

Dialogical Encounters with Disability in Integrated Dance Education

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Abstract:

This article (based on a paper presented at the NADP 2018 conference) discusses the social encounters taking place within the context of integrated dance education programs partnering students with and without disabilities, taught by teachers with and without disabilities. The paper is based on a larger anthropological research focusing on teachers' and students' practices, knowledge, and attitudes towards disability and bodily difference in integrated dance, and is based on fieldwork conducted in projects of integrated dance in Israel and the US. The activities I discuss here require of participants with and without disabilities a shared understanding and implementation of concepts such as rhythm, partnering, and pacing, which, in this context, are taught, learned, and expressed through multiple modes. These encounters challenge the taken-for-grantedness of the ways in which one performs his/her body, creating performances that provoke a critical understanding of what a body can do and what disability is. The research reveals the ways integrated dance delivers complicated messages about disability, embodiment, and dance, and its unique capacity to embrace and include cultural binaries and differences within the same social and physical encounter. In other words, integrated dance education is a context that enhance disability experience, and can be considered as an inclusive educational practice. This enhancement is expressed by: 1. Practices of study and exploration 2. A development of participants' kinesthetic awareness, and 3. A change in perspectives regarding the meaning of disability.

Introduction

When I read that the theme of the NADP 2018 conference was “Ensuring quality provision”, and saw its aim of “sharing solutions ... in order to allow opportunities to positively affect how quality principles are applied across the world” (NADP website, 2018), the educational and social practices I have been documenting in my study on integrated dance immediately came to mind. These programs challenge stereotypical notions of ability and disability, and expand participants’ understanding of what their bodies and others’ bodies can do, and how they should look and move. I believe that the type of meetings and the dialogues taking place in integrated dance can offer a blueprint for quality provision in the field of disability, and within social encounters with social otherness more broadly.

My research, which began in 2014, explores the construction of sensory practices and disability embodiments within the emerging phenomenon of “disability performance art” (Garland-Thomson, 2000) in Israel and the US. This phenomenon is part of what has been identified as “Disability Culture” (Kuppers, 2004; Peters, 2010) -- a movement and a collective awareness through which people with disabilities claim their condition as a basis for positive identity politics, which has led to numerous initiatives, many in the arts.¹ In my research on disability culture, I focus on dance programs and companies in which people with and without disabilities collaborate in

¹ Disability culture is identified, for example, with Deaf Culture, which asks to recognize deaf with capital D, not as a medical problem needing curing, but as a social identity with its own cultural practices, offering the term “deafhood,” which emphasizes a deaf sense of being and a belonging to a community (Padden and Humphries, 2004). In my doctorate research I used the ideas of disability culture to offer the term “sensory capital” (Hammer, 2012) of blind women, through which they accept, and even celebrate their difference.

the creation of public artistic performance.² The programs comprise participants with a wide spectrum of abilities and body types, including performers using wheelchairs, crutches or prosthetics, dancers with one arm or leg, and dancers without disabilities with diverse bodies in terms of height, size, strength, and age, and some with cognitive disabilities. All of the programs I study have an educational component, including teacher training programs, in-studio dance classes, and school-based projects with youth from age 5 to 18. These initiatives commonly include not only students with and without disabilities, but also teachers with and without disabilities, and are based on a model of co-teaching.³

Methodologically, the research is based on fieldwork I conducted in five programs of integrated dance in Israel and the US from different genres: integrated ballet, modern dance, dance-theatre, contact improvisation, and sign-language dance theatre. Fieldwork included 63 in-depth interviews with practitioners, educators, directors, curriculum writers, and participants with and without disabilities; hundreds of ethnographic observations of classes and workshops; and content analysis of publications about integrated dance.⁴

² My research on integrated dance emerged from a theme I wrote about in my previous study, in which I explored blind women's gender identity and the cultural construction of blindness and sight (Hammer, 2013). When I talked to blind women about their everyday gender performance, they described a common experience of feeling like a performer and a spectacle when simply walking down the street, attracting gazes and stares from people because of their blindness. This made me think about the junction of disability and performance.

³ See, for example, an introductory video of an Israeli teachers' training program of integrated contract improvisation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2knv3y7ZHo>

⁴ Methodological issues that are outside the scope of this paper relate to my own participation in the observations, the role of my body in the study, and the challenges of writing and producing a written text on an embodied research subject. On these matters, see: Ophir, 2016; Samudra, 2008.

My research questions focus on the formation of embodiment, movement, ability, and disability in integrated dance. When I look specifically at educational programs of integrated dance, I ask about the ways integrated dance programs and companies promote a dialogue about difference, and influence equality. These programs bring into a shared space two categories considered oppositional and in conflict with each other: dance and disability (Aujla and Redding, 2013; Broyer, 2017; Cooper-Albright, 1997; Harari, 2016; Koppers, 2001). In our cultural imagery, dance is typically associated with ability, strength, and physical capital, while disability is associated with weakness, dependency, and lack of physical strength. Moreover, dance is traditionally identified with aesthetics, beauty, youth, and sexuality, while disability is identified with sickness, old age, death, and asexuality. Thus, the meeting between these two categories often engenders suspicion regarding integrated dance's artistic value, and disbelief that disabled people can actually dance. Broyer (2017), an Israeli scholar of dance and disability, addressed this complicated conjunction, which threatens to turn this type of dance into what she calls "dis-dance." "The common assumption," she writes, "that disabled people lack the ability to dance creates an almost unbridgeable distance between the impaired body and the dancing body. These two bodies are loaded with conflicting cultural meanings to the extent that attempting to connect them generates an epistemological collision." (Broyer 2017, 32)

This "epistemological collision" taking place within integrated dance is what I find so fascinating about this phenomenon. Just imagine the reactions of kids of every age when a wheelchair user rolls into their classroom or dance studio and is introduced as

When quoting participants, I refer to them using the term by which they identify themselves (disabled/with disabilities), and use an alias unless research participants asked to be identified by their own name.

their guest teacher, coming to give them a dance class no less. Their shock stems not only from the fact that they're not used to seeing people with disabilities in positions of authority, but also from the idea that someone with a disability could teach them about dance. The seeming impossibility of it immediately raises critical questions about what constitutes movement, dance, and ability, and through physical contact with disability and a body different from theirs, the activity soon engenders curiosity, surprise, and exploration of the nature of the dancing body.

Theoretical Context

I explore integrated dance through several theoretical prisms, including: Disability culture's research on the empowering force of "disability performance art" (Garland-Thomson, 2000; Kupperts 2004; Quinlan and Bates 2008; Quinlan and Harter 2010; Sandahl 2004);⁵ the cultural study of performance which examines dialogue as a critical, self-reflexive tool (Conquergood 1985; Garland-Thomson 2009);⁶ and research on the moving body (e.g., Manning 2014; Sheets-Johnstone, 2018; Sklar, 1994). Integrated dance education programs allow me to bring into a mutual conversation studies from the field of physical education with theories from the field of the

⁵ Previous research on disability performance art has identified disability culture's role in challenging cultural norms about the body as well as racist and ableist ideologies, yet largely focuses on individual performances and productions by artists with disabilities (e.g., Fox 2007; Hodges et al. 2014; Lipkin and Fox 2001; Saur and Johansen 2013). This project's focus expands the scant available research on dance pedagogy for dancers with disabilities (Aujla and Redding 2013; Morris et al. 2015; Whatley 2007) by examining effects of integrated dance education on social opportunities, disability equality, and attitudes towards disability.

⁶ Research within the field of anthropology of performance has indicated that dialogue between individuals different from one another may result in new understandings of social identities (Conquergood 1985; Schechner 1985; Turner 1986). It is therefore significant that differences among participants in integrated dance education are not eliminated but, ideally, are employed to create physical, emotional, and social interactions that promote self-reflection and agency (Garland-Thomson 2009).

anthropology of the senses (including the kinaesthetic sense) – both arguing for the importance of movement as both a physical *and* cultural practice.

Studies of physical education have pointed out the benefits of inclusive physical activity for participants with and without disabilities (Brittain, 2004; Taub and Greer, 2000; Vickerman, 2012). McCaughtry and Rovegno (2001), in their article on the role of physical activity in education practices, discuss for example, the wide and varied roles movement has for students (not disabled), including the development of self-confidence, self-respect, honesty, and responsibility; a willingness to cooperate, and an openness to incongruity. Movement, they demonstrate, also affects the development of aesthetic attitudes, such as playfulness, openness to diversity, openness to exploration, gracefulness, harmony and balance. Iris Young (1980), who already explored movement socialization in the 80', wrote on the ways young girls and boys are taught to move and use their bodies, and demonstrated how movement affects the social opportunities women have later in life and the way they understand their bodies. Scholars of physical education, therefore, tell us that movement can contain deep educational meaning, enriching our “store of sensory perceptions” (McCaughtry and Rovegno, 2001, 498).

Anthropologists of the body and the senses share a similar enthusiasm about movement, addressing it as crucial in the formation and expression of social identity and cultural ideology. Anthropologists of skill-making, of sports, dance, and martial arts have argued for the ways culture affects and mediates our sensory practices, perceptions, and experiences, including the kinesthetic senses (Bar-On Cohen, 2006;

Downey, 2010; Geurts, 2002; Hammer, 2017; Parviainen, 2002; Spinney, 2006).⁷ The philosopher of the body Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (1999) calls movement “the mother of all cognition” (253), and reminds us that movement is the initial way in which we communicate with the world as infants, while language and verbal expressions come later. And the dance scholar Sklar (1994) argues that: “Movement is a corporeal way of knowing. It is as loaded with significance with who people take themselves to be” (11).

My study of integrated dance education builds upon and contributes to these studies. First, investigating educational practices in integrated dance exposes how the shared participation of students and teachers with and without disabilities in an activity requiring physical intimacy, collaboration, focused attention, and trust can change participants’ attitudes about disability and enhance social opportunities. Secondly, integrated dance allows exploring what the anthropologist Marchand (2010) called our “embodied cognition.” Students and teachers engage in a mutual exploration of rhythm, use of space, partnering, center of gravity, exposing and articulating the ways kinesthetic knowledge is learned, taught, and transmitted, and the conscious aspects of physical habitus. Thirdly, integrated dance contributes to the study of the nature of the kinesthetic experience because it focuses on disability as a “kinesthetic culture” (Samudra, 2008). Like dancers and people of other embodied professions, people with disabilities who have experienced injury develop a meticulous kinesthetic awareness of the body through relearning or understanding differently concepts such as range of movement and center of gravity (O’Donovan-Anderson, 1997 in Parviainen 2002, 17; Sobchack 2005). Integrated dance therefore, bringing together two kinesthetic

⁷ The kinesthetic sense has been identified as “the physical qualities of meaning in movement” (McCaughy and Inez, 2001). For a broader definition of the kinaesthetic sense of motion, see: Potter, 2008, 448; Sklar, 2000, 72.

cultures, dance and disability, allows questioning the social conventions that understand disability as a lack of movement, promoting instead a more sophisticated understanding of a spectrum of mobility and disability, and allows asking about the ways values such as pathological/normal are manifested in and maintained through bodily practices.

Dialogical Encounters with Disability in Integrated Dance

The meeting of people with diverse abilities in integrated dance fosters participants' critical self-reflection regarding the notions of embodiment, ability, and disability. This critical awareness is expressed and based on three dynamics taking place in integrated dance: 1. Practices of study and exploration 2. A development of kinesthetic awareness, and 3. A change in perspectives regarding the meaning of disability.

Study and Exploration

The dialogical encounters taking place in integrated dance are created by the dynamics of study and exploration. The engagement of bodies with and without a disability requires asking questions, verbalizing the body and its abilities and limitations, and mutually exploring movement possibilities. While in an integrated dance setting we cannot take for granted faculties such as carrying weight, doing lifts, conducting floor work, walking on two legs, and being able to sense touch through the whole body, we might also be called to question common associations of the disabled body as fragile and vulnerable, something that needs to be treated with caution. Therefore, dancers working together in integrated dance *must* communicate their specific abilities and explore their range and possibilities of movement together. In other words, integrated work invites hesitancy; a suspension of what we take for granted.

Aspects of study and exploration were present in my research observations in the dance studio and in the classroom. In 2015, I watched three new dancers in an American integrated modern dance company studying a work that had been created a year before for two nondisabled dancers and a wheelchair user dancer. Learning this piece posed a challenge to the new trio, since Dwayne, the wheelchair user dancer, had a different type of injury from the dancer he replaced, in a different location in the spine, which meant that Dwayne's range of movement, the body parts he moves, the way he uses the chair, and the body parts in which he has sensation are different. Dwayne sits in the chair differently, stretches his arms differently from the original dancer, and has a different aesthetics of the fingers, arms, and shoulders. While watching them I wrote in my field journal: "When Dwayne opens his arms and does the sequence of movements, he can't stretch his fingers into straight lines, and all of a sudden the shoulders get the focus. The folding fingers bring new aesthetics to the piece, and his movement from the shoulder, through the arm, to the fingertips, creates whole worlds of meaning with a new nature and quality." The specific ways Dwayne moves required the new dancers to re-explore, "to solve", as they put it, how to travel on stage and to partner.

Another instance in which dynamics of exploration and study came to the fore occurred in the classroom, in one of my observations in an Israeli year-long, school-based project in which 16-year-old high school dance students met once a week with a group of disabled youth from the same city, to create an integrated dance piece they performed at the end of the year. In a workshop dedicated to what one of the teachers, who uses a wheelchair, called "a sharing-weight laboratory," groups of students, each including one student with a disability, explored different techniques of tilting, and of giving and sharing weight, and maintaining balance. The students carefully investigated what their bodies could do together, how their different centers of gravity could meet,

and how to use their bodies and equipment to create balance and weight-sharing possibilities in space. The teachers explained that the goal was not to create the highest lift or the fanciest position, but to explore and “expand their movement options” by learning and exploring the essence of pushing, pulling, falling, and leaning among different bodies, becoming aware of the tonus of the body, of angles, intentions, and momentum. In my field journal I described: “In this class the students’ bodies become tangled. An entanglement of balances, connections, points of touch, weights, is created. Creative structures of balance are formed as bodies move along. There’s joy of creativity and exploration in the room. Structures of shared effort and bodies.”

Embodied Awareness

The second dynamic that constitutes dialogical encounters and self-reflection in integrated dance is the development and expansion of participants’ embodied and kinesthetic awareness. Susie, a nondisabled dancer, described the new techniques she developed by working with someone different from herself: “Depending on who you're working with, you pick up different skills [...] Working with... someone who works in a wheelchair, you just have these moments of pivots and swooshes and you can try to replicate them in your own body ... and if you're the kind of person who is interested in picking up bits from other people, it's such a rich pool of information.”

Participants’ kinaesthetic awareness is expended in integrated dance not only to new movement possibilities but also to a discovery of the art of stillness and small movements. In the school project I described earlier, for example, the choreography for the end of the year performance was based mainly on the movement of folding and stretching the hand. The two teachers deconstructed the movement to its smallest segments, and asked the students to explore the simplicity of taking the hand to the side

and stretching it forward. The students practiced a new awareness of the ways body parts like the chin, the forehead, and the ears could lead the movement, and the ways small gestures of the head and hands may receive beauty and richness. “I discovered the beauty of simplicity,” one of the dance students told me when I asked about what she learned in the workshop. “I discovered that lack of movement is not the opposite of movement,” another commented. “You can also move when you're still, through breathing and touch. And to use each other's body as a source of inspiration.”⁸

An expansion of participants' embodied and kinesthetic awareness takes place in integrated dance also through a practice called “translation”- an adaptation of movement from one body type to another, and its translation to varied forms of movement. The practice of translation involves distilling the essence of a movement, and then translating its essence to different locations, body parts, and ways of moving. For instance, the translation of the movement called in contact improvisation ‘starfish,’ which includes a contraction and opening of the body, like a starfish, focuses on the principles of expansion and contraction. One participant, therefore, may contract and stretch the entire body, another the hands, and another one the eyes only.⁹

⁸ Participants' discovery and new awareness of the value and artistic possibilities of small gestures, of shaking, and of floor work, are important not only in order to enlarge participants' embodied awareness, but also in order to challenge ideological, cultural, and kinesthetic structures of power in dance and in the everyday life that are based on verticality, phallic, speed, and virtuosity. Bodily awareness created in integrated dance continues the critique started in 1980s by dancers, choreographers, and artists who challenged the political ontology of dance by performances of stillness and slowness, performances that included crawling, and non-vertical walking (Lepecki, 2006). For an additional discussion on this matter, see: Wood's (2012) writing on “critical spatial practice.”

⁹ The term “translation” is used by practitioners in the field, and I find it very meaningful, since it brings into a shared space the somatic and the semiotic. Quinlan, and Harter (2010) in their article on the integrated ballet company Dancing Wheels mention this term as used in this company. For additional discussion of what I call

Rethinking Disability

The third dynamic dialogical encounters in integrated dance are based on, is a change in perspective regarding disability that emphasizes a spectrum of abilities rather than lack of skills, rethinking disability outside the normalizing ideology. In this regard, disabled dancers emphasized the ways working in an integrated setting, and having disability valued within a non-hierarchical structure, changed their view of their bodies. Nondisabled dancers also talked about how they came to see disability differently because of the integrated work, becoming much more aware of issues of accessibility, for instance, and to the stigmatic ways disability is treated.

Change in disabled dancers' perspectives came up in my interview with Hailey, a dancer who was born with a disability that affects bone development. "I had a very narrow definition of who dance was for - who people would want to watch dance," she said. Hearing for most of her life messages emphasizing what she *can't* do, and internalizing ideas such as, "my body doesn't fit in," "my body has pain," "my body looks different than everyone else's," Hailey spent "many years trying not to listen to my body." "I just wanted to be as normal as possible," she said, "I didn't want to be different, I didn't want everything to be harder." With this as her background, watching and participating in an integrated dance program was very meaningful, offering her a lens which suggested that "disability can be cool, and athletic, and dynamic." Integrated dance not only offered Hailey a different way of approaching disability, but also legitimized her way of moving. "I can get out of my chair, I can't walk, but I can crawl; and I can kind of walk up-right on my knees. [But] being a woman, get[ting] a little older and as a pre-teenager, you want to be cool, and you want to fit in, and you

"sensory translation" and the way this term is used by anthropologist, see: Hammer, 2017.

want to feel pretty, and sexy, you don't want to crawl around on the ground [...] And so [integrated dance] was really inspiring to me, to explore more of how I can move and what I can do.”

Conclusion

Following the call of disability studies in education for an interdisciplinary expansion of policy, theory, research, and practice that takes disability beyond the “monopoly” (Connor 2012) of special education, my research addresses integrated dance education as a platform with the potential to create a rare form of quality provision, an inclusive education that promotes a meaningful dialogue among participants of all abilities. Within these environments, disability is understood and expressed not as a deficit or insufficiency, but as an additional human experience; as such, all participants can engage in the activity as full members and expand their bodily and kinesthetic awareness. This context is important, since the typical social encounter with disability asks to normalize it into the normative social order, in which disability is a liminal category located between death and health (Garland-Thomson, 1997; Hughes, 1999; Snyder and Mitchell, 2006), or in Mary Douglas’ (1966) terms, “a matter out of place.” Examining the rich mosaic of gestures, movements, and motions in integrated dance indicates the ways physical and symbolic space may bring together different worlds of being not only through a discourse of rights or access but also through an alternative conceptualization of bodily experiences. If we go back to Nili Broyer’s (2017) term I mentioned earlier, integrated dance is not a “dis-dance” but a type of art that takes its inspiration from the disabled body, or in this case, from the meeting between different bodies, through an experimental, critical, somatic listening.

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