an unrealized opportunity to apply proven special education techniques to teaching students fine arts and performing arts. This thesis will research and summarize the psychological and social value of fine arts and performing arts for the human person, evaluate known research on this topic as it pertains to individuals with developmental or cognitive delays , survey special education techniques for familiar subjects (reading/writing, math, science), which seem likely to transfer to fine arts education (Hu & Wang, 2021), and finally, map out a theoretical curriculum and learning environment that incorporates fine arts into special education at the elementary, and middle, and high-school levels (Darrow & Adamek, 2017). This will include a review of curriculum, resource needs, fitting fine arts into IEP discussions, staff, student, and parent 'training' and preparation, and goal setting with suggested benchmarks for success.

Definitions of Terms

The important definitions for this paper include:

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): is a developmental disability caused by differences in the brain. Persons with ASD often have problems with social communication and interaction, and restrictive and repetitive behaviors or interests (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022).

Bloom's Taxonomy: is a classification system used to define and distinguish different levels of human cognition first written in 1956. Teachers use Bloom's model to help guide in writing assessments, curriculum, and instructional methods. Bloom's model was revised by Anderson

and Krathwol in 2001 and renamed A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Objectives (Glossary of Educational Reform, 2014).

Common Core Curriculum: is a set of academic standards for what every student is expected to learn in each grade from Kindergarten-12th grade (Lee, n.d.).

Down Syndrome: is a condition in which a person has an extra chromosome on the 21st chromosome. It is also called Trisomy 21 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023).

Reverse Inclusion: the goals and activities are tailored to fit the needs of the students with disabilities and typically developing peers can join in the activities (Draper, 2022).

Universal Design of Learning (UDL): is a teaching approach that works to accommodate the needs and abilities of all learners and eliminates unnecessary hurdles in the learning process (Cornell University, 2023).

Statement of the Question or Topic

The fine arts and performance arts are non-verbal means of human expression; they are a common part of the human experience, and their presence in school curricula are beneficial. However, a comprehensive approach to the arts is largely absent from SPED curriculum, especially for students who are developmentally and cognitively delayed. How can the fine arts be presented, instructed, and cultivated among students with DCD in a school setting as a way of developing the student's sense of self and self-expression? The literature review presents research and resources relating to curriculum planning, educator training, student involvement, peer or 'general education setting' interactions and involvement, family interactions and needs,

and student benchmarks for social, psychological, and educational growth, and establishes and quantifies the benefits to the student, the school, and society when students with DCD learn and use the fine arts to communicate.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Education and the Fine Arts

The current models of education are focused on literacy as a method of communication. When students can communicate effectively and clearly, it helps them form the foundation of modern life (University of Kansas, 2023). This philosophy is pervasive in education models in developed countries, and the many standards used to develop curriculum push to expand and improve literacy. For example, Job and Coleman (2016) make a strong argument for including non-fiction in the reading curriculum at all ages. Although this is a new and appealing idea, the entire basis of their argument is that students need to be more literate; in other words, literacy is the goal of the education process. In defending their new approach, the authors cite the importance of children demonstrating mastery along Bloom's taxonomy which outlines six levels of intellectual behaviors, specifically within the cognitive domain.

Bloom's taxonomy is a developmental framework used by teachers to understand the level at which a student has learned a particular concept (Wheeler, 2023). Wheeler (2023) describes Bloom's taxonomy as a more accurate assessment of how effectively students absorb and understand what they have learned in the classroom, subjectively evaluating their progression from basic memorization toward creative adaptation of learned material. Bloom's hope with writing his theory is that it would assist teachers in the assessment of learning readiness and the development of education and academic programs.

Few would argue that fine arts such as dance and music are better options than reading and writing to move children up Bloom's ladder in the cognitive domain (or, to use the revised Anderson and Krathwol 2001 model, the 'factual dimension'), but humans are more than just academic minds or disembodied brains. Bloom recognized other domains in the human person, and within each domain he models a similar progression of remembrance and mimicry, toward internalization and creative expression (Santrock, 2011). It is when Bloom's affective domain and the psycho-motor domain are considered that the value of dance and music becomes apparent. Taxonomic growth in any domain is a mark of learning and development, which is the goal of any educator and education model, and this growth can be achieved through use of the fine arts (Santrock, 2011, p. 404).

Additionally, standards such as the Common Core Curriculum do not actually stipulate *how* progress is achieved in students' education, but merely determines the benchmarks. They are meant to be a goal-setting guide for what to teach and how to assess learning. One program, Everyday Arts for Special Education (EASE), provides an example of utilizing standards-based design and assessment to validate and promote the importance of the arts in special education classes (Seham, 2017), showing that the use of fine arts to achieve accepted educational goals is a viable option for any educational program. Another area using arts-based model is Contact Improvision (CI). CI is a touch-based form of dance utilizing a dialogue of sensations, "sensorial inquiry", where bodies listen to each other's proposals, acquiesce, and counter-purpose (Dower, 2022, pg. 75). In CI, over a longer period of time, students can explore the theories of sensory

and movement-based learning and how this has positive effects on reconceptualizing the ‘no talking’ in schools.

Garvis et al. (2017) reported on the history of music education within Australia and Sweden. Music education and music as an artform, was viewed in Australia as a cultural, artistic, and social accomplishment. It was an art form that was offered to the elite and those who could afford it. In the early 1900s, learning an instrument was expensive and participants were encouraged to participate in public examinations. This practice led to the creation of university music programs, as well as secondary schools for music specialization. Music was introduced in the schools not so much for its intrinsic value, but as a form of pedagogy for instilling moral, patriotic, and religious values in children (Garvis et al., 2017, pg.11). Kopp (2017) similarly traces the history of dance education in the US to its birth in Wisconsin in 1926, and notes competing themes within the programs, focusing on dance as a performance art, with less focus in educational settings on dance as a type of human movement (similar to sport), or dance as an art that provides an outlet for creativity, communication and exploration of one’s body.

All of these pursuits of introducing students to music and dance exist against a constantly evolving backdrop about innate versus learned musicality. To state simply, sociologists and neuroscientists continue to explore and debate the extent to which a person’s ability to sing, play instruments, or dance, is innate and genetic, versus learned. Levitin (2012) has shown that there are certainly real phenotypic markers in the human brain that correlate to musical ability, suggesting that there is a genetic or inherent element to a person’s aptitude toward musicality and

dance. However, Levitin also recognizes several observed instances of neuroplasticity, where the human brain adapts to repeated exposure to musical stimuli; which supports that there is a large causal relationship between (social) exposure to music and an individual's musical experience. Most compellingly, an individual's physiological and psychological manifestations of enjoyment when experiencing music, are part of childhood development, and shift to largely automatic processes when a person reaches adulthood (Levitin, 2022, p. 633). A nuanced understanding of neurobiology helps identify the limits and opportunities available for music education (including dance), both in general and specifically for students with developmental or cognitive delays. Levitin (2022) also recognizes a theme that is prevalent in the literature reviewed below, that 'musicality' is an ability that humans can possess and express in ways beyond being unusually gifted in skills-based expressions of music and dance.

Dance as a Means of Self-Expression and Communication

Dance, simply defined, is rhythmic movement, often accompanying music, and often following a coordinated sequence of steps and actions (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). When people think of dance, they might think of beautiful costumes, bright lights, and storytelling. Dance also can be considered a form of play, physical exercise, recreation, sport, or theater performance. Dance is multisensory and heightens the perceptual awareness that expands access to the meaning of different kinds of emotional expression (Hanna, 2008). On the surface, dance appeals to a dancer precisely based on its definition. Some enjoy the exercise accompanying choreographed dance; some find it fun or relaxing to move rhythmically to music; others might

enjoy the exacting precision of a competitive troupe's routine. Having an outlet to express emotions has been beneficial for students with ASD (Reinders et al., 2019), as well as other developmental disabilities.

But in and through this structured rhythmic movement, dance is a means of expression and communication. The purpose of a person's representation of knowledge through any of multiple forms (dance, music, emotions, and verbal) is to further their own understanding and to communicate their understanding to others (Hanna, 2008). Dance is a means of expression where one can tell a story to an audience without a single word, thereby allowing the dancer to communicate and feel understood through the use of movement.

Dance has a long history of being a powerful nonverbal form of communication in most human cultures around the globe. African dance varies widely across tribes and nations, but all dance styles are deeply rooted in ritual and history. Dance is used not only for entertainment but for prayer, emotional communication, and rites of passage. African dances are passed down through a 'dance authority', and the dances have been danced for centuries with little variation (Lewis, 2017). Dance has played a fundamental role in ancient Greek society for thousands of years. Classical writers such as Plato, Lucian, and Athenaeus recommended dancing as an essential part of the development of a good citizen, and boys and girls dancing under adult supervision have been found in ancient vase paintings (Choubineh, 2020). Dance has been a part of (East) Indian culture for more than 2000 years (Hanna, 2008), while early European accounts

of encounters with the first people of North America reflected a culture that danced for social and religious celebrations (Encyclopedia of American Studies, 2011).

Dance is a human behavior composed of purposeful, intentionally rhythmical, and culturally influenced sequences of nonverbal body movements (Hanna, 2008). Motor, moving visual, and kinesthetic channels of communication are predominant in dance. Educational theorist John Dewey recognized that an art form may be able to convey information better than spoken languages (Hanna, 2008). Taylor (2008), director of the Paul Taylor Dance Company in New York City, once stated that he creates dances "because I don't always trust my own words" (Hanna, 2008, p. 495). This clever one-liner underscores the reality of dance: that some ideas are expressed better *without* words, sometimes due to the subject, the audience, or the performer.

It has been suggested that more than half of all meaning in an exchange between people is communicated through non-verbal means (DeVito et al., 1999), and dance is non-verbal communication *par excellence*. There is no universally accepted meaning to any certain sequence of steps or moves, but the overall dance conveys large ideas. A performance can tell a story without words. The dancer's current emotions or mood can be gleaned from a dance, and a choreographed performance can also leave the audience with a sense of a dancer's self-understanding, or perhaps their relationship and struggles with their environment. The human body is not just an instrument to create a dance, but a tool for language experiences beyond words, declaring not only life, but also capability and self-worth (Reinders et al., 2019).

Movement is a powerful force for sensory connection and expression, especially in young children who are nonverbal. Through touching, sensing, and moving throughout their world, children spontaneously and naturally develop their kinesthetic curiosity (Dower, 2022). Choreographed dance routines provide a structured outlet for this connection and expression that people, especially children, need. Additionally, dance is almost always conducted with a background of rhythm or music. Dance is an important part of human musicality and is recognized as a universal human behavior (Kim & Schachner, 2023). This universality begs for the inclusion of dance in the educational curriculum, not only as sport, but as fine art.

Dower's studies on Contact Improvisation (2022) offer further examples of dance as a means of communication. Dower recognizes that movement is a sensory means of interacting with our world, and that group movements represent group knowledge or understanding. But she moves beyond what she and her sources consider a Western paradigm of 'giving meaning' and strives to provide students with a type of body-knowledge or bodily awareness that occurs creatively, and without explanation. This already has advantages for preschool-aged children and non-verbal learners of any age, but Dower takes her position further, noting that any student is able to reap a number of subtle benefits from this creative contact improvisation. The experiences provide the students/dancers with non-verbal or even pre-cognitive connections with the world and with each other, and creates anchor-points within the individual's experience, which eases the tensions that our rules-based social environments impose upon students.

Assuming Dower's findings are repeatable and quantifiable, her work makes yet another compelling reason to include dance as a holistic addition to SPED curriculum for learners.

Dance has Educational Benefits for SPED Students

One accepted task of public education is to help youth communicate with the world and with each other (University of Kansas, 2023). Educators fulfill this responsibility from a linguistic perspective as they teach reading and writing and maintain literature and language arts as a core element of primary and secondary education curricula. However, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, dance deserves another look in educational settings as a form of communication. Dance has much to offer our youth, and its wide adoption across human cultures adds to its intrinsic appeal. The non-verbal nature of dance also leads educators to consider a corollary application in our curricula: could dance carry additional benefits, or could it prove especially helpful to non-verbal students? This question has been studied with encouraging results. Dance is a form of fine art that can help a student with intellectual disabilities engage with the academic curriculum while also gaining movement and body control (Munsell & Davis, 2015).

Munsell and Davis (2015) reported on the use of dance with students who have special needs. The authors examined the research on the use of dance as a means of improving physical fitness and social and academic outcomes, and as a means of accommodating diverse learning needs. They also provided considerations when planning movement activities and evaluating student performance. Munsell and Davis (2015) presented information from two research studies

that were conducted on students with disabilities and how movement was incorporated into their day. The first study, completed by Jobling et al. (2006), was modeled on Laban's (1963) movement framework. It provided students with Down syndrome the ability to develop body, space, and effort awareness as well as develop a movement language and movement exploration. The participants were able to be more confident in their movement and were allowed the opportunity to interact and communicate with each other. The results showed an increase in the students' communication skills, body awareness, and respect for personal boundaries (Munsell & Davis, 2015). The second study looked at by Munsell and Davis was a summer program ran by Camp Thunderbird from 2003-2008 which paired minority students with disabilities together with general education peers and exposed them to a variety of rhythm, flexibility, and hand-eye coordination activities. These activities included ballroom and modern dance classes and improvisation classes as well as learning key vocabulary terms associated with the dance forms. This program did not conduct scientific research, but their anecdotal evidence suggests that the exposure to the different movements helped improve fine and gross motor skills of the participants with disabilities (Munsell & Davis, 2015).

Munsell and Davis (2015) surmised that by incorporating movement and dance into an inclusive classroom curriculum, students were given more creative and kinesthetic learning opportunities which, in turn, could help with more mastery of linguistics and math skills. This conclusion has also been explored through direct research. A researcher and dance instructor, Goodgame (2007), introduced a four-session program in three inclusive schools to help students

with disabilities better “explore the possibilities of more dynamic approaches to creative expression and enhancing self-esteem using a medium that had the ability to cross language and cultural boundaries” (Munsell & Davis, 2015, p. 4). By training special education teachers in ways to incorporate dance and movement into their classroom curriculum, the hope is to see an increase in academic performance as well as socioemotional interactions with peers. Finally, rubrics need to be designed to assess the effectiveness of incorporating more dance and movement into a student’s daily curriculum.

Hu and Wang (2021) completed a research study to develop a learning model based on a Bayesian network for inclusive dance training. The research study analyzed the level of physical development and psychomotor skills of students with developmental disorders of the musculoskeletal system at different stages of inclusive dance. The Bayesian network allowed for the researchers to take participant interviews and results after participation in different dance programs. The qualitative study was completed with 30 students ranging in age from 17-19 who were divided into two groups. Group one participated in inclusive dance classes for six months, where group two consisted of students who had between two and three classes of dance before the study started. The results of Hu and Wang’s (2021) study showed that inclusive dance helped with self-expression of students with disabilities, helping them feel more confident as members of society. The program also was an effective method of motor rehabilitation and helped to improve physical health characteristics.

Cetin and Erdem-Cevikbas (2020) performed a literature review on groups using creative dance to allow preschool-aged children to express their emotions. One of the many points of the review was the approaches of educating young children, with an emphasis on incorporating 'play' as a learning tool. Creativity is at the heart of dance, and it is important to allow everyone to dance in their own style and originality. Play-based learning, especially pretend play, allows for young students to learn emotional regulation strategies. Practicing emotional regulation in real life situations can be hard for anyone, especially young children and SPED students. Pretend play can go hand in hand with creative dance to provide students the opportunity to learn how to express themselves and practice emotional regulation (Cetin & Erdem-Cevikbas, 2020).

Purgstaller (2021) reported that a central-key component in children's dance education is the promotion of creativity. In the last 10 years, the teaching approach in most dance environments has been based on the understanding of dance as a phenomenon that enables children to go beyond everyday routines and norms, allows children to break with existing orders, and allows the ability to experiment with new, individual movement possibilities. Although Purgstaller did not focus on SPED learners, these findings align well with the work of Dower (2022), who stressed that contact improvisation enhances learners' connections with their environment and their peers.

Dance has Educational Benefits for SPED Students

Dance programs for students are generally available in most cultures (danceus.org; danceeurope.net). Dance courses and even dance units in physical education ("gym") class are

not commonplace in American public education, however, in Europe, the Americas and Asia, dance studios and courses exist for student participation (Rustad, 2012). Meanwhile, dance that is part of cultural heritage is often available to students at local cultural centers (including churches, synagogues, etc.), though sometimes more or less organized means (Jain & Brown, 2013). Consequently, , the availability of dance does not automatically make it *accessible,* which is especially the case for students with special needs.

The first challenge is one that reaches beyond students in SPED classrooms and affects most forms of dance classes available to students, especially in the United States. Koff (2017) described the familiar master/apprentice model and conservancy model of dance education, whereby the most skilled dancers are encouraged to continue training, and the performance routines are emphasized over more generalized learning and experience. While this practice certainly rewards the most talented athletes, Koff recognizes that there are aspects of learning that are missed. Dance education can also be about creativity and experience. Unfortunately, finding dance studios or dance classes that are willing to focus on creativity and experience can be a challenge for learners, and this becomes increasingly important (and perhaps frustrating) when searching for dance opportunities for SPED students who may be unlikely to excel in performance-focused dance settings.

General education curriculum cannot always be offered to special education students without adjustment. Aujla and Redding (2013) conducted a literature review on the barriers to dance training for young people with disabilities and provided recommendations for which

barriers could be overcome. The first barrier reviewed was aesthetics in dance. A dancer is expected to look and move in a specific way, and a young person with disabilities may not fit the 'dancer body' and may be excluded from participating. Many of the recommendations to help overcome this barrier were aimed at creating new images, vocabulary, and ways of movement to accommodate the disabled body.

Seham (2017) researched ways to make dance accessible to all people, including diverse bodies and minds. Several dance companies throughout the United States provide dance classes that are available for people of all abilities. . When designing classes for students with special needs, adjustments need to be made according to the emotional, physical, and social needs of the participants. Allowing for drums and other percussion instruments to be used to help teach rhythm and timing, as well as piano accompaniment to help with sensory needs, can be helpful accommodations to make dance classes more accessible to all abilities (Seham, 2017). A dance routine planned and choreographed to be within a developmentally delayed dancer's abilities will minimize the risk that the student will struggle to master the forms and sequence of the dance (Aujla & Redding, 2013). Proper planning will allow the students to express themselves in and through movements that they are capable of completing, and the audience will likewise see a dancer performing and not a person struggling to keep up (Aujla & Redding, 2013). Seham (2017), also reported that it is important for the teacher to come to a class ready to present the dance movements in multiple ways, to accommodate all students, and to be ready to integrate concept teaching into the class. Teaching peers to help students understand the movements and

perform the dance is another important learning strategy (Seham, 2017). A principle-based approach is important for dancers and teachers alike to assist with collaboration, interpretation, and expression of movement. The principle-based approach presented elements and qualities of dance without restricting movement to a narrowly defined physical execution (Seham, 2017).

Aujla and Redding (2013) presented another barrier in dance that needs to be addressed: society's image of 'a dancer.' The image that people tend to conjure of a 'typical' dancer (or musician, athlete, etc) tends to exclude people with special needs, not to mention a great number of people who aren't physically built to fit a culturally imagined form. This exclusive attitude, though perhaps unintentional, creates a barrier for many students, which needs to be removed for any special-ed dance program to succeed within a community. The idea that disabled people cannot be dancers is an area that family members, peers, the disabled dancers themselves, teachers, dance companies, and audiences can all help overcome. Dance, for a student with disabilities, needs not to be seen as just therapy but rather as a piece of art they can create. While the therapeutic approach is important, it suggests people with disabilities are not always capable of creating art worth seeing. Knowledge needs to be provided to parents and educators that students with disabilities can participate in dance classes and create a product worth seeing. At the same time, it is important that the dance teachers not lower the expectations of their disabled students (Aujla & Redding, 2013).

Dance has therapeutic benefits for children as they learn to communicate and feel understood with movement, and students can build relationships with both instructors and peers

within their dance class (Reinders et al., 2019). The authors researched the participation of nine children with ASD and their involvement within a recreational dance class. Reinders et al. (2019) defined a successful recreational dance class as a community-based program that does not focus on competition or examinations but allows an opportunity to perform. The class would also be a place where the students had fun, participated in the activities, contributed to the class, and learned new ways to move their bodies. The dance classes were designed to be inclusive of all abilities and student's assistive devices were used in the choreography. Classes were designed with routines, so students knew what was coming next, and the dance instructors had to be flexible and change plans on the fly if some part was not working well. Several able-bodied helpers were in the class to help support the students with disabilities to be successful in class. Reinders et al. (2019) highlighted three areas that make an inclusive dance class successful. They reported on the importance of family support through the use of family communication, suggestions, or involvement, as well as instructors with background knowledge and experience and willing volunteers. Reinders et al. (2019) believed that all individuals, regardless of socially constructed beliefs of ability or disability, should enjoy the life-proclaiming experience that is dance (Reinders et al., 2019, p. 17).

To help individual dance studios convey this message, the visibility of disabled people in dance needs to increase in society overall. Logistical and building accessibility barriers also pose challenges for people with disabilities to gain access to high-level dance programs. Dance training is expensive and could cost even more for a disabled dancer, as they could take longer to

learn the same skills as their able-bodied peers. While many theater buildings are handicapped accessible, the stages, as well as dressing rooms, still occasionally lack disability access (Aujla & Redding, 2013).

Training barriers are also encountered by developmentally and cognitively delayed dancers. This is particularly evident in the individual dance studio's (or instructor's) philosophy. Dance programs for the disabled tend to be at the recreational level and are mostly designed with therapeutic outcomes as their primary focus. There is certainly a place for dance therapy in society, however, this seems to be a limiting perspective, as it uses fine art as a tool for the patient's improvement or healing rather than offering the student a new expressive medium with limitless potential (Aujla & Redding, 2013). Very few dance programs focused on progression, accredited courses, and vocational training are available to students with disabilities (Aujla & Redding, 2013). One key recommendation to come from the literature review was to create dance and disability networks. The development of these networks at all levels of dance can provide awareness, share practices, provide bridges between dance participation, training, and the profession, and offer mentorship and professional development opportunities (Aujla & Redding, 2013).

Seham (2017) provided ideas on how to structure a dance class for students with mixed abilities. These ideas could easily be replicated within an inclusive classroom setting for teachers to provide a structured dance/movement time within the student's educational setting. Seham suggested allowing time for students to arrive into the dance space and prepare themselves for

class by greeting peers and getting into their dance spots. She suggested using breathing patterns to start to prepare for class and continuing to use these breathing strategies during transitions, refocusing the group, and encouraging individual and whole group concentration. Seham suggested classes should begin with a warm-up and stretching. Stretching helps to lengthen the anterior muscles of the torso and shoulders which is important for students who are in the sitting position. These warmup exercises, like plies and releves help strengthen the tibialis muscles, which is important for students with Down Syndrome, as they typically have weak ankles. Neck and head rolls should be avoided in students with Down Syndrome due to weak neck muscles. Jumping is an extremely important exercise for warm-ups as it not only strengthens a weak cardiovascular system but it turns the student's attention to dancing, and it is a joyful experience for students.

As the class progresses and dance steps and choreography are presented, it is crucial to present the movements in incremental learning, breaking the step into many little parts, subsequently put together to create the whole step (Seham, 2017). It is key to remember that all dance concepts introduced should target cognition, behavior, social awareness, and dance-making. Seham reported that students learn at different rates, and offering levels to the dance moves will allow students to progress at their own rate and avoid frustration. Presenting students with different levels, speeds , and quality of movement will give students an opportunity to learn at their level. Locomotor and floor exercises should be included as a part of the dance class. These exercises permit students to run freely and safely, skip, walk, turn, and move in a

safe area, which is not something they can always do safely outside of the dance space. Floor exercises empower students to roll and move on the floor independently and without the support of an able-bodied student. These two areas of the class provide movement and exercise that let all students, especially blind students, feel independent in a space as they take comfort from the floor that provides support and a point of contact to push off of. Finally, the class should end with a reverence, a thank you from the teacher to the student for all their hard work, as well as a thank you to the partners and other students who were part of the dance class.

In all, a fair amount of evidence has been amassed in recent years to demonstrate the benefits of dance education for students, including students with physical or mental disabilities (Aujla & Redding, 2013; Reinders et al., 2019; Seham, 2017). Incorporating dance into a special education classroom is a challenging process, but dance programs can provide students with opportunities to engage with academics in more meaningful ways, as movement allows students to express themselves and help to regulate emotions. Being able to express themselves without the use of words gives students more self-confidence in themselves, which can open more opportunities to interact with our society; to develop a level of independence or self-sufficiency in their lives (Hanna, 2008; Kartasidou et al., 2012; Kim & Schachner, 2023).

Music as a Means of Self-Expression and Communication

Music is defined as vocal, instrumental, or mechanical sounds having rhythm, melody, or harmony (Merriam-Webster dictionary). The human voice can be used to make more primitive

sounds like crying, laughing, and screaming, but evolves into speaking and, at the most complex level, into singing. Music forms an integral and valued part of a person's everyday life. It impacts a person's well-being, social behavior, and health (Kim & Schachner, 2023). The human voice was the first known instrument in music history; it is the oldest, most natural, and most valuable instrument (Ekici, 2022). Humans are drawn to music, touched by music, engaged by the music, and captivated by it. Music is a way for people to express themselves, to grow relationships, and to learn about others. Simply put, music is a birthright; from a young age, children absorb and sustain music they pick up from interactions with others. Children can creatively express themselves in necessary and new ways through the music they make, as well as share emotions that they cannot express with their vocabulary repertoire (Campbell, 2022). Music, especially songs, powerfully capture an infant's attention and helps to control emotions more effectively than speech (Kim & Schachner, 2023). Through implicit learning of the regularities of music, children learn the harmonic syntax and rhythmic structures they hear. This allows the child to sharpen their harmony and rhythm perceptions in culturally specific ways (Kim & Schachner, 2023). This agrees with previous research that recognizes both the universality of music, and its unique cultural expressions. Kang (2016) reported that while music does contain some universal elements, it is hard to present to students in music education classes the cultural-specific elements. Music classrooms should be a place of reconciliation in which musical differences are celebrated (Kang, 2016).

Demirtaş and Üstün (2023) surveyed more than 500 students in five high schools in Turkey to assess whether there is a correlation between music education and social intelligence or communicative skills. After controlling for other variables such as gender, education level and intelligence among the students, the authors were still able to show a strong and pervasive correlation between music education (outside of school) and social intelligence and communication. Student-musicians were more willing to communicate and had higher aptitude for personal expression and non-verbal expression compared to students who did not participate in extracurricular music education. The authors used the Tromso Social Intelligence Scale and the Communication Skills Scale (both adapted to Turkish) in order to assess students' abilities, which indicates that the effects of exposure to music education are assessable on conventional scales. The authors note that their results agree with previous literature on this topic (that is, with studies performed in other countries or social settings), and mention that their unusual qualifier, that their surveyed students' musical participation was explicitly *outside the school setting,* was a selected qualifier because these Turkish high schools' music programs only focused on general music education and not choral or instrumental music. The authors emphasize a commonly accepted belief that social skills are teachable behaviors and conclude that "learning an instrument from an early age will contribute to social intelligence and communication skills" (Demirtaş & Üstün, 2023, p. 191).

McFerran et al. (2015) show improvement in students' communication and social interaction skills when they encounter music through the classroom as an experience between

people. The creative aspects may well be present within the encounter, but they are not the focus of the authors' research. Rather, the authors noted a clear and repeatable shift in communication and interaction patterns between autism-spectrum students and their teachers and peers when the students were exposed to music education with an emphasis on the experience itself. McFerran et al. (2015) noted that students with special needs adapted to their environments more easily when they were participating in music programs and found the reverse to be true as well: suspension of the student's participation showed a resultant decline in social communication and adaptation. One aspect of the focus on music as an experience was a shift in the power dynamic between student and teacher. Teachers observed that with a differently focused curriculum, their relationship went from one of authoritative control or expertise (teaching skills that the teachers want the students to master) toward a more peer-to-peer relationship of two people encountering the same music together. This reinforces the social communicative benefits inherent in music education for students in general and special education students in particular.

Music has Educational Benefits for SPED Students

Music can provide students with special needs with all of the benefits listed above. However, in certain contexts, music becomes infinitely more valuable, as it may be the only effective means for some children to communicate ideas or emotions. Smith et al. (2019) ran a research study on the use of The Rhythmic Arts Project (TRAP), a curriculum that integrates visual, tactile, auditory, and speech experiences through rhythmic drumming, with a group of 23

students in grades 6-12 who were diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The TRAP curriculum helps to address life skills in the students. TRAP's mission is to empower people with intellectual disabilities to feel successful in their lives and abilities by incorporating drums and percussion instruments as a creative learning tool (Smith et al., 2019). The researchers evaluated the life skills of the students prior to the program beginning as well as after the completion of the program. Smith et al. also administered the Pediatric Evaluation of Disability Index Computer Adaptative Test (PEDI-CAT) before and after the completion of the program. Overall, the children who participated in the study showed significant increases in their participation in daily activities, mobility status, cognitive and social skills, and responsibility due to their participation in the TRAP research study.

The TRAP program uses three evidence-based treatment principles used with people who have ASD. The program focuses on the use of modeling, prompting, and visual supports. The program is designed to have the teacher model desired behaviors and activities. The TRAP program incorporates prompting to help provide assistance verbally, physically, and gesturally to help support the new acquired skill. Finally, the program uses visual supports to aid in the student's independence within the program. Smith et al. (2019) were able to demonstrate the program's effectiveness through participation tracking and observations. The students participated in the TRAP program as part of their everyday curriculum for one school year. Participation was high for most participants, with many completing 70 or more of the 76 sessions provided, with the level of engagement by the students being moderate. Although the study

acknowledges that its sample size is far from statistically conclusive, the authors successfully correlate TRAP participation with improvements in activities of daily living, mobility status, cognitive and social skills, and responsibility. The students' PEDI-CAT scores significantly improved in all four areas which the authors correlate with their participation in dance via the TRAP program. The authors used a scale score system so the students could still show they had major improvements in all four areas just by introducing a dance program into their school day (Smith et al., 2019).

Considerations for Music Curriculum for SPED Students

Expanding the availability of music and musical education to students with special needs is not a novel idea. Hash (2015) offered a brief history of the New York Institute for the Blind, in which he discusses instruction and performances in instrumental and choral music as early as the 1830s, with regular concerts offered to the public through the 1840s, 50s, and 60s. The author does not discuss sociological motivations or outcomes but notes that the Institute was able to use musical instruction for vocational purposes, producing blind music instructors and technicians whose abilities were carefully honed through the NYIB's curriculum (Hash, 2015). The successes of the NYIB and similar institutions have inspired special education curriculum planners to consider including music education through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century.

Today, the music classroom is often one of the first inclusion placements for students with disabilities, but music teacher education programs do not adequately prepare teachers for

working with this population (Draper, 2022). Draper (2022) presented a literature review where the original researcher proposed a question; “Is the purpose of music education in elementary schools to operate as an arena for socialization with age peers or to increase the musical skills and abilities of each individual student?” (p. 4). Only six studies in 36 years have looked at the experiences of students with disabilities in music class, and there is not enough information to help answer the above question (Draper, 2022). Wong (2022) reviewed teaching curriculum and practices in a Hong Kong special school and noted this same lack of teacher preparedness in an entirely different educational setting. Clipper and Lee (2021) noted most music educators had observed special education environments for less than five hours prior to their own (music-focused) student teaching. And Altun and Eyüpoğlu (2018) recognized this same shortcoming in educational settings in Turkey and were able to document the occasional (negative) classroom consequences and student outcomes related to this lack of preparedness.

Tower Elementary, in the Midwestern United States, provides a positive example of the inclusiveness of students with disabilities in music education programs. Draper (2022), presented a case study of Tower Elementary, a full-inclusion school with 86 of its 450 students on 504 plans or IEPs. General music is offered to students starting in first grade, as well as the ability to join a choir or learn a string instrument. The school offers several musical opportunities from advanced musicianship to beginner, and any student who wishes to participate regardless of ability. Tower Elementary offers three choirs that each meet for 30 minutes. Comunita is an all-inclusive choir that was modeled after a ‘reverse-inclusion choir. The choir includes many

joyful voices paired with movement instruments, all working towards a common goal. With reverse-inclusion, the goals and activities are tailored to fit the needs of the students with disabilities. Typically developing peers are paired as mentors to provide social and musical support (Draper, 2022).

Draper (2022), reported on two first grade students with a diagnosis of ASD. The two students participated in a general music education, as well as the Comunita choir, and one received private viola lessons. Ann, the viola teacher, explained that teaching a string instrument is so individualized that it does not really matter if a student has anxiety, depression, or another disability; you just take them where they are that day, and you try to push them to the next level (Draper, 2022, pg. 7). The case study yielded three emerging themes: not-so-atypical benefits, a focus on strength, and a culture of inclusivity. The not-so-atypical benefits were that the students gained a love for singing and music, were motivated to wake up and participate in an early morning choir, and had an overall increase in their ability to focus throughout their day and feel confident in their abilities. The skills learned in the structured music class were able to be used throughout the student's day for relaxation, motivation, and the overall joy of singing. During music classes, it is important the teacher play off the strengths of their students. Allowing the student to 'lead' the class in the movement or song and allowing them to move for their assigned spots helps improve their overall participation in the class. The learning approaches of the teachers were to be flexible and responsive to the students within their classes and lessons (Draper, 2022). To play to their student's strengths, the teachers used the Universal Design for

Learning (UDL) framework, which used multimodal activities and experiential music-making before the students would read notes. By using the UDL framework, each student is welcomed into the learning through their strengths rather than being limited by deficits.

Draper (2022) indicated that Tower Elementary uses a great approach to inclusive learning. With music being offered during the school day, all students can access the extracurricular opportunity. This is an important inclusive approach, as many students with ASD have to use their 'extracurricular' time after school to attend many different therapy sessions (Draper, 2022). Another important part of the inclusive community feel that Draper (2022) reported on was the peer relationships that form with the SPED students and their 'buddy' peers.

While Draper (2022) correlated successful music education to an inclusive school environment and flexible, interactive curriculum using UDL framework, Wong (2022) asserted that a music curriculum that focuses on creativity instead of skills mastery drives learning for intellectually disabled students. The author identified two forms of creative expression in students with Intellectual disabilities: music composition and performance on instruments and spontaneous movement or dance in response to movement. Wong noted a cultural motivation for the 2022 study: Hong Kong generally does not practice music therapy with intellectual disability students, and Hong Kong music educators are also specifically tasked with developing student creativity. Developing creativity does benefit the students (Wong, 2022), but in Hong Kong as well as in Turkey, the U.S. and likely elsewhere, the teachers are currently ill-prepared for such

an assignment. In the Hong Kong study, Wong (2022) noted that the teachers struggled on a practical level with classroom time management and that they also acknowledged their shortcomings in how to teach music creatively. The educator participants all admitted to defaulting to skills-development as their preferred teaching. While intellectually and physically disabled students deserve the benefit of the doubt (that is, the 'least dangerous assumption' is that the students are capable of musical ability), the observed facts are that ID students often cannot learn skills in a manner compatible with traditional music education teaching (see Clipper & Lee, 2021; Draper, 2022; Wong, 2022). These observations dovetail with the survey results from Buren et al. (2021), where the authors note a correlation between student musicality and rhythm and aural perception and attentiveness, on the one hand, and also a positive correlation between musicality and motivation and stamina. These authors did not expand on whether any of these skills are teachable, so at the very least, these are considerations when planning SPED music curriculum.

Wong focused on creativity in music education, which Clipper and Lee (2021) also recognize and see it developed through musical composition. Practicing musical composition improved creativity and students' self-perception, and the authors also noted that musical composition is a form of expression open to students who might struggle with traditional forms of verbal and written communication. Clipper and Lee (2021) recognize the lack of resources and available training for music educators and proceed to describe the use of creating musical

scenery in group composition settings, with two examples: a day at the zoo and the Wizard of Oz tornado.'

Clipper and Lee (2021) asked students to imagine, as a group, a place that was rich in sound and was emotionally meaningful to the students. They brainstormed the settings with the students, discussed the sounds that would be heard (simulating sounds with their voices), and then the students were introduced to different instruments. After basic demonstration, the students were allowed to select their preferred instrument to re-create the sounds. Finally, the students were tasked with creatively notating their compositions. This exercise was done as a whole class once, and in small groups in a follow up.

Clipper and Lee's (2021) shift in focus to creativity is supported indirectly by the research performed by Buren et al. (2021) on what defines a musical child. In a series of surveys of more than 900 educators and students conducted in Germany, Buren et al. categorized perceptions of musicality amongst students, especially focusing on preschool aged students, in order to identify traits that relate to musicality and musical ability later in life. The authors recognized that there are skill sets that relate to musical ability, especially involving aural perception and a sense of rhythm and timing. However, the authors also discovered some surprising relations in the data. First, they noted that 'musical understanding' is a valued trait amongst parents and general educators but that music educators, specifically, do not weigh a student's 'comprehension' of music in connection with that student's ability or aptitude. Further,

Buren et al. (2021) noted that early exposure to music and music education fosters a more fluid understanding of a child's own musical ability. In other words, children who are exposed to music believe themselves to be musical to some degree, while students who are not exposed to music early and often in their development tend to display a more rigid definition of musicality. Buren et al. also recognize the connection between musicality and creativity as being of primary importance for young children. And they see this as connected to communication and creative expression as well. While Buren et al., assess musicality by looking for passive correlations, their results align with the educational work being done in music education for special education students, in which the educators are actively attempting to teach some of these skills.

The reason that these methods outlined by Clipper and Lee (2021) are successful is that the teachers are shifting focus from musical skills to expression and communication through instruments and (in this case, non-vocal) sounds. They saw increased engagement among all students and ultimately found that at the end of the lesson, there was more even growth and development across the students, regardless of disability. This led the authors to suggest that this same strategy could be implemented in inclusive classrooms using Universal Design for Learning principles. Such cooperative, creative projects, the authors suggest, "could potentially remove barriers to making music and allow our students with special needs to develop confidence, connect emotionally with their peers, and view their creativity as an indicator of their musicianship." (Clipper & Lee, 2021, pg. 3).

Draper and Bartolome (2021), reported on a three year long qualitative study about the Academy of Music and Arts for Special Education (AMAZE) program. AMAZE is an undergraduate volunteer organization offering music instruction for individuals with disabilities. The authors examined the AMAZE program for its social relational model of disabilities and how that affected the participants, parents, and volunteers. The program's philosophy is to provide free, private music education and to cultivate a community that acknowledges the impairments of the students but seeks to better understand the socially imposed barriers for the students to successfully access musical education. Draper and Bartolome (2021) explained the social model of disability. In this model, it is argued that the disability is imposed by societal barriers and not just the result of a biomedical deficit, which is then just an individual problem. In the social model, the disability exists because of the social barriers that favor the 'normal' body and mind.

When a student is first enrolled in the AMAZE program, they get to choose from a variety of instruments, which account for the varying levels of cognition and physical ability. Once a week, each student receives a 30-minute private music lesson, and spend another 30 minutes engaging in a community ensemble, where participants sing songs together, participate in music activities and arts and crafts. Each student is paired with two volunteers, one who helps support the musical development, while the other helps to support behavior concerns and management.

During the three-year observation of the AMAZE program Draper and Bartolome (2021), interviewed volunteers, parents, and students, as well as collected samples of the song transcripts, concert programs, and communications of the AMAZE executive board, volunteers, and families. Draper and Bartolome (2021) found their findings fell into three organizational values: ability, community, and service. All volunteers identified the importance of ability with the students and the importance of using person-first language and recognizing the student as a person with many characteristics, a disability being only one of them. AMAZE volunteers are intentional in focusing on a student's capability and supporting those despite the challenges that can come with the disability. All participants recognized the importance of the social community that came from their participation within the AMAZE program. Students can interact with same-aged peers with and without disabilities, as many of the volunteers are the same age as the students. The students became friends outside of the program as well. Music was used as a jumping point to make friends and relate to others (Draper & Bartolome, 2021, pg. 13). The AMAZE program is providing a service that parents are seeking out as musical learning was hard for them to find for their children, and some of the students had graduated from a formal educations system. A barrier for students with disabilities is sometimes the ability to access a music class, as they might skip music to get more help on academic needs. Draper and Bartolome (2021) reported that parents were also frustrated with the music opportunities outside of the school, as many instructors would not see their student due to the behaviors related to their

disability. With the AMAZE program being free, it allows all students to access music education and eliminates privilege and inequality.

With the adoption of the ability mindset, Draper and Bartolome (2021), were able to see that the AMAZE program was pushing against social barriers and provided access to musical instruction and provided learning spaces that allowed all students to grow in their musical abilities. The AMAZE program also provides students with an even playing field for social interactions and helps to cultivate real friendships across conventional social boundaries. Draper and Bartolome (2021) concluded that barriers to students' access to music education came from exclusion from programs, the need for community organizations, and the lack of preparation among music educators. The authors feel there is a critical need to better prepare music educators to not only be a teacher of music, but also advocates for their students with disabilities. It is important for music educators to challenge their implicit beliefs about their student's abilities and try to stop just modifying and adapting. Music educators need to think about how environments, curricula, and instruction could be what is disabling the student (Draper & Bartolome, 2021). Just like Draper & Bartholome (2021) reported on music; Seham (2017), reports that to be able to deliver an accessible dance program instructors need to overcome many obstacles such as time, space, funding, support, and expertise. The biggest barrier is the lack of belief in the capacity of all students to meaningfully engage in dance.

A theme common in the literature above is also echoed in the research by McFerran et al. (2015), whose work in music education spans two cultures on different continents. The authors express similar challenges for educators and articulate the need for SPED music programs to shift focus away from skills toward experiential encounters with music. However the authors go further in noting that shifting the school curriculum and planning for inputs and outcomes was a task that the music educators could not reliably accomplish without assistance. Specifically, music therapists were repeatedly needed to assist with the many unique variables that SPED students introduced to the education model. McFerran et al. (2015) go on to suggest that the most effective approaches in most education settings will involve interdisciplinary teaching structures. Team teaching (or at least team lesson-planning) will bring many types of expertise to bear and will improve the likelihood of achieving the educational goals that are sought by SPED teachers and families for their students through exposure to music education.

A final consideration for planning a music education curriculum for students with special needs involves a recognition of the limits of the currently available material. Especially in America, music education has been reviewed academically through a lens narrowly focused on the public school setting. Humphreys (2015), a historian of music education, recognized that the shift toward inclusion of music in the public school curriculum in America in the 1800s was beneficial, but shaped later research to skim past sources of music education in American culture that occur outside this public school space. McFerran et al. (2015), describe music therapists working with SPED students *within school settings* on two continents, providing further

evidence of this default focus on school settings for music education. Although the past decade has seen inroads in broadening the source information for both sociological and historiographic studies, the overwhelming bulk of the information available still discusses music education in the context of public schooling. This bias is echoed in the literature surveyed above and contrasts with the literature available for dance education, which is now primarily seen (and researched) *outside* the public education arena.

There are some indications that the US music education model is beginning to shift. While the school system still functions as the normative reference point, individual schools are beginning to introduce alternatives to the typical 'large ensemble' band or choir classes commonly encountered, especially in US education settings. Smith et al. (2023) offer an extended review of the problem with the typical 20th-century band/orchestra model. They discuss how this model fails to keep up with modern social trends in music and fails to engage a large percentage of students. Non-white and/or impoverished (free- and reduced-lunch) students have disproportionately low representation in band classes. However, the past decade has seen a groundswell of alternative music programs offered during school or as extra-curricular options for students through the school district. The authors use "Little Kids Rock" as their example program, whereby children engage in music in a rock-band format rather than orchestral or choral programs (Smith et al., 2023). These programs show higher engagement, and the demographics are much more reflective of the communities in which they are set. The authors

further note that the benefits include improvements in students' ability to experience music and express themselves musically through non-traditional but highly familiar types of music.

As with dance, music has been shown to be an effective form of communication for developmentally and cognitively delayed students. Music allows students to expressively communicate with others and improves social interactions (Demirtaş & Üstün, 2023; McFerran et al., 2015). This is accomplished most effectively when courses are switched from traditional skills-based music classes to creative play and composition. The various studies all reach a similar conclusion: this does not happen without preparation and effort, on the part of the students, the teachers, and the community (Draper, 2022; McFerran et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2019). But when it does happen, the benefits are shown to be measurable and manifest. Music performance and music composition is a viable means of communication for students with special needs (Campbell, 2022; Clipper & Lee, 2021; Ekici, 2022).

CHAPTER III: CONCLUSION

Summary of Literature

A review of recent research confirms that the fine arts, especially dance and music, are a novel and effective form of communication for people with disabilities. Humans need an outlet to express themselves, whether it is in an academic or social setting. Similarly, Munsell and Davis (2015) reported that including dance and other art forms in an academic curriculum can help improve overall academic outcomes. However, the benefits go beyond the classroom; they extend to the individual themselves. Hanna (2008) reported that dance and music allow people to further their own understanding and to communicate their understanding to others. Researchers have repeatedly demonstrated that dance and music play a positive role in the lives of those with disabilities by allowing them to express themselves using physical movement and sound produced by instruments (Aujla & Redding, 2013; Dower, 2022; Kim & Schachner, 2023; Munsell & Davis, 2015; Seham, 2017). When given the opportunity to learn and participate, these mentally and/or physically disabled students grow dynamically, both as artists and more holistically as humans, and their growth is seen in measurable improvements on common benchmarks (Draper, 2022; Kim & Schachner, 2023; Smith et al., 2019; Wong, 2022).

Dance and music (vocal and instrumental) provide students with different but related outlets for creativity and self-expression. Dance's most promising contributions to the development of special needs students are in the improvement of the student's body

knowledge, producing a level of comfort and self-confidence that comes with learning unique physical sequences set to music or rhythm and then performing them for an audience. This physical self-awareness and boost in self-confidence are critical to SPED students, as they are often identified as 'different' and excluded in general education or mixed settings, in part because of their physical mannerisms or abilities. The expressive, performative nature of dance provides great benefits to all people, but especially to those with disabilities. The dancers have learned to be comfortable with themselves and to share themselves with those around them without fear or shame (Hanna, 2008; Munsell & Davis, 2015; Reinders et al., 2019; Seham, 2017).

Music offers SPED students an additional avenue for growth and development - creative composition. Music already offers a (mostly) non-competitive environment for students, which is beneficial for developmentally delayed individuals, as it creates a free space to learn to be themselves without competing for resources or attention with peers of higher ability. However, band, choir, and orchestra programs emphasize skills development, which accentuates SPED students' weaknesses. Of the SPED music programs reviewed in the research above, the most successful programs focused not on the form and technique of music-making, but on the creative activity of musical composition. The skills to play an instrument were taught only to empower the students, to arm them with new tools for self-expression. This shift allows SPED students to participate in a program where their (in)ability to play a specific style or arrangement on a specific instrument is nearly irrelevant to

the overall success of the project, and where success depends only upon creativity, cooperation, and engagement (Clipper & Lee, 2021; Draper & Bartolome, 2021; Draper, 2022; Smith et al., 2019; Wong, 2022).

Professional Application

Teachers need a carefully designed curriculum for SPED students that emphasizes the particular skills for each subject and maps out the best method for achieving these skills. Dance develops self-confidence and self-knowledge. So, teaching a specific dance style is less important than finding a style that challenges the student somewhat, and that can ultimately be mastered and performed by that student (Aujla & Redding, 2013; Hu & Wang, 2021; Reinders et al., 2019; Seman, 2017). Music skills are second to music creativity. The aim of a SPED music program is the expression, and the students benefit from learning instrumental skills to express thoughts and ideas through the sounds of any particular instrument (Draper, 2022; Smith et al., 2019). The teachers also need some convincing to try this new curriculum, perhaps through statistical or anecdotal evidence of success, through impassioned pleas for arts education from SPED families, or through reinforcement from district or community management that the teacher's own job is not being evaluated on the students' abilities. Teachers need to be given the space to explore the new aims of the curriculum without fear of being held to old standards (Clipper & Lee, 2021; Altun and Eyüpoğlu, 2018).

Special education teachers can be the best people to help implement movement and dance activities in the classroom, even though they may feel they lack the skills. Davis and

Munsell (2015) provided several opportunities for special education teachers to receive training on how to best implement dance activities into their classrooms. The Children's Dance Theatre's Side-by-Side Teacher Training Residency Program, as well as the National Dance Institute of New Mexico's Hip to be Fit: Train the Trainer Program offer teachers learning opportunities on how to best implement dance into their classroom and academic routines. If training programs are not accessible, several resources are available for teachers to use. Munsell and Davis (2015) also suggest that teachers seek out community partners, such as local dance instructors, to provide learning opportunities on structured movement activities. Seham (2017) mentions the John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Arts VSA, which is an international leader in supporting and promoting arts education in students with disabilities. Another program mentioned is the Everyday Arts for Special Education (EASE). EASE offers instructional materials that clearly delineate the complex contributions of arts teaching to student learning and to social and behavioral development.

Limitations of the Research

Neither dance nor music can be readily adapted into special-education classroom settings without a great deal of preparation. Teachers, especially performance-art teachers, have very little exposure to special education settings before they begin their specialist careers. So, they are caught less prepared than their peers when tasked with educating SPED students (Aujla & Redding, 2013; Draper, 2022; Kopp, 2017; Wong, 2022). Beyond the development of basic special education skills, the teachers of both dance and music struggle with time

management and/or classroom management. These challenges are inherently connected with the desire to teach SPED students with the same goals and planned outcomes as general education classrooms. The teachers need to change their expectations for the students, and then change how they teach their material.

Any attempt to shift curriculum aims to benefit SPED students, while simultaneously passing on to the individual arts teachers the responsibility to adapt to changing curriculum, seems almost certain to fail. This is both because the teachers are inexperienced with special education, and because most performance arts instructors have been raised (and have likely excelled) primarily in environments where music and dance were performance-focused and skills-focused (Kopp, 2017). It is not at all unusual that we, as a society, would expect a skilled teacher to have (and to act upon) the impulse to teach and develop specialized skills with capable students. But, as noted above, this is not the proper aim of a SPED arts class, and attempting this is unlikely to succeed on a regular basis. Some students with special needs will certainly excel at dance or music, but the more likely and more common scenario is the frustration teachers described to multiple researchers - that the students did not progress and disrupted progress in mixed settings.

Implications for Future Research

There is a push in the community and within schools to create more programs that allow students with disabilities to engage and interact with the fine arts; however, more research needs to be conducted to showcase the inclusive programs that exist as well as how to

better prepare music and dance educators to teach and engage their students with disabilities (Draper, 2022; Munsell & Davis, 2015; Smith et al., 2019). Teachers need resources; communities need resources as well. It is unreasonable to ask each community, cultural center, or school district to forge ahead alone with these lofty goals of inclusion of SPED students in the arts. Research across multiple continents in the past twenty years is already showing benefits to programs in existence, as well as what might not be working well (Altun & Eyüpoğlu, 2018; Wong, 2022). However, this information needs to be shared at local levels where student progress will be made and where individual students with special needs will be able to interact more fully within their own communities.

Conclusion

A multitude of research has been collected in recent years that consistently demonstrates that participation in the fine arts, especially dance and music, has a positive impact on the lives of people with disabilities (Draper & Bartolome, 2021; Draper, 2022; Smith et al., 2019). Dance and music give the students an opportunity to express themselves, through movement and sound, but without the need for words. Participation in inclusive music and dance classes gives students the feeling of self-worth and a sense of belonging in a world where they may not always feel accepted (Dower, 2022; Hanna, 2008; Kim & Schachner, 2023; Reinders et al., 2019). Students can improve their social skills, learn about their bodies, manage behaviors, as well as gain physical strength, coordination, or dexterity, through participation in these classes. Clipper and Lee (2021) reported that students who participated in

a music class, especially composition activities, were able to gain a closer connection to music, feel an ownership and pride in their abilities, and feel more emotionally connected with others; while Dower (2022) identified an improved connection with peers and the environment through the pre-cognitive and non-verbal act of creative dance. Music and dance classes provide a non-competitive opportunity for students to participate in classes with their peers without the pressure of trying to be exactly like their able-bodied peers but still get the satisfaction of performing on stage and feeling accomplished.

Expansion of available SPED dance and music programs is far from a plug-and-play endeavor at this point, but the specific benefits of SPED fine arts programs are becoming increasingly connected with teaching method and subject matter, while the obstacles encountered by educators and program coordinators are likewise becoming more predictable and solvable (Aujla & Redding, 2013; Draper, 2022; Kopp, 2017; Wong, 2022). More coordinated and broader-reaching research is still needed, but already today, enough is known to recommend this for communities and families with students in special education settings. Work is needed, however, in the following areas: educating the community on opportunities; coordinating the programs within a larger SPED curriculum goal (tying into IEPs as appropriate, defining the relationship of arts courses to Common Core or other curriculum models, etc), and providing education and support for arts teachers, who very likely never expected to teach special education on a routine basis, nor to teach their subject matters with a focus on experience over skills and performance. These are not small tasks, and any

well-constructed efforts will incorporate unique aspects of the community in which the program is set. But the work is a worthwhile pursuit: music and dance allow these students, like all humans, an opportunity to express their humanity, in uniquely creative ways.

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