

# REFOCUSING DANCE EDUCATION

## INTERVIEW INSIGHTS



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THIS RESEARCH WAS  
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**COVER IMAGE:** Group of dancers with and without disabilities outside facing away from the camera pointing with their arm and finger extended to upper right corner (Photo taken by Silva Laukkanen. Image courtesy of Art Spark Texas.)

## PREFACE

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This project originated many years ago from a growing personal awareness about the lack of dance education programming for dancers with disabilities. Through my own work, I saw clearly that before even reaching college-level training programs, youth with disabilities have very limited opportunities to access and participate in the same quality and variety of dance training that able-bodied children and teens do. Because of this, dance instructors with disabilities face disproportionate structural barriers to becoming educators. And if they do manage to break through those barriers, then they will continue to meet the additional challenges of not being able to access pedagogies that have been developed specifically by disabled dancers themselves. These pedagogies deeply consider – from a place of personal experience – accessibility and education in a radically inclusive way that enables the creation of training spaces for all bodies and people.

For too long, disabled dancers and dance educators have been left out of national conversations around training, educational opportunities, and professional development of dancers. Art Spark Texas saw this gap in dance education programs, combined with a lack of acknowledgement of it in national conversations, and sought to do something about it. Ultimately, Art Spark Texas knows that the solution to the challenges at hand lies in the hearts and minds of those multi-marginalized dancers that are most impacted by current barriers. The conversations captured in this report were the first steps taken in the process of understanding what a professional gathering around educational opportunities for dancers with disabilities could be. Through these conversations, dancers with disabilities wrestled both individually and collectively with the question of how to intentionally and thoughtfully gather together, and to begin setting down the guiding principles upon which future events will be founded.

Silva Laukkanen  
Director of Integrated Dance  
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# INTRODUCTION



**IMAGE:** An older, nondisabled white man, stands with his back to the camera wearing a black sleeveless shirt and black pants. In a line that spans the photo from left to right, dancers of various embodiments are facing Douglas, listening to his instructions – including one canine assistant. (Photo taken by Ute Haufe. Image courtesy of MeetShareDance.)



# THE TASK OF GATHERING

In an era of tremendous historical change, we find ourselves in a moment where, both individually and collectively, we're being asked to examine many of our core assumptions. This is as true within our communities and professions as it is within our world at large. It is during this time that we're called to reposition ourselves by finding new, emergent understandings of the world at large, and how we live, relate, and belong differently within this new world. At the core of this larger exploration is the central question, "How do we gather?"

This question of gathering has been the refrain to which we returned to again and again as we began our research to better understand how Art Spark Texas could create a professional gathering on dance education specifically for the Deaf and Disability communities in the United States. Our core questions were both pragmatic (Where should we gather? Who should be there? How should the gathering be structured?), and theoretical (*What defines the dance and disability communities today? What are the enabling and dis-enabling environments in which dance education opportunities unfold? How can concerns around justice and equity be centered within the work?*).

This report details both the methods and the insights that surfaced within these conversations. It is organized by first introducing the larger questions that people wrestle with in their day to day work as dancers and educators (*What does it mean to be a professional dancer? How does my artist work reflect and expand upon the larger field of dance? How do we understand*

*this historic moment we're experiencing?*). The second part of the report details the range of ideas that people brought forward around the gathering itself.

Though it would be wrong to say that there was a consensus around any of the topics that emerged during the research interviews, it is fair to say that there was an energy and an excitement about where the field of dance education is at this time for Deaf and Disability communities. After many decades of ground-breaking work by founders of the field, a new generation of dancers and dance educators is emerging. The question that still remains, and which the future gathering will explore, is how the larger field can ensure their ultimate success.



**IMAGE:** Dancers with and without disabilities sitting in a circle, listening to one person within the circle. People are sitting on the concrete floor, on risers, or on chairs and wheelchairs. (Photo taken by James Wilkus. Image courtesy of Art Spark Texas.)

# RESEARCH METHODS

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## PROTOCOL CREATION PROCESS

With the overall goal of the gathering focused on advancing access to dance education for people with disabilities, the supporting research looked to identify different frameworks currently held in the minds of different practitioners. Specifically, the research looked to understand current thinking around:

- Pedagogical practices;
- Disability culture itself; and
- The current state of critical conversations taking place within the field.

To support these goals, the process of gathering information was structured around a series of interviews that took a Grounded Theory approach towards the construction of knowledge. This approach requires that any understanding of key concepts – and the key concepts themselves – need to emerge from conversations with individuals within the community, before consulting any theoretical or secondary source work done within the field.

A semi-structured interview protocol was constructed (see the Appendix), and one-hour conversations were set up with interviewees. During these conversations, the protocol was generally followed, but emerging conversations were also followed and allowed to expand in order to surface new understandings.

## INTERVIEWEE SELECTION

Interviewees were selected based on their work within the field (either as an educator, a dancer, or an administrator) and the group as a whole was assessed to ensure a as broad range of perspectives as possible in terms of race, ethnicity, age, geography, and gender spectrum.

## CODING PROCESS

Upon completion, each interview recording was uploaded to a transcription software and reviewed alongside the audio for transcription accuracy. Transcriptions were then transferred to a coding database, where initial coding took place. Questions from the interview protocol were identified from the outset (see appendices: Round-One Coding) and combined with emergent coding that identified recurring themes related to the field of integrated, disabled, and Deaf dance education, as well as ideas and suggestions related to the gathering specifically. After the first round (Round-One) of coding was complete, a second round (Round-Two) of coding was conducted to review earlier transcripts for themes that emerged in later stages of Round-One coding. It was also used to document emergent themes and sub-themes that expanded on Round-One codes (see appendices: Round-Two Coding). These new sub-themes were derived through conversations between the planning team regarding the interviews.



# PROJECT ADVISORY GROUP

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Like good community-engagement efforts, good qualitative research is centered on feedback cycles where gathered information can be confirmed or edited as needed by the participants who help to generate the information. To ensure that this summary of the interview findings truly reflected the thoughts held within the field of dance and disability education, the planning team called together a five member Project Advisory Group made up of key interviewees who represented a wide range of positions within the field.

Advisors were chosen based on their ability to speak about the challenges and opportunities for different sub-communities found within the dance and disability field of practice including BIPOC, Deafness, Vision Impaired, LGBTQ+, and those that are multi-marginalized.

On-going work with all participants will continue in the lead-up to the professional gathering and conversations will help to shape and form the different sessions.

**IMAGE:** Dancers hold hands in a circle. Some are standing up, others are sitting in wheelchairs or on the wooden floor of the studio. Some of the dancers who are standing are in a wide stance, connecting the circle across a larger gap than others. (Photo taken by Blake Nellis. Image courtesy of Young Dance.)





# INSIGHTS INTO THE FIELD OF INCLUSIVE DANCE EDUCATION

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**IMAGE:** A dancer holds her arms over her head in an arc shape while sitting in her wheelchair. There are straps across her body holding her to the chair. Her gaze is directed downward as light from a window shines directly on her. *(Photo taken by Blake Nellis. Image courtesy of Young Dance.)*





# ADVISORY GROUP MEETINGS

## FIRST MEETING

The first meeting of the Advisory Group explored how the world of dance and disability thinks about itself internally and in juxtaposition to the “traditional” and “institutional” side of the dance world. Although disability dance has ties to the traditional dance world, Advisors agreed that it expands access to dance and creativity more broadly in several essential ways. From a pedagogical standpoint, the world of disabled and integrated dance inherently and critically recognizes accessibility and intersectional justice in a way that the traditional dance world has not, and in some cases, actively pushes back against. One of the key ideas that was discussed was how important it is to open up intentionally undefined, and unresolved conversations about what integrated and disabled dance is or could be. The intention would be to hold open the possibility of conceptualizing the field of practice completely separately from the traditional dance world. Free of constraints from the traditional dance world, integrated and disabled dance could occupy a space where dancers and educators can discuss their access needs openly, and have them met by those around them. This conversation was more focused on exploring the ways in which integrated and disabled dance could serve accessibility and intersectional justice more fully – pushing the edges of possibility as opposed to inserting boundaries.



**IMAGE:** Many dancers stretching and moving in a large dance studio space. Some dancers are laying on the floor, others are crouched or bent over in fluid movement, and others are moving in wheelchairs or sitting in chairs. (Photo taken by Merry Lynn Morris. Image courtesy of Art Spark Texas.)

## SECOND MEETING

The second convening of the Advisory Group honed in on what it means to gather in today's world. The conversation started on how to reconceptualize the ways in which people occupy their creative spaces and relationships. As discussed in the previous meeting, the world of traditional dance does not thoughtfully engage accessibility and intersectional justice in the ways that the disability dance world does. Therefore, to have a gathering centered on Deaf and disabled dance educators, access needs to be created in a circle of trust between all who participate. This new system of relationships would come with an understanding that access needs are and will be respected and therefore encouraged to be shared. To create a community of access intimacy, Advisors suggested that a dedicated, access-needs team at a gathering for Deaf and disabled dance educators would be essential. There was also support for a pre-gathering training or tone-setting, to call participants in and set collective expectations for the gathering. Emotional support systems, in the form of affinity group circles, in the access-needs team, or having the option to step away from the gathering, would also be an asset to creating a safe space for all. Additionally, the group considered practical barriers to participation including employment responsibilities, physical and mental health

needs, and restrictions on travel. Satisfying these various access needs would be critical to having full, embodied, and present participation from those who attend this future gathering. However, the Advisors shared that even with all of these structures in place, they still fear that they might not be enough to alleviate all potential harms that would need to be mitigated to create an ideally safe and creative space.

Within the group, there was significant support for a hybrid professional gathering by hosting both in-person and online options. This raised many questions about how online participation would be valued and in relationship – or not – with in-person activities. Playing with the concept of time for a gathering was also proposed; that the potential to gather people across a longer period of time than a few days or weeks would open up new opportunities for participation and creativity.

Most importantly, the Advisory Group felt that it would be essential for a gathering on dance and disability, Deaf, and disability dance to center and uplift voices of multi-marginalized individuals by having them lead conversations, workshops, or trainings within the context of this gathering.



# THIS HISTORICAL MOMENT

The work to create the gathering is happening during a time of historic shifts. The COVID-19 pandemic has shifted society in tangible and unforeseen ways and the racial reckoning that emerged during the same time has also had significant impact within the field, as within the rest of society. As with all times of historic shifts, **our time in history** is one where we are unsure about how society will change and what direction it will go. One understanding that began to emerge before the pandemic, and which is even more deeply held now, is that the arts can foster powerful connections between and among communities. As a fully embodied practice, dance in particular is well-posed as a creative medium to communicate the struggles, questions, and joys of our time while helping to build the types of inclusive practices that are needed to move into a yet-unknown future. The dancers we interviewed believe in this potential. They recognize that the field of dance and dance education itself is actively wrestling with the systems of thinking and practice in which it is embedded in order to devise new ways of practice that are truly inclusive and representative of all bodies and all dancers.

The interviewees expressed their feeling that **this time in history** is one where we can expand our definitions of dance itself, as well as what accessibility means within this expanded definition. Many conversations focused on the **intersectional dimensions of justice** in the field today, and the way it involves a heightened awareness of how ableism, racism, classism, and sexism impact how, where, and to what extent dancers are offered opportunities for expression.

## ON HISTORY

“What I’m witnessing is that there is an undercurrent in our field that is slowly becoming a roar. There is greater action around incorporating a disability justice framework that doesn’t just center Whiteness and the single issue of disability rights. It’s a collective push for realizing equity not just in terms of disabled / non-disabled, but recognizing everyone as a whole person. It was Audre Lorde who said, “We do not live single-issue lives.” I think that’s what’s been missing for the past several decades. In my experience, this field mostly highlights only disability. While that’s very important and valid, we also need to realize that disability is inseparably entwined with other aspects of people’s identities and oppression: for example, some folks are trans, or people of color, as well as being disabled. That’s what I’m witnessing – this is a point of reckoning for our field.”

## ON INTERSECTIONAL JUSTICE

“The Covid-19 pandemic combined with the racial reckoning catalyzed by the murder of George Floyd, the uncertain stability of democracy, and the crisis of climate change require us to think about how we are all connected and interdependent. We need to rethink the value of a human life, not in terms of our productivity, but in terms of the way we create a better world together. The arts give us resources to envision the world(s) we want to live in, to disrupt the status quo, and to find new ways to be together.”

**ON REPRESENTATION**

“I believe that physically integrated dance and inclusive dance is really the future. It’s helped me better understand my body in relation to other bodies in space and treating everyone – and their bodies – with autonomy. I think we’re in a very different time in which we’re continually questioning our roles in dance, like who gets to dance, and in what ways can dance be more inclusive? It has to do with representation as well. I think we have a huge responsibility to include voices that have yet to be heard.”

**ON LANGUAGE**

“You know, even saying ‘disabled dancer’ and putting ‘disabled’ first is new for me. I’m so used to using people-first language and advocating for disability in other contexts. Really, the language reflects where we are all at with our own identities.”

These structural systems are also embedded in the ways curriculums are – or are not – designed and companies themselves are run. Many respondents voiced the thought that addressing these constructs from a pedagogical perspective requires embracing dancers in their entirety prior to instructing them about a specific movement.

Additionally, for many interviewees, **turning towards issues of representation** in inclusive dance education is critical if the larger field is to address the injustices it currently wrestles with. Those we spoke with made it clear that inclusive dance education needs to have people who are Deaf, physically disabled, or mentally disabled at its helm. To many, representation is about seeing all bodies and abilities as valid and valued in the classroom, studio, and stage, as well as in positions of power: specifically as the instructor. It also means seeing racially diverse dancers who embody different gender identities, ranges of motion, and cognitive abilities. Overwhelmingly, interviewees thought these various and intersecting identities needed to be centered in order to create dance curriculums that are representative and inclusive.

Many interviewees also highlighted the fact that communication about issues of justice and representation in the field are not uniform across the discipline. While many of the dancers and dance educators hold the values of accessibility and inclusivity at their core, the way they are discussed or named is a sensitive matter. Many expressed that **holding an awareness of language** in the field of inclusive dance requires that dancers and educators be open to learning and honoring what preferences their colleagues have when it comes to naming their identities and pedagogical orientations, while also maintaining an orientation of forgiveness when unintended misunderstandings arise.

# THIS MOMENT WITHIN THE FIELD

With an understanding that we are living in an historic moment, the dancers and dance educators we spoke with recognized that there is a wide range of viewpoints on where the inclusive dance community is today. One particular tension within the field revolves around the idea of **what constitutes professionalism.** Some dancers and dance educators hold onto **traditional dance methods** as foundation stones of professionalism. Yet others see this view as enabling structures and systems that contradict the current movement towards justice in inclusive dance. These individuals see “professional” dance as a term used to uphold **ableism** and **institutional hierarchies.** Concurrently, many dancers also identify as a “professional dancer” when they speak about the amount of time they have put into their training, potentially signifying that dance is their full-time job.



## ON TRADITIONAL DANCE METHODS

“In concert dance practices within physically integrated dance, I see – and a lot of the time I think it’s unintentional – a lack of a critical lens being applied to the practices, and at the same time, a leaning into preexisting practices or aesthetic values. Which doesn’t actually shift the paradigm toward greater equity and justice nearly as far as I think a lot of our community thinks it does.”

## ON ABLEISM

“I think what holds the field back from being accepted on a professional level is the general ableism of our society, which believes that a disabled person can’t be a dancer.”

## ON INSTITUTIONAL HIERARCHIES

“I don’t care about the mainstream success story. A lot of the things that get held up as ‘success,’ it turns out, I’m not interested in. They’re not what matters. I’m interested in spending time with people who are working in dance and disability without the intention of having success look like a non-disabled dance company. There are some companies that I have not worked with and will not work with because their goal is a non-disabled company aesthetic that filters down to how they structure rehearsals, how they treat their dancers, how they handle contracts, all the way down. I’m interested in people who aren’t doing that, who are doing weird community work but also still looking at technique and how we’re teaching it.”

**IMAGE:** Two dancers are balancing on one foot together, creating a balanced duet. One dancer holds the leg of the other who has extended his leg backwards. His body is tilted forward so the leg his dance partner is holding is aligned with his torso. His arm extends forward. Both dancers wear loose-fitting clothes. (Photo taken by Leon Alessi. Image courtesy of Art Spark Texas.)



### ON "PROFESSIONALISM"

"I consider the dance world to be going through both an awakening and rebirth at the same time right now. Across the board, we're having this moment of, 'Oh, this thing we've been doing, we thought it worked. And it's not working.' So within the ballet world specifically, there's been a lot of realizing and owning of the fact that a lot of the dances that are considered historical and traditional are deeply rooted in racism and are horribly inaccessible, and that we're harming our dancers by forcing them to adhere to unsustainable practices within their bodies."

### ON PERFORMANCE

"I'm working with teachers and choreographers to think about how to create alternatives when you need them. To communicate what is actually trying to be done – how it should be done; what parts of it matter – instead of, 'A leap looks like this, and you do it by looking like this,' which is a circular method that doesn't work very well. So how do you find ways to develop technique when the technique is being done differently?"

### ON SHARED SPACE

"Part of what I see is that dancers with disabilities are saying [to non-disabled dancers, educators, and companies], 'You need to see us. You need to include us. And you need to let us participate,' And so the non-disabled dance world said, 'Okay, we can do that; but only you few who are really exceptional.'"

"When the teacher is more of a facilitator, they learn that each child has their own learning style. It's the same with movement – every person has their own movement. It doesn't have to be danced at all. It's phenomenal that you can just teach movement to other people."

Though interviewee's efforts to **define professionalism** within the field focused around many of the aesthetic and subjective dimensions of practice, there were a number of other markers of professionalism that contributed to the different perspectives on defining the idea within the field of dance.

For many, the practice of dance itself is oriented to a performance mindset, in which dancers train and instructors teach for the purpose of presenting a rehearsed dance in a concert setting. Many dancers and dance educators value this tradition in the field and maintain it as their motivation to continue creating, although they recognized that traditional concert performances can set up environments that embrace ableist and normative values of what beauty, technique, and achievement are within the field. Another viewpoint brought forward by interviewees was that of disinterest in the role of performance. These dancers and educators preferred sharing out their creative processes more so than a finished piece. Exploring new **definitions of performance**, particularly with an intersectional social justice lens, is something many dancers and educators expressed a desire for in their work.

One example that several interviewees shared about evolving dance pedagogy was in the ways that improvisational dance enabled the creation of **shared space** and movement. By creating this communal space, the practices opened doors for disabled and Deaf dancers to dance in a form where they are not required to move or perform in any traditional sense, but rather to move in ways their bodies were able to in that moment.

# ACHIEVEMENTS AND OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN THE FIELD

## ON FIELD ACHIEVEMENTS OVER TIME

“In the world of dance 20-some years ago, there were some companies that were like, ‘Oh yeah, the disabled folks, they’re over there doing that and that’s nice.’ Now, it’s much more assumed. Not across the whole field, but there’s so many more dancers with disabilities who are active and prominent in doing their thing. Neurodiversity has become a common term that people talk about a lot. Diversity has shifted a good deal, but there’s still so much ground to cover. But there’s more of an opening now and it’s not the same battle it used to be. Even to admit that perhaps dancers don’t all have to look alike. And perhaps they don’t all have to move in a similar way. Those discussions are happening and people are questioning, which I think is good.”

**IMAGE:** Four people sitting in a line, laughing, while participating in a group conversation. Three of them are sitting on folding chairs, one is in a wheelchair. (Image courtesy of Heidi Latsky Dance and Young Audiences Arts for Learning.)



Those who have been involved long-term in the field of dance education relayed how they have seen opportunities for inclusive dancers grow over the past several decades, and certainly since the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990. Dancers and dance educators that we interviewed expressed a desire for a documented history of the field and the instructors, institutions, and ideas that have propelled it forward. Because the history of the field has been so fragmented and individualized by person and company, the place for exchange of this knowledge has been bound up in individuals, rather than shared within a collective. These **achievements in the field over time** have been built upon by new generations to inform what is **important in the field today**: a celebration of diverse bodies moving together. All those who were interviewed expressed this value in some way. Ultimately, dancers and dance educators want to create a space where they are able to create without judgment, fear, or limitations. Deaf, physically disabled, and dancers with intellectual and developmental disabilities who were interviewed shared that they find dance liberating because of how it accepts and endorses their individuality and uniqueness.



**IMAGE:** Set in a dance studio with light gray marley dance flooring and wall-to-wall mirrors at their backs, six dancers with and without disabilities are seated or standing in their most vertical positions with both arms stretched wide. The two “stand up” dancers without visible disabilities and four “sit down” dancers using manual wheelchairs are of various ethnic backgrounds, and all are wearing athletic dance clothing of varying colors and styles. (Photo taken by Sara Lawrence-Sucato. Image courtesy of Dancing Wheels Company.)

Greater participation in and representation within the field has come from the expansion of inclusive dance curriculums. **Thoughts on dance pedagogy** today are rooted in **intersectional justice**, although the distinctive ways individual instructors and dancers go about this work is highly influenced by their own bodies and experiences. Many instructors disclosed that ultimately, their goal with teaching inclusive dance is to create a space where their dancers are free to move and express in the ways their bodies and minds do in order to find greater connection to themselves and others. Ultimately, these efforts were viewed as being deeply context-dependent. For any education to create **accessible** spaces, interviewees felt they had to make decisions and create opportunities based on the dancers who were in the room. With practices based so much in the specific nature of individual environments, interviewees talked time and again about how their primary **pedagogical desire at this moment in time** is to learn from and draw inspiration from other instructors.

**ON IMPORTANCE IN THE FIELD TODAY**

“I am interested in creating atmospheres where every person in the room feels pure pride, self-dignity, and value for who they are exactly how they are. That nobody has to change to be better. Nobody has to make a change to improve themselves. There’s a basic nature that’s accessible that can be experienced. I think a lot of what we want and need we already are, but we have been taught to be separated and isolated from it, from ourselves. So how can we bring some of that fragmentation together so that we can have a sense of value, worth, dignity, and joy?”

**ON PEDAGOGY IN THE FIELD TODAY**

“Something that I sit with a lot in the field is who’s excluded from the conversation? And what does our framing imply about who’s invited in? I feel like education can be a slippery slope in that department because there can be a lot of intellectual elitism, especially in places where it skews towards educators and professors, or an academic lens. And so having mindfulness around that feels important.”



# NEEDS AND OBSTACLES

The most pressing obstacle for inclusive dance education is **access to resources**. Far and away, the greatest resource dance educators need at this time is **access to educational training**. Broadly, this means more exposure to other instructors' curriculums, techniques, and pedagogies towards dance education for the dancers they work with. Dance educators are yearning for more information about how to design curriculum for a wide range of dancers. Depending on if a dancer has a physical disability, cognitive disability, is Deaf, the accessibility considerations for their dance curriculum may be drastically different. No one template for accessibility will work for all spaces, but the field to date has not developed a central platform for sharing accessibility considerations or teaching techniques for educators to access. For this reason, it has been difficult to track and share emergent approaches to inclusive dance. Additionally, it has made it difficult to train new instructors, particularly **those who do not have personal lived experience with disability or Deafness** who could greatly benefit from the perspective of disabled dance instructors themselves.

## ON FUNDING

**“Speaking as a non-disabled individual, I think there is a missed opportunity in understanding that you don’t have to be disabled to experience ableism. I think broadly, the accepted definition of ableism deals with outright discrimination based on disability. But I’m trying to encourage people to think of ableism more broadly in terms of product or affect, like how we view racism or sexism. Not just as outright discrimination, but also as a system that produces differential outcomes.”**

## ON ACCESS TO EDUCATIONAL TRAINING

**“I see people wanting and liking the idea of change and inclusivity, but the problem is training. We were having mixed ability and physically integrated dance classes but the teachers weren’t trained. They had no idea how to include someone with a disability. And that’s not to say it’s not hard or an adjustment. But this training needs to be more accessible.”**



**IMAGE:** Several dancers – differently aged, some in wheelchairs and some on their feet – are positioned in a group, rehearsing in a dance studio. Many of them have their arms extended out to each side of them and look forward. The space they are in is dark, so the lighting highlights their bodies. (Image courtesy of REVolutions Dance Company.)

**Disabled and Deaf instructors** repeatedly mentioned in interviews that they often feel as if they are carrying themselves through their education and learning in the field due to a lack of **educational training** and **accessibility accommodations** within **traditional dance spaces**. And since **representation** in the field for different disabilities continues to be weak, many dancers and instructors are constrained to create techniques and curriculums in isolation.

A final, consistent obstacle in the field is a lack of **funding** for dancers and dance organizations to do inclusive work. With more funding, interviewees mentioned it would increase their flexibility as organizations and individuals, allow them to employ more dancers, bolster administrative capacity, invest in more accessibility accommodations, and support curriculum development for educators. Many also felt that they were oftentimes competing with traditional dance companies and dancers for funding.

**ON SPECIFIC OBSTACLES FOR DISABLED DANCERS & EDUCATORS**

“I would love to explore in greater depth the scarcity of training spaces for disabled dancers. How do we rebuild or change existing training spaces? There is a fundamental fact that not enough spaces exist, in addition to the fact that once we [disabled dancers] do enter professional dance settings – especially settings alongside non-disabled dancers – there’s a disparity in the training of the disabled dancers and the non-disabled dancer. So what’s the reconciliation of that in a professional space? And how much time will that reconciliation take?”

**ON FUNDING**

“What we’ve been struggling with is funding. I can’t ask a disabled artist to come in and do what I do without a salary. I can’t ask someone to come in and mentor – learn to do what I do – and train them to take over the company when I can’t pay them to do so.”

**IMAGE:** Dwayne Scheuneman, a white-presenting man with a shaved head who is a wheelchair user, poses and points towards the camera with children from Glenn View Elementary school in Oakland, CA. (Image courtesy of AXIS Dance Company with dancer Dwayne Scheunemen and students from Glen View Elementary in Oakland, CA.)





# THOUGHTS ON A PROFESSIONAL GATHERING

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**IMAGE:** Three dancers laying on a curved, wooden ramp. Two are closer to the floor and another holds on to the top part of the ramp and is positioned higher up. (Photo taken by James Wilkus. Image courtesy of Art Spark Texas.)



# ATMOSPHERE OF THE GATHERING

## VIBE

When considering the most important aspects of a gathering focused on expanding access to inclusive dance education, respondents were very attuned to the ways that this diverse group could come together. The emotional state and general atmosphere of the gathering – **the overall vibe** – was consistently brought up. Many relayed that dance is about so much more than the dancing itself and rests heavily on the relationships, respect, and dignity of everyone in a room. Attendees hope that the atmosphere of the event could create a container for camaraderie and comfort within the group. Generating a **sense of community** through a unifying experience was often offered as a particular approach that organizers could take.

### ON THE CONFERENCE VIBE & COMMUNITY

“I’ve been with the dancers for so long, we’ve all been so connected in so many ways, it’s been about more than dance. It’s become so important to see how we could all continue to be together through this time.”

“I want to come away with a feeling of support. In the arts world, there’s this sense of competition, a sense of, ‘This is mine, I’m going to keep it to myself,’ rather than, ‘This is for everyone.’ I feel like some people in the field think that it’s either / or.”

## FEELINGS

Interviewees expressed that they would like to feel a **sense of openness** at the gathering to share ideas, techniques, and experiences. People want to feel like they are in a safe, **shared space** that brings them together and makes them feel like they belong despite individual differences. Some dancers and educators, particularly those with physical disabilities, remarked having felt under a spotlight at times when they attend events or enter a new group setting. There is also a desire to **feel challenged** at the gathering, whether that be physically, technically, or mentally. They also want to feel a **sense of movement in the field**, and that after the event, they are able to leave with a better sense of where the field of inclusive dance education is headed. All of these feelings point to a need to be nourished in multiple ways through coming together around an art form they love.

### ON FEELINGS AT THE CONFERENCE

“What I want to go home with from the conference is having got what I always want, which is why I dance: I want to learn how to relate better to any person that’s in front of me. I want to learn how to connect with anybody. I want to learn how to stay present with people I want to know. I want to facilitate community and communication. And I want to be with other people who want that too.”

ON HOPES FOR THE CONFERENCE

“I was trying to get everybody to put our energy into people who are miles away. I was trying to create this huge sphere. I thought it was really powerful and it brought me back to the thought that so many people with disabilities are confined to their homes and physical limits. Being able to break down and dismantle that through this energy was really cool for me.”

ON CONFERENCE FEARS

“The first thing I thought of was something that’s fully accessible. But there’s always going to be a limitation. Somebody might not be technically savvy enough to get on a computer and join virtually, or someone may not be able to get to some place because of time, or might not be able to get into the physical building. There’s always the question of ‘How can we do this dancing thing better?’ because we get to know each other and learn how to best do whatever an individual needs to contribute.”

“I always hope to come away feeling like it was a conference that was really planned for me, with people like me in mind; and that I really got something out of it. I cannot tell you how many conferences I’ve gone to and it’s been disappointing. For a lot of years, I was the only one in a wheelchair for one thing. Disability was so off the map and I always had to bring it up and be that person in the room. Now, that’s changed some.”

## HOPES

Dancers and educators hope to come away from this gathering with a sense that they are **connected to others** in the inclusive dance education field. They hope to maintain these bonds over time and continue them once the event itself is over. Many also hope to have questions that they bring to the gathering answered or in some way responded to upon leaving. Interviewees hoped that they could find professional **opportunities and networks** for their own dancers at this type of gathering. They felt that having greater access to a network of dancers, educators, and pedagogies would improve both what they deliver to their students and how they set them up for the future.

## FEARS

The most prevalent fear about attending a gathering for this community revolves around **accessibility**. Many interviewees asked the question: “Accessible for who?”. This question was one that disabled and Deaf dancers continually responded with during the interviews, knowing well that what is accessible for one individual may not be for the next. Many pointed to the need to **ask the right questions beforehand**, so that attendees need not be worried about entering an ableist environment at the event. Another central concern for interviewees was a potential **lack of diversity** in attendees. Ensuring a broad range of representation among Deafness and disability was a critical concern. Engaging with a **range of voices**, rather than a coveted few is also something attendees would prefer; harkening back to their feelings and hopes for the event. Some dancers and educators also worried that this professional gathering might focus too heavily on improv dance and not hold enough space for sharing specific techniques.



# LOCATION & FORM

## ON THE CONFERENCE LOCATION

“I’m imagining a physical space. I arrive, and there’s a thoughtful spatial design that could support how to physically get myself to where I need to be. I don’t feel singled out. I’m imagining a space where there’s multiple ways of receiving information.”

## ON A HYBRID CONFERENCE MODEL

“Given the current state of existence right now, I would lean more towards a virtual conference being primary. And then having smaller pockets elsewhere so that everything can happen at the same time. Those that are able to travel or willing to travel can do so. But for me, I’ve never been to a dance conference until they started being online, because I could never get there. It was either I couldn’t afford to travel, I couldn’t physically get to the space – it was an inaccessible location – or just my health wasn’t up for it that week. So I would suggest, if possible, prioritizing virtual space so that it is as inclusive and accessible as possible.”

## POTENTIAL LOCATION

Within the interviews, there was no uniform consensus about what an ideal **location** could be for the gathering. Most everyone expressed the desire for the event to take place in a space that has a wide range of **accessibility accommodations**, or that can be retrofitted to accommodate them. A few interviewees remarked that an aesthetically beautiful space would be inspiring to those who attended. Due to COVID-19 concerns, a number of people mentioned the need for a large space, to maintain social distancing and other safety measures if need be.

## SUPPORT FOR A HYBRID GATHERING

Wide-ranging support was voiced for having some element or option for this gathering to be held online. Many interviewees shared that expanding online offerings had improved their ability to attend or participate in group activities, particularly during COVID. It was recognized that an online or hybrid event would need to consider accessibility differently and ensure that those participating online had the same access to opportunity, inspiration, networking, and feelings of connection as those in the in-person offering. Many also remarked that the **hybrid or online model** would be a good way to continue relationships after the gathering.

# PARTICIPANTS

The single most important consideration interviewees recommended when thinking about **potential participants** in the gathering, was to have wide representation from different backgrounds, identities, and disabilities. Additionally, although this professional gathering is attending to the practice of integrated dance, many dancers and educators worried that too many attendees would be non-Deaf and non-disabled. Compounding this was a recognition that there are some disabled, Deaf, and non-disabled dancers that have more access to attending a gathering of this type than others, and/or more exposure to dance education and pedagogy because of the company or organization they are affiliated with. To have a large number of these dancers and educators with more privilege and access would be a disappointment because it would not live up to the **movement towards justice** that represents the field at this moment in time, and also would neglect to include **new and emergent voices** in the field.

**IMAGE:** Two dancers balancing with their backs together. One of the dancers is on her knees with her arms extended outward. Her torso is bent forward. The other dancer, who is using a wheelchair, leans backward, with her back resting on the other dancers. Her arms are also extended out away from her body. They both look towards the camera. (Image courtesy of Art Spark Texas.)

## ON CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS

“I think there needs to be a lot of listening on the part of people who position themselves as the professional face of physically integrated dance, because a lot of the time, that is the only experience that non-disabled communities hear about. Those who are invisible are really the large majority of our field, but these people who exist on the margins are not represented in those companies. This is biased based on my own experiences, but I think there needs to be much more interaction between the ends of this spectrum, where the professional and grassroots movements interact and inform each other.”

“I think it’s really important that dancers with disabilities are there. But I also think it’s nice to have a mixture because of the integration and people informing each other of their different paths and backgrounds. Recognizing that one form of disability doesn’t stand in for all forms of disability in any way, shape, or form. Having a diversity and plurality of different types of disability is useful as a pedagogy because it adds new questions to your practice and keeps you growing.”

“I often found myself in a space when at a conference where I’m the only person of color. If there are no people of color, it makes it awkward. Even if they are people with disabilities. We often don’t have the space to share who we are with one another.”

“I want to come away with new contacts, new resources. I want to make new connections. It’s like, we’re seeing each other on these calls, but it’s always the same group of people on the call.”





# STRUCTURE

## LEADING WITH DISABLED INSTRUCTORS

**Leading with disabled instructors** and dancers at the helm of this event was expressed as a critical element by many interviewees. For a gathering focused on educating people in inclusive dance, having the individuals with lived experience sharing their knowledge and techniques is helpful for everyone. Disabled-only instruction and dance would be something that most interviewees supported.

## STRUCTURING LONG-LASTING RELATIONSHIPS

Maintaining the personal and professional connections that attendees make at the gathering was very important to all interviewees. Dancers and educators want to leave the event with a **feeling of community**. To do this, many recommended that small groups or **cohorts** be formed at the beginning of the gathering - or even before the gathering - with the intention that the groups would connect during the event and have relationships that would last after the event itself is completed. Some even suggested that the organizers of this professional gathering could orchestrate **small activities after the gathering** to keep the cohorts engaged. The question of who would make up a cohort was less clear. Some interviewees wanted to have a diverse cohort in order to be exposed to new perspectives and experiences, while others wanted a group of similarly identifying members to act as an affinity group and emotional resource. Some interviewees voiced the opinion that short, small group activities often lead to surface level interactions and conversations, while longer periods of time together were more likely to produce lasting relationships.

### ON LEARNING FROM DISABLED INSTRUCTORS

“I’m in a physically integrated company and I find great value in that integration. But there’s a huge movement right now where disabled dancers want to just explore disabled-only dance. I think that’s really important, but not to the exclusion of inclusion. It’s a different value system for the choreographer.”

### ON CREATING COHORTS

“I could see there being multiple tracts to the same conference. So maybe there’s a tract for non-disabled newbies who need to learn the ropes. And then there’s a tract for non-disabled institutions who are setting an example. And then there’s different tracts for disabled institutions, or maybe it’s not disability specific.”

**IMAGE:** Photo of the Wandering Ensemble, performing as part of California State University East Bay’s “Ceremony for Coming Alive in Troubled Times,” in the courtyard in front of the CSUEB University Theater, directed by Eric Kupers; Several dancers, wearing similar hooded, zip-ups, dancing outside in a concrete plaza next to a large concrete building with glass windows. (Photo taken by Garvin Tso. Image courtesy of California State University East Bay Department of Theatre and Dance.)



**ON POP-UP RULES**

“People are comfortable and wearing things that are comfortable for their bodies. [The conference setting] It’s not overly formal that makes people feel stifled, that they’re not ‘supposed to’ do things, so people know that this is a place for uniqueness and comfort and respect.”



**IMAGE:** Four DanceAbility students, four dancers in wheelchairs and one standing student, in Hong Kong in 2007, in front of the Center for Community and Cultural Development creating strong shapes with their bodies. (Image courtesy of DanceAbility Hong Kong.)

## CREATING POP-UP RULES

Many interviewees felt that specifying ground rules for this gathering would help the gathering achieve its primary goals. These **‘pop-up rules’** would set expectations for attendees within the scope of the event. Codes of conduct, intentions in group conversations and workshops, and orientations to the field of dance would be important in creating the inclusive, shared space that dancers and educators yearn for. Many of the interviewees suggested a degree of boundary setting – a practice that they themselves do in group settings. At the same time, they also noted that too many rules can be stifling. While there are some rules that might be obvious and need not be said, as in, “please don’t interrupt or talk over others,” others such as, “hold space for dialogue instead of argument,” may be less so.

## PROFESSIONAL GATHERING PRE-TRAINING

In the context of the concern held by many about the use of specific language, different identities, and the passion for the ideas of creating a respectful and thoughtful environment, a few of those we spoke with offered the idea of **holding a pre-training** prior to this professional gathering to get attendees together and set the groundwork for the gathering. This training may introduce some of the **pop-up rules**, or hold a ‘Disability 101’ for dancers who are not disabled and are new to integrated, disabled, and Deaf dance.



# POTENTIAL ACTIVITIES

## EXPLORING CURRICULUMS

Echoing the obstacles to **accessing educational training** resources for dancers and dance educators, all interviewees shared a desire to **explore curriculums** from others attending the gathering. An often-expressed desire focused on having opportunities to soak up knowledge and inspiration from fellow attendees through workshops, classes, brainstorming, and creative activities at the event. Many interviewees stated that they don't always know where to find such opportunities in their daily practice, and believe, for that reason, they don't readily exist. We know that there are existing opportunities for disabled and Deaf dancers, but not to the same extent that there are for non-disabled dancers. But there remains in the field the palpable need to create a platform to share, question, learn, and ideate these concepts in order to help move the field forward.

## TIME FOR REFLECTION

A number of people we talked with requested dedicated **time for reflection** throughout the gathering to take a moment to think deeply about the activities, discussions, and movements they are experiencing with others. This came out of a need to **process information in real time**, as opposed to holding it until after the gathering is over and doing this processing alone, and away from the event itself. Interviewees expressed interest in both individual and group processing. Some also recommended that having the option to leave a given activity at any point in time would be a welcomed opportunity; sometimes individual experiences can be overwhelming and the ensuing responses within the body

### ON EXPLORING CURRICULUMS

"I need to replace myself. I need to replace myself right away. Right now, I can't even ask someone to substitute for me. Nobody else knows how to do what I do yet. I've only been doing it for a year and a half."

"A lot of our students in this class would have been turned away at sign-up [from other classes] because they can't independently make safe movement decisions or can't respond consistently to instruction – the kinds of things that set a baseline for safety. For understandable safety reasons. A lot of the time, you don't have an environment where those things can be learned. And [so] these students are never going to [get to] be there, ever."

"At first, the community started because the training didn't exist. People had to learn as they went and figure it out. And then they mounted professional productions, and they hired esteemed guest artists to work with their company. Over time, that experience began to open up questions of pedagogy and training. Now, I think we're recognizing that the training doesn't exist – you go to the studio and you go, "Where's the training?"

### ON TIME FOR REFLECTION

"The highlights for me are in the self-reflection, or reflection with others having the same experiences, and being able to process it – really think about it. Something we do in our teacher training is, at the end of every day, we post self-reflective questions. The next morning, those are the questions we come back to. The book-end is always self-reflection. "Think about this at night when you go home, we're gonna start talking about it tomorrow morning."

ON WITNESSING HISTORY

“We have many in our community who are moving into eldership. We’re seeing a changing of the guard and that feels important in this moment because these are times ripe for change. The history and importance of dance not being lost feels really important. Like, what is the legacy of this work? Why did people do what they did? And how was that important to getting us here? And why do we not want to shift? It feels like holding and honoring those elders and what they did allows us to be able to critique it now, and that also feels important.”

ON OTHER ACTIVITIES

“I think you should do something irreverent at the beginning of the conference. Get everybody laughing or something, because there are very typical ways to break down people’s nervousness, and I think you should do something different.”

need to be attended to. Another option that was suggested was the opportunity to participate in an activity purely through observation. In this way, individuals could participate with the energy in the room, even if they themselves are not “actively” immersed in it.

## WITNESSING HISTORY

At this moment in history, dancers and educators are yearning to understand their roots in order to continue building and moving the field forward. There is a recognition that those who have been witness to the history of inclusive dance are moving into eldership and worry that these stories and knowledge may be lost. At the same time, those in younger generations recognized both a need to capture these earlier stories as well as the need to tell new ones. In a time of immense change, many feel that it is important to document and learn from those who have come before them.

## ADDITIONAL POTENTIAL ACTIVITIES

Dancers and educators are most interested in having opportunities to create together at this professional gathering. Outside of exploring curriculums, learning new techniques, and sharing pedagogy, they want to create something new together such as a performance in groups. Others wanted to respond to a specific question with others, or to solve a problem together. Actions that could be taken to recognize this particular moment in time and share an emotional connection about the pandemic years was also expressed as a needed outlet within the interview conversations. One other desired shared experience was for an opening experience that could function to bring people together and help them feel connected from the start.



# APPENDICES

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**IMAGE:** Five dancers in ballet class. Everyone's one foot, toes pointed, extended in the front, and one arm up in a slight arc shape. (Image courtesy of Company d.)

## Appendices

### Interview Protocol

Refocusing Dance Education Conference

Planning Interview Protocol

9.28.21

**INTERVIEW GOAL:** To gather information that will help in creating a conference in which attendees have a true sense of building the collective field of dance education. To do this the interviews will gather an understanding of 1) what each interviewee imagines as a dynamic conference environment; 2) how each interviewee understands the field of practice as it is today; and 3) how each interviewee could imagine the conference supporting the growth of the field.

**LENGTH:** one hour

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** recorded, confidential

**OPENING:**

Exchange hellos and greetings.

**Purpose of Interview:** Many thanks for being part of this interview today and the larger conference planning process. I know Silva and Aubrey are looking to create a gathering that has real, tangible action steps for the future of inclusive dance education in the US. To do that they're starting the planning process with some deep listening to their peers and colleagues in the field. The goal of our conversation today is to help understand where you as a practitioner see the field of inclusive dance education, how you can imagine it developing to its highest potential, and how the conference can help that process.

**What will Happen with the Information:** With your permission we'll record our interview today. [Start recording] The information you share will be used for planning purposes only, and the ideas you express will only be discussed outside of this conversation in aggregation with the ideas from other interviews that we do. No personal information will be shared, and no attribution will be made without your direct permission.



### Opening Questions:

- 1) To start off our conversation, tell me about one moment that happened to you, sometime during the past two years, that brought home the importance of inclusive dance practices. Describe what happened during that moment, or that period of time.

### Focus Questions (and sub questions)

*Topic: Musing about the Conference*

- 2) Think about a future conference we're now calling "Refocusing Dance Education: Deafness and Disability". Imagine in your mind that it's the best conference you've ever been to:
  - a) Where does it take place?
  - b) Who do you see being there? Who are the participants? Who are the presenters?
  - c) What kind of activities or sessions are happening?
  - d) What would be the highlight for you at this conference?

*Topic: Desired Experiences within the Conference*

- 3) If you were to attend this conference, what are three things that you would want to feel during the conference?
- 4) What would be three things you would hope would be possible after the conference that aren't possible now – this could be for yourself or others or both?

*Topic: Thinking about the Larger Field of Practice*

- 5) Diving a bit deeper into the larger need for the conference, what do you see as the most urgent needs in the dance community right now in terms of dance education?
- 6) Much has changed in the dance community over the past five years. What do you think are the key things that the conference should highlight and celebrate?
- 7) There are still many obstacles in the way for dance educators. How would you name those obstacles?
  - a) How could the conference help to address them?

### CLOSING

- 8) We're at an interesting moment in history right now, and no one knows exactly where we'll be in ten years, or even five years. In your experience, how can dance education help us in this time of historical transition, and help build a future for new generations?

**WRAP-UP**

- 9) Is there anything that we haven't spoken about that you think is important to mention?
- 10) Who else do you think we should be speaking with?
- 11) Would you like to be involved further in the planning process? In any particular way?

Many thanks for taking the time to talk today. We really appreciate you making space for this conversation. We're just starting our interview process, but we will make our summary findings available for everyone, and the results will serve as the building blocks for the conference.



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