

Deaf Inclusion and Accessibility in the Dance Field

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INTRODUCTION

- In this project, I investigate how Deaf culture is currently represented in U.S. dance studies and how Deaf dancers learn best in a studio environment.
- This research is relevant because it pushes for inclusivity in the dance field and opens the world of dance to many others.

METHODOLOGY

For this research, I did a literature review and surveyed videos available on the internet. This research was open to different dance styles and forms, but it was limited to publications in the English language.

TERMINOLOGY

As a disclaimer, this research will use identity-first language, as opposed to person-first language. According to Haelle, “Most deaf people prefer identity-first language, not person-first, and they reject “hearing impaired” because many do not perceive an inability to hear as a deficit” (Haelle, para. 9). This will of course vary person to person, and it is important to clarify with the people who have disabilities which language they prefer. As this research does address any specific Deaf people, the general identity-first language will be used. Additionally, “use the lowercase deaf when referring to the audiological condition of not hearing, and the uppercase Deaf when referring to a particular group of deaf people who share a language – American Sign Language (ASL) – and a culture” (National Association of the Deaf, para. 2). Thus, this research will use the uppercase Deaf when referring to the community and culture of Deaf people.

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CULTURE AND DISABILITY

The dance field has seen a lot of positive change towards inclusivity, diversity and accessibility in the recent years. However, there is still a long way to go, and awareness of the issues at hand is the first step. One area that is in need of improvement is the inclusion of Deaf and hard of hearing (HOH) dancers. As someone who is not Deaf or HOH, it can be hard to understand the culture surrounding the deaf community. In fact, many hearing people do not even know that most Deaf people do not consider it a disability, but rather a culture. Culture can be associated with many things, and one of them is language and collective experiences, which is something the deaf community has. They communicate through their own hand symbols, gestures and facial expressions. Collectively, they all understand what it is like to be a Deaf person in a world built for hearing people. With the increasing introduction of the cochlear implant, many people believed that deafness was decreasing and there was less need for inclusion. After all, if you could choose to hear why wouldn't you want to? There are many different answers to this question, depending upon the person. “Choosing to augment sound through hearing aids or cochlear implants can be a complex decision, since many in the Deaf community view Deafness: as a culture, not a disability” (Ritzel, pg 83). Some people are born deaf and cannot imagine a world where they can hear. Others want to experience the sense of hearing. Imagine if someone tried to ask you why you still sang your national anthems, even if you lived in a different country. That culture still means something to you, and it changes who you are. For many Deaf or HOH people, they do not want to give up their deafness because it would change who they are. As Timothy Reagan says, “the tension between these broadly distinct ways of thinking about deafness is neither a minor nor a trivial one; it is *fundamental* to how deafness is conceived, what it means to be deaf” (Reagan, et al. section 3). It is very dependent on the Deaf person and their view of being deaf.

Most Deaf people do not view being Deaf as a disability. However, for many reasons, they might be required to file under the American Disabilities Act (ADA) and certain services, like the Student Disability Services (SDS) at Kennesaw State University. Services, laws and acts like these are in place to help with accessibility, but they are very general and do not always help promote inclusion, rather just help regular discrimination. Society is responsible for moving itself towards inclusivity and accessibility.



Hobson, Jane. 'From The Progress Score.' *Deaf Men Dancing*. www.deafmending.com/time.

SIGN LANGUAGE AND DANCE AS MOVEMENT-BASED EXPRESSION

Both sign language and dance are forms of movement-based expression. It follows that they combine well together, easily and thoroughly. Some choreographers use the signing of the words in sign language as choreographic inspiration for their piece. Mark Smith of Deaf Men Dancing is a Deaf British choreographer who uses sign language incorporated into his works. Smith uses British Sign Language as opposed to ASL which Americans are used to seeing. Each sign language is its own language, but since all are movement-based, all the points still hold true. One example of incorporating sign language into choreography can be seen in Smith's work, *Resolution*. Smith can be seen in the background of the dancers, dressed all in black. He is signing the lyrics of the music, both for the Deaf audience members to understand the lyrics, and for all audience members to see his choreographic inspiration from the signs (“Deaf Men Dancing, Resolution at The Place, 22nd January 2011,” 2:07-2:48). It is very clear at times to see where the sign is directly related to the movement vocabulary of the choreography. Smith is one of many choreographers, both Deaf and hearing, that are incorporating sign language into dance. Perhaps a more well-known example would be from Lin Manuel Miranda's musical production *Hamilton*. There is a very brief moment of incorporating ASL in two scenes in the filmed production of *Hamilton*. The choreographer, Andy Blankenbuehler, used ASL numbers in the choreography for “Ten Duel Commandments” and “The World Was Wide Enough.” (“Hamilton,” 0:48:37-0:50:26, 2:21:54-2:25:15). These are very small gestures, but with the knowledge of Deaf culture and ASL, they enhance the piece greatly.

This leads to questioning whether or not ASL furthers the choreographic piece. Especially if the choreographer is hearing, does ASL add anything to the work? ASL is a directional based language and has “four parameters: handshapes, movements, palm orientation, and location” (Adams, pg 5). These four parameters serve to provide clear and concise communication. Adams talks about her own experience as a hearing choreographer incorporating ASL into her work saying, “I chose several different signs in ASL that depict concepts that are relevant to my research. These signs are, “language,” “communicate,” “dance,” “song,” “speak,” and “signing.” I used these signs as motifs for my work. I modified some of them and choreographed the signs to flow into the movement” (Adams, pg 11). Adams uses her incorporation of ASL as motifs in her work, instead of as inspiration for the choreography like Mark Smith did. If a hearing choreographer wishes to add ASL into their piece, they should have prior knowledge of the language, as well as its signs' meanings and parameters. If done correctly, ASL can further a choreographic work for both hearing and Deaf audience members, but caution should still be taken if the choreographer is hearing and ASL is not their first language.

CONCLUSION

Many people may think that the dance studios of today are accessible to Deaf and HOH people. However, there is still a lot of work to be done. Even in the last few years, there has been an incredible number of scholarly sources and personal experiences published regarding this concept and the inclusivity of the Deaf community in the dance field. Looking into the future, these publications should continue to happen, but there should also be effort put forward into these classrooms and dance studios. Perhaps a future research project could be done on a group of Deaf or HOH students who are taking dance classes. It would be interesting to see a comparison of these students in a typical studio classroom, and those in a classroom with accessibility modification and a dance teacher or choreographer with knowledge of ASL and the Deaf Culture. I would personally also like to continue in this research in the future. Like Young Ha Park, I want to include “a hope that all deaf dancers can learn dance everywhere in the world” (Park, pg 147). I believe it is important to bring diversity and accessibility into the dance classrooms for anyone who wants to have access to dancing, no matter their background or walk of life.

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