

ILLUMINATING INVISIBILITY:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF DANCERS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES
IN HIGHER EDUCATION DANCE PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

Enactment of the *Rehabilitation Act of 1973* and the *Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990* expanded and clarified the rights of students with disabilities in higher education (Connor, 2011; Pena, 2014; Troiano, 2003). In the past three decades, the enrollment rate of students with learning disabilities (LD) in higher education has tripled. However, the magnitude and quality of scholarship addressing the experiences of students with disabilities (including LD) does not reflect this exponential shift. While existing literature addresses dancers with physical and developmental disabilities (Kuppers, 2004; Sandahl & Auslander, 2005; Whatley, 2007, 2008) and children with learning disabilities (Cone & Cone, 2011), research on dancers with learning disabilities in postsecondary settings is nil. Research that includes the voices of identifying dancers with learning disabilities in higher education is necessary in order to discover more effective pathways and approaches to interventions and learning strategies.

This qualitative study examines the perceptions of six dance majors and minors with learning disabilities (LD) in higher education dance programs from five universities located in the New York/New Jersey/Eastern Pennsylvania and Midwest regions of the United States. The purpose of the study is to privilege the voices and perspectives of an underrepresented population in dance in order to illuminate challenges, learning strategies, and experienced meanings within creating, learning, and performing dance in higher education.

Qualitative sources of data include in-person interviews, non-participant observations, and participant reflective journals. Several rounds of coding and data

analysis generated a multifaceted and nuanced portrait of six dancers with LDs' challenges, strategies, and experienced meanings, both individual and composite, in higher education dance. Several described self-determined approaches through agentic acts of learning individualized to their unique LDs. For all dancers, emotional states undergirded challenges, strategies, and relationality in higher education dance. Further, descriptions of visibility, acceptance, and affirmation by peers and instructors in technique and composition classrooms illuminated the value of relational authenticity for these dancers.

Research findings suggest areas in need of reformed practices while also illuminating extant teaching practices that effectively meet the needs of students, including the transparent integration of ameliorative strategies into higher education dance. Findings related to emotional challenges point to the importance of emotional support as a priority in higher education dance programs, a need that I suggest has become increasingly critical for all university dance students during this period of global pandemic. The study offers insight into the ways dance in higher education can be more accessible and inclusive by privileging the authority of the individual student and enabling authentic engagement with self and a broader relationality to different others.

This dissertation is dedicated to my family.

I also dedicate this work to dancers with learning disabilities:

“Never quit on a bad day” – Nathan Marcus

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation illuminates challenges, strategies, and experienced meanings of learning dance in higher education for individuals with Learning Disabilities (LDs). It is based on the experiences of six undergraduate Dance majors or minors who identify as having LDs, an underrepresented population in dance education research. I begin this chapter with a personal narrative as a disabled dancer, researcher and educator, offering a window into distinctive embodied understandings that led me to this inquiry. Next, I provide a statement of purpose and the study's orienting research questions. I then focus on the significance of the research, including a brief history of dance in higher education and a rationale for studying dancers with learning disabilities in higher education contexts. In subsequent sections, I discuss the delimitations and limitations of the study, concluding with an outline of the dissertation structure.

A Personal Narrative of Dance and Disability

Starting around the age of five, I began to feel that something was different about me. I remember dreaming about spinning and twirling in pink tutu, leotard, and tights; then one day the dream came true. I went with my best friend, Cara, giggling in the car with anticipation all the way to the dance studio. However, the class did not go as I had pictured in my mind. For some reason the teacher kept yelling at me. I remember trying to pli , but the teacher yelled at me until she finally told me to sit in a corner. I started to cry – My dream of becoming a ballerina was crushed. After a few attempts at the class, I

told my mom that I wanted to quit. After years of frustration and uncertainty in learning environments, I was tested for a learning disability in the fifth grade and diagnosed with a central auditory processing disorder. According to audiologists James Jerger and Frank Musiek (2000), an auditory processing disorder (APD) is broadly defined as “a deficit in the processing of information that is specific to the auditory modality” and is often “associated with difficulties in listening, speech understanding, language development, and learning” (p.468). In my experience, even if the sounds are loud and clear enough to be heard, I have a difficult time distinguishing subtle differences between different words. I have a difficult time processing and remembering language, process thoughts slowly and have a difficult time explaining them, have a difficult time staying focused, often misinterpret information, struggle with memory and several other challenges. I also identify as having Dyscalculia, which affects my ability to understand numbers and learn math facts, although this has improved with age.

I slowly found my way back to dance. In high school, I experienced dance in a completely different way from when I was younger. This time dance was an escape, a release, a joy, and a place of contentment. Permission to bypass the verbal expression of ideas and reach into the depths of creativity through my body allowed me to access a different kind of knowing reminiscent of Howard Gardner’s (1993) kinesthetic intelligence. His theory of multiple intelligences challenges the notion of a “general intelligence” by conceptualizing intelligence as “a property of all human beings; a dimension on which humans differ; and the way in which one carries out a task in virtue of one’s goals” (p. xv). Gardner proposes seven differing intelligences, including linguistic, spatial, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal,

and musical. In the company of novice dancers, I experienced a growing sense of social belonging and confidence in my individual movement style. In the midst of academic struggles in subjects such as math, science, English and history, dancing (particularly improvisation) allowed me to break away from fixation on “correct answers” to explore my personal aesthetic through body, mind, and spirit.

Although many advisors told me that I would not make it into a four-year college due to my disability, I was determined to pursue dance. The journey was difficult; many times I felt my disability got in the way of learning dance and improving as fast as my peers. Nevertheless, I worked to complete a bachelor’s degree (B.S.) in Therapeutic Recreation and Minor in Dance from Calvin University and went on to pursue a Master of Education (Ed.M.) in Dance at Temple University.

During graduate coursework in dance at Temple University, I conducted small-scale qualitative projects on dance and disability that substantiated my research interest and informed the methodological framework of this dissertation study. For instance, as a student in the Ed.M. program, I conducted a small phenomenological study for Karen Bond’s course “Meaning in Dance” in which I investigated my own lived experience of disability in dance and that of a dancer who had suffered a stroke. Later, while in the PhD program, I presented a paper at a Society for Disability Studies conference that examined my personal history of efforts to “recreate lived reality” as a dancer with an information processing disorder (Vander Well, 2013). Both projects gave insight into the complexity of my own, as well as others’ disabled embodiments – physical, mental, and emotional.

Now, as a dance instructor in higher education, I am challenged with creating physical, emotional, and intellectual spaces that can embrace a diverse group of dance

learners. Teaching with a LD in environments where students themselves present a broad continuum of abilities is a complex charge. My determination to meet the pedagogical challenge along with conducting research on dancers with LDs strengthens my dedication to improving dance education in multi-ability settings.

As a researcher with a LD, I carry my “lived” biases to the analysis process. My unique experiences as an adopted middle-class Hispanic woman with a disability inevitably shape my expectations and color my perceptions of what it means to live and learn as a dancer with a learning difference. As a dancer with an auditory processing disorder and dyscalculia, primary challenges include memory retrieval, verbal processing, and anxiety when attempting to recall the steps of choreography or listen to verbal instructions in a dance technique class.

Being adopted into a white middle-class family afforded opportunities and advantages that I might not have received otherwise, including a dance education and access to dance performances. However, throughout my childhood and young adulthood, I continuously struggled to find my identity as a Hispanic girl and woman in a predominately Dutch American culture. Despite a stable family life and childhood, issues and questions of identity, belonging, and culture were often at the forefront of my mind. As noted above, I associate embracing my identity as a dancer with gaining a sense of empowerment and confidence in my unique learning style and self-expression.

Through years of struggling with learning both in and out of dance, I found myself asking questions like, “Do other dancers with LDs struggle in dance like I do? If so, what is their experience like?” Such questions led me to pursue the topic of dancers

with LDs in higher education for this dissertation research. The orienting questions of the study stem accordingly from these interests.

After writing chapters 4 through 6 on research findings, I revisited the aforementioned phenomenological studies of my own lived experience in dance and noted aspects that parallel those found in the present study. Though I do not consider myself a key subject in the study, I seek to make meaning as a collaborator in this discussion since I am a member of the group that I am studying.

Statement of Purpose

The overall aim of this research is to illuminate perceived challenges, strategies, and experienced meanings of learning dance in higher education for individuals with LDs. My commitment to disability research is rooted in a belief that disability is a “basic human condition that should be studied and investigated as part of the diverse fabric of human experience” (Prilleltensky, 2009, para. 1). The driving force of this study aligns with this commitment, as it seeks to examine complex perceptions and interactions of dancers with LDs in higher education dance programs.

This qualitative study examines the meanings of six dance majors and minors with learning disabilities (LD) in higher education dance programs from five universities located in the New York/New Jersey/Eastern Pennsylvania and Midwest regions of the United States. The research draws on the theoretical framing of disability within the emerging interdisciplinary field of disability studies (Cypher & Martin, 2008; Prilleltensky, 2009), as well as on critical pedagogy and feminist theory, to interrogate and conceptualize disability in higher education dance. Qualitative data are drawn from

informal, semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations, and participant reflective journals. Understanding the experiences of dancers with learning disabilities could potentially promote more equitable dance opportunities in both technical and creative learning environments, helping students with LDs in higher education to create new realities and re-imagine their place in the dance world.

Orienting Research Questions

The first orienting research question derives from my experiences as a dancer with LD and from LD based literature addressing social, emotional, and political barriers to learning in higher education (Barga, 1996; Connor, 2009; Denhart, 2008; Gerber & Reiff, 1991). The aim of this question is to understand which aspects of learning, creating, and performing dance are most challenging for the six participating dancers with LDs in their university settings. Students with LDs' perceptions of challenge might suggest possible areas of educational reform for this population. As a point of clarification, this question does not intend to fixate on individual deficiencies or therapeutic interventions, nor to fully represent the full scope of challenges experienced by dancers with LDs. Rather, the question is fashioned to place participating dancers in an empowered position to form recommendations for making their respective dance environments more accessible—places where sustainable change can occur.

The second orienting research question focuses on how these student dancers with LDs navigate and cope with challenges in higher education dance. More specifically, I ask what learning or coping strategies the dancers use and how they developed them.

Further, I inquire into whether and how these students with LDs claim agency in their learning.

Based on the literature on students with LDs in higher education, accommodations may be geared toward extended time on tests or papers, copies of lecture notes, and individual tutoring; overall, accommodations are related to writing and reading without reference to studio-based arts or dance studio class contexts (Albert & Fairweather, 1990; Chaplin, 2011; Connor, 2011; Keim et al., 1996). This, as well as my own experience of not always receiving accommodations in the dance studio, leads me to wonder whether dancers with LDs might be frequently obliged to invent clever ways to navigate the dance studio classroom. The aim of this question is to expose students' learning approaches and self-advocacy tactics, and to invite dialogue about learning strategies that can be employed independently from institutional support.

The third orienting research question asks how dancers with LDs view their disabilities and whether and how their conceptions influence their outlook and approach to learning dance. This question is connected to the previous one, but more broadly concerns conceptions of disability that influence and shape perceptions of self, and the role of self-advocacy in creating strategies for learning. Similarly, how does dance influence the way participants perceive or conceive of their LDs? Both questions are vital to understanding the emic perspective of the participant.

The fourth orienting research question asks what perceived benefits dancers with LDs experience from participating in higher education dance programs. While the physical, social, emotional, spiritual, and mental benefits of dance are widely discussed by researchers in the field of dance and other areas (Bond, 2019; Hanna, 2006, 2015;

Minton & Faber, 2016), the aim here is to uncover distinctive benefits of dance for an under-researched population. Literature from the field of dance movement therapy (DMT) addresses the well-being of individuals with disabilities but primarily focuses on therapeutic approaches and interventions within rehabilitative settings. The American Dance Therapy Association (www.adta.org) defines dance movement therapy as “the psychotherapeutic use of movement as a process which furthers the emotional, cognitive, physical, and social integration of the individual” (What is dance/movement therapy?, para. 2). Only a small body of research focuses on contexts where dancers with LDs have pursued professional dance careers geared toward performance and teaching, and this literature is dated (Hayes, 2004).

This question, therefore, seeks to understand beneficial aspects of dance that are unique to participants’ learning experiences in higher education that might or might not be related to therapeutic outcomes. Understanding beneficial aspects of dance in higher education potentially sheds light on what factors encourage dancers with LDs to continue studying dance despite the challenges and high demands typically involved in higher education dance studies.

The fifth and last orienting research question seeks to discover what learning environments and teaching practices dancers with LDs like to encounter in the dance classroom. Although scientists, researchers, and educators have greatly contributed to research on educational assessment and intervention strategies, the etiology of LD, and justification for political legislation supporting the rights of individuals with LDs, only a small number identify or are labeled as having a LD (Hallahan et al., 2013). The goal of this research question is to glean suggestions that could help to improve participants’

educational experiences in dance. As noted, an underlying intention is to stimulate dialogue and reimagine dance training as opposed to establishing standardized interventions. Ultimately, this question proved beyond the scope of the dissertation and will be reserved for future examination.

Rationale & Significance of Study

Historical Context: Dance in Higher Education

Although the dance institutions represented in this study differ in philosophy, mission, design, demographics, and size, they share values and tenets of the field of dance in higher education. The historical tracings of dance in higher education reveal shifting vicissitudes in the way dance has been defined, in both its functional parameters and its role as an academic discipline. Early 20th century pioneers of dance in American higher education, Gertrude Colby and Margaret H'Doubler, propelled the field forward, emphasizing values of personal creativity, “aesthetic expressiveness,” and the intrinsic value of dance in education, while dance educator successors such as Martha Hill stressed technical training and performance in the art of dance (Kraus, Chapman & Dixon Gottschild, 1991; Ross, 2000; Wilson, Hagood & Brennan, 2009). Retentions of early educational models continue to be reflected in higher education dance programs, while adaptations and transformations have created integrated (Burnidge, 2012) or “midway” models (Smith-Autard, 2002).

Prior to the formal establishment of undergraduate dance programs in the early 1900s, dance was taught under the umbrella of calisthenics, “a form of musical gymnastics” (Kraus et al., 1991, p. 295), in physical education programs throughout the

United States. Initially designed for females only, calisthenics emphasized freedom, harmony of movement, and interpretation of music for expressive movement (McPherson, 2008; Oliver, 1992). Building on these beginnings, in 1913 Gertrude Colby instituted a creative dance program within physical education at Teacher's College, Columbia University (McPherson, 2008; Ross, 2000).

In many ways, dance in higher education was founded on a model that is inherently accessible through its emphasis on the creative potential of all beings, freedom of expression, and the “qualitative immediacy of experience” (Ross, 2000, p. 143). Echoing this sentiment, dance education scholar Thomas Hagood (2000) asserts that dance in higher education was initially based on an “accessible training educational model” through an emphasis on natural, pedestrian movements (p. 71). However, a stronger theoretical and artistic justification of dance would eventually position dance as an academic field of study.

Dance educator Margaret H'Doubler sought to position dance as an arts-based discipline within liberal arts education (McPherson, 2008). In 1926, she founded the first dance major at University of Wisconsin, which helped delineate and frame dance as a discipline. Drawing heavily from predecessors, H'Doubler stressed the importance of individual expression and creativity, but also contended that a biological, intellectual, and kinesthetic understanding of the body was critical to the development of the individual in higher education dance (Hagood, 2000; Hawkins, 1954). H'Doubler believed every individual possessed creative potential, thereby supporting a democratic view of dance education that availed access for all (Hawkins, 1954; Ross, 2000).

Education reformer and philosopher John Dewey provided a theoretical basis for H'Doubler's view of dance as a tool for education and means to "developing a free and full individual" (H'Doubler, 1925, p. x; Ross, 2000). Like Dewey, H'Doubler was chiefly concerned with developing responsible, thoughtful, and engaging citizens rather than dance professionals (Hawkins, 1954). More precisely, Dewey's ideas relating to experience informing knowledge shaped her approach in privileging "qualitative immediacy of experience" rather than technical mastery and professional performance (Ross, 2000, p. 143).

In 1934 Martha Hill founded the Bennington School of Dance, a program that reflected a shift toward professionalism and dance as a performing art (Hawkins, 1954; McPherson, 2008). The school is recognized for integrating professional artistic standards into higher education curricula, primarily by the means of enlisting modern dance professionals to teach and interact with students (Hawkins, 1954). The disparity between the two philosophical schools of thought generated debate on the function of dance in higher education: to technically train the "talented few" for professional purposes or to nurture "all students in a more egalitarian manner with an eye toward self-expression and discovery" (McPherson, 2008, p. 8).

Thereafter, dance programs emulated the divide, with the emergence of conservatory-based schools gearing toward professional performance careers in dance, and small colleges and universities taking a liberal arts approach to performing arts, often focusing on dance teacher preparation (Oliver, 1992). Today, universities and colleges represent a spectrum of holistic and professionally driven values and approaches. However, in examining the current climate of higher education dance programs, dance

scholar Doug Risner (2007) highlights a sudden increase of Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) programs. He argues that BFA programs, which focus primarily on the professionalization of dance as art, downplay a liberal arts approach to learning that fosters the educational development and creative potential of the learner.

Dance in higher education continued to flourish and expand in the 1960s after Alma Hawkins' establishment of the first department of dance separate from physical education at UCLA in 1962. Progress slowed during the economic recession of the 1980s (McPherson, 2008). Themes of multiculturalism and emphasis on "inter-arts" curricula were of great interest in higher education dance throughout the 1980s and 1990s, signaling the need to meet the demands of a rapidly changing society (McPherson, 2008; Oliver, 1992). In the early twenty-first century, the recurring challenge of balancing all-inclusive and technical training approaches continues with an increasing emphasis on preparing undergraduate students for professional careers in dance.

The lineage of dance in higher education offers a useful point of reference to reflect on the experienced meanings of dance in higher education for students with LDs. A holistic approach, dating back to H'Doubler and Hawkins, is arguably more accessible, while the conservatory or professional training model tied to Hill appears exclusive and inaccessible. Participating dance programs in the current study fell into composite models of dance education that integrated holistic with professional training preparation approaches.

Dance for Students with LD Enters the History of Dance Education

Bringing LD to the forefront, this qualitative study addresses a gap in dance pedagogical theory and practice by illuminating experienced meanings of dance

education for LD dancers who are endeavoring to succeed in higher education dance. In institutions of higher education, general academic accommodations may be provided to students with governmentally documented LDs to provide equal access to the university environment, but mechanisms to allow students with LDs to provide input to changing or critiquing existing educational policies are nonexistent (Denhart, 2008). Furthermore,

Few studies in LD research seek the voice of those labeled as to the impact of scientifically based interventions imposed on them or other possible solutions yet to be recognized by researchers who do not experience the phenomenon. (p. 483)

Since students with LDs are characteristically deemed as “intellectually inferior” (Harvey-Carter, 2008, p. 4) it is imperative that solutions to accessibility and understanding LD are provided through first person or emic perspectives.

Scholars in dance, disability, and gender studies, among others, have addressed challenges faced by individuals with physical disabilities in dance and performance contexts (Kuppers, 2004; Sandahl & Auslander, 2005; Whatley, 2007). Unlike dancers with disabilities that are physically apparent, dancers with learning disabilities are sometimes difficult to identify as such disabilities may not be outwardly (physically) visible. This “paradox of visibility” perpetuates the *invisibility* of learning disabilities, including the capacity to “hide” them (Bruggemann et al., 2001; Davis, 2005). As depicted in my personal narrative, signs of learning disabilities can be visibly apparent when making a mistake in a dance class. However, unlike physical impairments, individuals with learning disabilities sometimes have the option of hiding or concealing their disability.

Due perhaps to this invisibility factor, literature addressing learning disabilities in dance is lacking. Although dance education literature sheds light on teaching practices for

dance in higher education (Band et al., 2011; Bond, 2018; Whatley, 2007), it neglects to deal directly with LD dancers within post-secondary education. Furthermore, the majority of literature on learning differences in dance focuses on children and the importance of utilizing therapeutic approaches and creative (Cone & Cone, 2011).

Researching and understanding the experiences of dancers with LD might contribute to increased accessibility to technical dance training in higher education by 1) providing a means for students to articulate suggestions for improving teaching practices in the dance classroom, 2) demystifying misconceptions about students with LD, 3) shedding light on the current educational paradigm in dance, and 4) providing an outlet for dancers to reflect on their embodied learning experiences, thus promoting greater self-understanding.

Limitations of the Study

This study is restricted to student dancers who self-identify as LD and/or have LD documentation within a small number of cooperating higher education institutions in the Northeast (NY/NJ/Eastern PA) and Midwest (Michigan) regions of the United States. Although the number of participants is small, the study's multi-site approach across geographic areas and types of institutions adds an element of productive variation to qualitative research findings. However, selecting participants through a convenience sampling method, which relies on convenience and availability, limited the scope of the population sample (Creswell, 2018). Originally, I set out to recruit ten students to participate in the study, but very few students expressed interest in volunteering. Out of the small pool of volunteers, only six qualified or fit the criteria. Confining the study to a

small sample size allows an in-depth, individualized treatment of the topic, but does not access a comprehensive sample of experiences of dancers with LDs.

In addition to interviewing the dancers, I observed each participant in two 60-minute dance classes: one technique class (any genre) and one composition or dance improvisation class. While delimiting observations to two occasions might have weakened the reliability and depth of the study, it allowed me to glean a basic understanding of each student's performance and interactions in their dance education environments. Further, increasing the number of observations would have positioned me as a more primary source of knowledge, potentially compromising the authority of student voices.

Working with a qualitative methodology, data analysis was inevitably affected by my own understandings, choices, and decisions as a disabled female researcher. Therefore, the various bodies of literature I selected to engage with as background to the study and for dialogue with research findings inform my interpretations and conclusions. Though the research might be relevant to dancers with and without LDs, this study does not attempt to generalize or represent the experiences of all dance students in higher education.

When I was planning the study, I was acutely aware of the variables involved in working with a population that is often reluctant to disclose their "invisible" disabilities and the grueling schedules and responsibilities that dance students are expected to balance. I was also cognizant of my limitations as a disabled researcher - mainly my struggle to comprehend verbal information and remember facts and details. Other

wavering and often unpredictable elements, such as access to technology and public transportation, also weighed heavily on my mind in the preparation stages.

Methodological Limitations

I perceive three methodological limitations of the study. The first is the amended exclusion/inclusion criteria for participation. In the beginning, students were required to have a documented LD to participate, but due to a shortage of participants and desire to re-align the study's theoretical position with a disability studies approach (to be discussed further in chapter 2), I expanded the criteria to include self-identification as having a LD. Even with this broader definition, there was a lack of volunteers. Originally, I set out to recruit ten students, but out of the small pool of students who volunteered, only six qualified or fit the criteria, all of them female.

Another limitation was technology. During an interview in Michigan, the flow of the conversation was disrupted when recording devices malfunctioned, requiring the participant to repeatedly reiterate her thoughts. Several of her immediate and insightful responses were consequently lost. On another occasion in the Northeast, half of an interview was deleted for an unknown reason. As a result, I interviewed the participant again before the semester ended in a different location; her responses were regrettably less descriptive and were not consistent with the first interview.

The third methodological limitation was that of time and space constraints— hectic scheduling and location barriers that resulted in the elimination of two planned group interviews in each region and minimal journal reflections from most participants. Though all the dancers agreed to write weekly journals, only three submitted them at the

end of the study. I did, however, find the student journals valuable in providing a deeper look into half of the study sample's perceptions of dancing with a LD.

Research Structure

The dissertation includes six chapters. This chapter (chapter 1) introduces the dissertation in terms background, central purpose, significance, and scope of the study. I present a personal narrative recounting experiences, motivations, and inquiries that brought me to this study, offering a reflexive and transparent stance as a researcher in the study. This chapter also includes a statement of purpose and five orienting research questions that speak to the overall aim of examining experienced meanings of learning dance in higher education for six participants with LDs. A historical overview of dance in higher education offers a context for situating rationale and significance, highlighting different approaches to teaching and learning. The chapter concludes with an examination of constraints that limited the scope of the project and methodological limitations that affected the research.

Chapter 2 contextualizes the dissertation within a larger body of research related to learning disability, dance, and higher education. This background literature review examines theoretical definitions of disability, historical underpinnings of dance in higher education, qualitative research on dance and disability in higher education, and approaches to teaching and learning dance. It draws from multiple disciplines including dance, education, arts education, disability studies, special education, dance science (for example, motor learning and dance cognition), and dance somatics. The review of

background literature reveals a gap in relation to perceptions and meanings of student dancers with LDs in higher education.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology of the dissertation: its epistemological premises and the methods and procedures used to collect and analyze data through an interpretive qualitative lens. Methods and procedures pertaining to participation criteria and recruitment, data collection, ethical procedures, and data analysis are described.

Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 present the analysis and discussion of research findings. Chapter 4 begins with six student profiles or ‘snapshots’ that introduce participants’ personal histories and backgrounds. The remainder of the chapter addresses challenges the participating dancers with LDs encounter while learning and performing dance choreography, including physical limitations, directionality, information processing, and emotional hindrances. Chapter 5 explores inventive strategies, or self-directed pedagogies, that participating dancers with LDs have created to cope with the demands and challenges of higher education dance, including self-advocacy, self-talk, and recuperating activities. Students’ disclosures point to pedagogical strategies that could be implemented to make the dance classroom more accessible for all students.

Chapter 6 provides a thematic analysis of participants’ experienced meanings of relationship to self, peers and instructors and concludes with a collective thematic analysis of being seen, connected, and helped by peers and instructors. Chapter 7 offers a synthesis and discussion of findings through theories of embodiment that illuminate the significance of data. Chapter 8, the final chapter, provides an overview of the dissertation, suggestions for further research, and closing reflections.

CHAPTER 2

FRAMING DISABILITY

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to situate the study within a larger body of literature that informs the central aim of the dissertation: to illuminate challenges, strategies, and learning experienced meanings of dance for students with LDs in higher education dance programs. After outlining the bibliographic search strategy for the study, I discuss conceptual models of disability and LD in order to establish the theoretical positioning of disability within this study. Using a thematic approach, I then review wide-ranging representative examples of qualitative research that speak to learning disabilities in higher education.

The initial search phase involved gathering, organizing, and reviewing sources from my master's and doctoral coursework on the topic of disability and dance. Preliminary searches began while I was taking courses in phenomenology, dance education, cultural studies, and ethnography. Salient theoretical conceptions stemmed initially from research for my master's thesis titled *Uncovering the Layers: An Analysis of Two Disability-based Dance Companies* (Vander Well, 2011). After gathering sources from previous coursework and research, I sorted them according to my dissertation research questions and current theories of disability. I then devised a list of search terms that spoke to my research topic and questions and would facilitate a feasible, yet comprehensive review. These included disability studies, dance and dance education, and somatic dance education.

A second search phase began with using search engines and journals from selected discipline areas to broadly explore keywords such as *learning disability*, *learning difference*, *hidden disability*, *challenges with learning*, and *artists with disabilities* in combination with the words *higher education* and/or *dance*. I located some sources through a systematic search of databases while others arose through intuition and good fortune. I relied primarily on the search engines of Education Research Complete, ERIC, National Dance Education Database (RDEdb), JSTOR, Academic Search Premiere, and ProQuest Dissertations. Research journals such as the *American Journal of Dance Therapy*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, *Journal of College Student Development*, *Journal of Dance Education*, *Journal of Developmental Education*, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *Research in Dance Education*, *Learning Disability Quarterly*, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *Disabilities Studies in Education*, and *International Journal of Education and the Arts* were also helpful in obtaining sources related to dance and learning disabilities in higher education. The third search phase involved looking for central themes and topics already found that were worthy of further investigation. Emergent resources included neurological and psychological dimensions of LD, institutional barriers for people with LDs, inclusive frameworks and teaching strategies for technical education in dance, and qualitative studies of individuals with LD.

Defining Disability: Medical, Social, or Complex Embodiment

According to sociologist and disability studies scholar Juliet Rothman (2010), the way disability is understood has a major impact on people's present perceptions in the

United States. Definitions of disability have prompted civil rights legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990) and the Architectural Barriers Act (ABA, 1968), but have also denied persons with disabilities access to the public sector and perpetuated the perception that people with disabilities are only valuable to society if they can overcome or “cure” their disability. Fortunately, conceptual frameworks continue to progress toward the construction of disability in relation to social and cultural conditions. Nevertheless, this does not negate the adverse reality that restrictive definitions continue to drive individual and collective conceptions of disability. In sum, disability has been and continues to be defined in multiple ways.

Theoretical frameworks for disability are generally divided into ‘individual’ and ‘societal’ categories. Individual models tend to focus on how an individual might view disability whereas societal models tend to look at “...the way in which society views, values, and understands individual members” (Rothman, 2010, p. 196). Both are important for understanding the positive and negative impact of the treatment and perception of dancers with disabilities. In the following section, I discuss medical and social models, two prevailing models of disability that have had significant influence in disability studies and conclude by talking about disability scholar Tobin Siebers’ (2013) theory of complex embodiment, a newly rising model of disability.

Medical Model of Disability

The medical model is an early and historically significant model of disability that has been deemed outdated and regressive in disability studies, but remains a point of reference for scholars, advocates, and persons with disabilities (Oliver, 1996; Sandahl & Auslander, 2005; Shakespeare & Watson, 2001; Withers, 2012). Defining principles of

the medical model draw attention to individual differences and/or deficits through a diagnostic or pathological lens, aiming to ‘normalize’ the disability through remedial treatment (Sandahl & Auslander, 2005; Withers, 2012). The medical model thus situates disability within the individual, as if they are inherently defective. Though the medical model is the “primary paradigm through which disability is understood in mainstream society,” there is no single or universal definition of disability within its framework (Withers, 2012, p. 31).

According to disability activist and scholar A. J. Withers (2012), conceptions of disability adjust according to changing definitions of health or current social phenomena (p. 32). The process of creating new diagnostic categories of difference is best understood through the process of “medicalization.” Sociologist Catherine Kohler Riessman (1998) offers a comprehensive definition of “medicalization:”

The term medicalization refers to two interrelated processes. First, certain behaviors or conditions are given medical meaning --- that is, defined in terms of health and illness. Second, medical practice becomes a vehicle for eliminating or controlling problematic experiences that are defined as deviant, for the purpose of securing adherence to social norms. Medicalization can occur on various levels; conceptually, when a medical vocabulary is used to define a problem; institutionally, when physicians legitimate a programme or a problem; or on the level of doctor-patient interaction, when actual diagnosis of a problem occurs. (p. 124)

One of the major shortcomings of the medical model is its overreliance on medical expertise and consequent failure to consider the knowledge and experiences of individuals with disabilities (Withers, 2012). Within this model, medical practitioners and scientists are considered “experts” in determining the needs, identities, and experiences of people with disabilities through the filter of the “medical gaze” (Withers, 2012).

The medical gaze occurs when a non-disabled individual looks at the disabled body through a diagnostic lens, demarcating a divide between ‘normalized’ and ‘other’ (Withers, 2012). The exact year of first usage of the term “medical gaze” is unknown, but was first coined by French philosopher Michel Foucault (1975) in his second major work, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. He focuses specifically on the enlightenment period of the eighteenth century when physicians were thought to have the ability to ‘unearth’ concealed truths through continuous observation of a patient (Foucault, 1973). The medical gaze reinforces a norm-based standard in categorizing disability and has led to the marginalization of disabled people’s voices (Sandahl & Auslander, 2005).

Another limitation of the medical model is its role in maintaining oppression and social control. According to Withers (2012), its failure to address social and systemic barriers is primarily due to a myopic view of disability, which simplifies social inequality to individual pathology. The medical model’s “primary function is to change oppressed individuals but leave the social structure that enable oppression intact” by imposing political and moral regulations on people with disabilities (p. 34). In *Medicine as an Institution of Social Control: The Medicalization of Society*, disability studies scholar Irving Kenneth Zola (1972) purports that “medicine is becoming a major institution of social control, nudging aside, if not incorporating, the more traditional institutions of religion and law” (p. 254). For example, medicine uses disability as a form of social control by controlling access to governmental/social resources and medical care.

A final critique of the medical model is its assumption that all individuals with disabilities seek to be cured or desire normality. Although this might be the case for some

people with disabilities, others take pride in their disability as an integral part of their identity. The medical model's exclusive focus on "curing" disability is highly problematic, as it leads to "eliminating certain kinds of people rather than oppressive social conditions" (p. 48). For instance, "resources are directed towards prenatal screening in order to try and eliminate disabilities" (or disabled fetuses) in the womb" (p. 49).

I do not align with the medical model as a way of conceptualizing disability, and it is important to acknowledge the damaging and lasting effects of its ideology, which continue to permeate and affect the lives of people with disabilities. At the same time, the medical model has inspired disability activists and scholars to discover new ways of understanding and describing disability. Despite the medical model's damaging effects, the advancement of modern medicine has afforded people with disabilities relief from pain, access to specialized treatment, and a greater understanding of the biological/physiological processes related to their disability. The medical model has also enabled individuals with disabilities to gain political rights that afford access to health care and education. A shift to conceptualize disability as a socially created barrier has brought a sense of equality and removed blame from the individual.

Social Model of Disability

Gaining prominence in the 1980s, the social model examines ways that society creates structural barriers, such as inaccessible building entryways, that do not accommodate the disabled individual (Barnes & Mercer, 2010; Silvers, 2010). In contrast to the medical model, the social model theorizes disability as "an outcome of social processes or as a constructed or created category" versus holding the individual

responsible for invoking a dependence on others due to a specific impairment(s) (Shakespeare, 1996, p. 96). The social model has had a major impact on legislative initiatives that endorse civil rights and social inclusion for individuals with physical disabilities (Barnes & Mercer, 2010; Withers, 2012).

One of the central aspects of social model thinking is its clear distinction between ‘disability’ and ‘impairment’ (Shakespeare, 2013; Tregaskis, 2004). Within the social model, impairment is defined by Disabled Peoples’ International (2010) as a “functional limitation within the individual caused by physical, mental or sensory impairment” (p. 1) whereas ‘disability’ emphasizes the lack or limited ability of individuals to participate as equal members of society due to barriers within the environment. In other words, the social model diagnoses an individual with a physical, cognitive, emotional, or learning impairment, but an impairment is only considered a disability when society or the physical environment do not adapt to or accommodate specific needs of the individual.

Delineation of the two terms offers a balanced view of the challenges individuals with disabilities face through quotidian limitations while concurrently attributing the subjugation of persons with disabilities to systemic hindrances. For example, an individual who is blind is impaired due to a lack of visual perception caused by physiological or neurological factors. However, the impairment becomes a disability when the individual is not able, for instance, to take public transportation if there are no Braille signs that assist independent travel on a day-to-day basis. The social model suggests that disability could be eradicated by making all environments accessible to all citizens (also known as Universal Design) (Tregaskis, 2004).

The social model's critical examination of societal frameworks in relation to the value of the individual is useful for considering disability in light of changes needed for a socially inclusive society. Another distinguishing and progressive mark of the social model is the underlying premise that disability is not exclusively a minority issue (Shakespeare, 2013). In other words, all people will experience some form of disability through the course of their life, whether it be accessibility, mobility, vision, hearing/memory loss, or other issues related to injury or age (Harvey-Carter, 2008). The collective experience of disability has become abundantly apparent during the current global pandemic of COVID-19. Online and distanced modes of communication and learning have created disabilities and exacerbated existing disabilities for learners and educators. Despite the social model's value in facilitating an understanding of disability, an analytical evaluation of the model reveals limitations and shortcomings that interfere with normalization.

One of the central criticisms of the social model is its strong emphasis on barriers placed on individuals with physical disabilities (Rothman, 2010). Critics suggest that the social model fails to acknowledge 'invisible' disabilities such as learning disabilities, chronic pain, and mental illnesses that do not always exhibit visible marks of impairment (Rothman, 2010; Tregaskis, 2004). A second related criticism of the social model is its heavy focus on societal limitations and inattention to personal narratives and the lived experiences of individuals with hidden disabilities (Tregaskis, 2004). One of the major challenges of living with a hidden disability is being dismissed by people based on false assumptions and misinterpretations of certain behaviors related to deficits that are caused by the impairment. Integrating the life experiences of people with disabilities into the

theoretical construct of the social model would draw out specific barriers that might or might not be related to larger societal structures.

A third critique of the social model suggests that its basic principles are exceedingly broad in scope, thus simplifying the complex nature of disability and disability's relationship to broader social structures (Vander Well, 2011). The model's overarching approach to classifying disability as a societal phenomenon has consequently neglected to consider:

... the range of impairments under the disability umbrella; ... the different ways in which they impact on individuals and groups over their lifetime; ... the intersection of disability with other axes of inequality; and ... the challenge which impairment issues to notions of embodiment. (Corker & Shakespeare, 2002, p. 15)

Ironically, the social model's all-encompassing ideology is what has reinforced its predominant position among scholars and individuals with disabilities. Disability studies British scholar Tom Shakespeare (2013) critiques the impairment and disability distinction further, indicating that it is difficult to dismantle and distinguish between the "impact of impairment, and the impact of social barriers" (p. 218). He posits instead that disability occurs as a result of "the interaction of individual bodies and social environments" (p. 218).

Although the social model does not (and was not intended to) address all facets of exclusion, it has instigated political and social change (Tregaskis, 2004). In disassembling several barriers to access, the social model has had an affirmative impact on the self-worth and identity of individuals with disabilities. According to Shakespeare (2002), "...disabled people began to think of themselves in a totally new way, and became empowered to mobilise, organise, and work for equal citizenship" (p. 5). Current

legislation advocating for ‘universal design’ and equal rights, as well as the increasing amount of discourse on issues of accessibility, further exemplify the social model at work (Davidson, 2006; Iwarsson & Stahl, 2003; Jaeger & Bowman, 2005; Scott, McGuire, & Foley, 2006).

The *Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990*, a federal civil rights law that “prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in employment, transportation, public accommodation, communication, and governmental activities,” is an example of anti-discrimination policy for individuals with disabilities (ADA section, n.d.). In addition, the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004* was enacted to regulate state and public special education, early intervention, and educational services for children and youth with disabilities. Inclusion, which encourages students with disabilities to integrate into mainstream classrooms, is a by-product of *IDEA*. It compels educators to learn how to attune their teaching to a variety of learning styles and abilities, hence providing an accessible public education. The International Organization on Arts and Disability (formerly known as Very Special Arts), an international non-profit organization that provides arts and education opportunities for youth and adults with disabilities around the world, and other disability-based organizations also emerged during the rise of the social model.

Theory of Complex Embodiment

Tobin Siebers (2013) offers a comprehensive way of conceptualizing disability and impairment that mediates between medical and social models of disability by reimagining the concept of embodiment in relationship to the built environment, and individual and collective experiences of people with disabilities. As aforesaid, the

medical model defines disability through a medicalized lens that focuses almost exclusively on physical ailments while the social model takes a social constructivist approach that essentially ignores embodiment altogether. Siebers' theory of complex embodiment "raises awareness of the effects of disabling environments on people's lived experience of the body, but it emphasizes as well that some factors affecting disability, such as chronic pain, secondary health effects, and aging, derive from the body" (p. 290).

Complex embodiment views disability as a valued form of human variation, a spectrum that varies between individuals and fluctuates within a person's life; it "embraces what the body has become and will become relative to the demands on it, whether environmental, representational, or corporeal" (p. 291). Siebers theorizes the relationship between body and representation as "mutually transformative" or "reciprocal," meaning that just as one's body can be changed or affected by social representation, we can also determine our own social representation through situated embodied knowledge (p. 290).

In exploring and considering various ways of designing and deconstructing delineations of disability, it is evident that the way disability is defined can empower or disenfranchise disabled populations. Each disability model encompasses positive and negative qualities that are pivotal to advance conceptions of impairment and disability. Though the social model does not account for less visible disabilities, overlooks the range and variation of impairments among disabled people, and pays little attention to embodiment, its emphasis on inclusion and universal design is integral to the goal of exploring accessibility and teaching practices for students with learning disabilities in

dance education. The social model also acknowledges the socially constructed nature of disabilities, which displaces the blame from individual to environment.

Siebers (2013) theory of complex embodiment best represents the ideology of disability put forth in this dissertation for its privileging of individual and shared experiences that reflect the subtleties and complexities of disability while equivalently recognizing the social location of disability through intersecting identities and the continuum of bodily difference/embodiment. I concur that disability is created and defined through cultural and social implications that are enacted through the dynamic relationship between the person with the disability and society. The social model of disability, as well as the theory of complex embodiment, will be points of reference and theoretical foundation for defining learning disability moving forward.

Framing Learning Disability

The term *learning disability* is a relatively new category that has generated controversy not only over its existence, but how to define it. Remedial programs and strategies for identifying students with disabilities began as early as 1920 but neglected to include children who did not meet the requirements for severe impairments, yet continued to struggle in school (Hallahan et al., 2013). In the early 1960s, parent and teacher led organizations developed to advocate for students in this liminal category of disability (Chalfant & Reynolds, 2013). From 1960 to 1975, grassroots initiatives caught the attention of federal officials, leading to educational programming and a formalized definition of LD (Hallahan et al., 2013). The first formal definition of LD appeared in Samuel Kirk's (1962) textbook *Educating Exceptional Children* and since its conception,

efforts to define learning disability have generated at least 38 definitions (Vaughn & Hodges, 1973). According to the *Encyclopedia of Special Education*, “many people have tried to define learning disabilities, but no one has yet developed a definition that is acceptable to everyone” (Chalfant & Reynolds, 2013, para. 3).

In 2004, the legislative enactment of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* provided a formalized definition of learning disabilities that lessened confusion surrounding the term (Chalfant & Reynolds, 2013). However, scholars in the field of learning disability found the *IDEA* definition problematic as it focuses exclusively on children (ages 0-21 years of age), overlooks the etiology of LD in the central nervous system, and uses overarching language that can lead to misinterpretation and sweeping generalizations (LD: Issues of definition, 1991). The *IDEA*'s federal definition of learning disabilities is as follows:

Children who have a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. Such disorders include such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (as cited in Chalfant & Reynolds, 2013, par. 5)

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities' (NJCLD) definition provides a more comprehensive description of LD as it attempts to widen the age category for individuals with LD, categorizes disability as a heterogeneous group of individuals, and addresses etiology:

Learning disabilities is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities.

These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to the central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, social perception, and social interaction may exist with learning disabilities but do not by themselves constitute a learning disability. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (for example, sensory impairment, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance), or with extrinsic influences (such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions or influences. (LD: Issues of definition, 1991)

Though the NJCLD offers a comprehensive definition of LD, it complies with a medical or deficit-based conceptualization of disability through its emphasis on neurological deficits. While during the 1990s, national organizations and initiatives to legitimize LD were burgeoning across the U. S., a subgroup of scholars in the field of special education questioned the very category of LD altogether.

Education reformer Christine Sleeter's (1987) germinal work, "Why is there Learning Disabilities? A Critical Analysis of the Birth of the Field in its Social Context," was one of the first publications to question the ideology category of LD within the field of special education. Sleeter contextualizes the emergence of LD in the United States during the Cold War era when an increased concern over academic ranking between the U. S. and other countries brought teaching and schooling practices under scrutiny. She essentially argues that the LD category was created to "differentiate and protect middle class children who were failing in school from lower class and minority children" while fulfilling the military and economic standards" (Connor & Ferri, 2010, p. 1). According to Sleeter (1987), "the majority of students placed in LD classes during the category's first ten years (1963-1973) were, in fact, white and middle class" (p. 230).

Acknowledging the oppressive role of social class and race in the construction of LD instigated a backlash from traditionalists in special education, as it threatened the field's

predominately “positivistic, quantitative, intervention-focused, and ‘scientifically based’ ...” ideological foundation (p. 9).

A recent special issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly (DSQ)* (2010) brought Sleeter’s ideas on the construction of LD to contemporary dialogue and debate within Disability Studies (DS) and Disability Studies and Education (DSE). In the issue’s introductory article, learning disability scholar David J. Connor and professor of inclusive education and disability studies Beth A. Ferri (2010) draw a historical parallel between the cold war era and today’s growing pressure to “increase rigorous standards in education” due to foreseeable threats to America’s superior political power (p. 3). A call to question school practices that provide “student-based explanations of underachievement” as opposed to critically examining the ways in which schools are failing students underlies the purpose of the issue to revisit the query, “Why is there learning disability?” (Connor & Ferri, 2010, p. 3).

The 13 articles within the issue respond to Sleeter’s work and build on her approach to intersectional analysis by integrating social, cultural, and historical facets of the construction and deconstruction of LD. The issue is divided into three sections: Systems Structures, Ideologies, and Practices; Individuals and Families; and Challenging the Dominant Discourse of LD in Schools. I delimit my review to two that specifically speak to defining LD.

In “Hiding in Plain Sight: The Nature and Role of Theory in Learning Disability Labeling,” Deborah Gallagher (2010) examines problematic features of learning disability theory from the origins of LD to the twenty-first century. She begins by outlining various shifts and disputes in defining LD and purports that the phenomenon of

LD continues to be nearly impossible to deconstruct. However, she primarily critiques the Response to Intervention (RTI) model, which posits that “the presence of learning disability [is] based on interpretation of behavior” (p. 7). Gallagher looks to other critical theorists that suggest “pedagogical practices play a leading role in creating and un-creating learning disability, thus viewing and analyzing disability as a ‘product of discursive practices’” (pp. 13-14). In other words, LD has the permeability to be constructed and deconstructed depending on teaching practices, instructor perceptions, and interactions in the classroom. Like Sleeter, Gallagher suggests efforts should focus on amending educational and social inequalities and less on constructing LD theories that often pathologize difference.

Education professor Wanda J. Blanchett (2010) extends Sleeter’s analysis. Her article, “Telling it Like it Is: The Role of Race, Class, and Culture in the Perpetuation of Learning Disability as a Privileged Category for the White Middle Class,” provides an overview of the treatment of African American and other minority populations with the label of LD in special education. She asserts that LD is a “category of privilege,” stating:

An overwhelming majority of students (i.e., the white middle and upper class students) labeled with LD (a disproportionate percentage of whom are males) have been treated in privileged ways when compared to other socially constructed mild disability categories (e.g., emotional and behavioral disorders). (p. 4)

She suggests that LD is normalized since it is not as easily distinguishable and is less apparent than more severe cognitive and/or physical impairments, reasoning further that American society normalizes LDs by capitalizing on the intellectual and creative superiority of individuals with LD, pointing to celebrities and public figures who identify as being learning disabled. According to Blanchett, individuals with LDs are privileged in

the types of services they are offered, including access to the general education classroom; however, if one is positioned at a lower socio-economic status and/or a person of color, privileges are often denied.

Building on Gallagher's ideas of LD as a constructed, permeable category, I propose a definition of LD that draws on crip theory's perspective of disability as a flexible and unstable category of difference. Disability scholar Robert Mc Ruer (2006) defines crip theory as the study of "how bodies and disabilities have been conceived and materialized in multiple cultural locations, and how they might be understood and imaged as forms of resistance to cultural homogenization" (p. 34). Crip theory is dedicated to privileging "crip experiences and epistemologies" to account for different ways of being that might or might not align with diagnostic categories (p. 42). In an attempt to eschew the medical model, this dissertation project examines LD through the rhetoric and experiences of each participant. Some dancers entered the project with distinct and precise identifications while others were irresolute and inexplicit. Unfortunately, accommodations and access are limited to individuals that have documented LDs, which adhere to a governmental definition of LD. In the next section, I examine issues related to accommodation and access in higher education.

Accommodations and Access

At the outset of this study, one set of core research questions related to whether dancers with LDs in higher education receive accommodations, how/if they advocate for them, and what types of accommodations they would like to see implemented in higher education dance classrooms. Accommodations were a potential vessel through which political and bureaucratic amendments could be rendered for dancers with LDs. When

my study criteria to participate changed from having a government or medically based LD to self-identifying as having a learning disability, issues of accommodation and access were called into question. In other words, how could I properly address accommodations if half of my participants could not gain access to them since they did not possess the necessary government documentation? These access questions afforded a deeper examination of accommodation, both in its defining parameters and necessity to create greater accessibility and political agency for dancers with learning disabilities.

The term ‘accommodation’ is ubiquitous in the LD literature and embedded in informational texts and materials in post-secondary disability service offices as a way to ameliorate challenges and provide greater entry or “access” into university life. An overarching definition of accommodation is “to adjust the manner in which instructional or testing situations are presented and/or evaluated so that individuals with documented disabilities can learn and/or demonstrate their learning in a fair and equitable fashion” (Gregg, 2009, p. 2). Accommodations are typically determined individually and can include the following: test taking accommodations, sign language/Communication Access Real Time Translation (CART), assistive technology, alternative test formats, and note taking (Academic Accommodations and Modification, n.d.).

As noted earlier, many disability scholars and advocates disavow an accommodation-based approach as “a direct result of the medical model of disability,” one that relies on the medicalization of LD to validate individualized accommodations (Harvey-Carter, 2008, p. 19). Though the discourse of accommodation is laden with medicalized views of disability and exclusionary devices, it is currently one of the only bureaucratic means to access for students with LD in higher education. In her master’s

thesis, Elizabeth Harvey-Carter (2008) examines the ways that an accommodations-based approach fails to meet the needs of students with LD in post-secondary education. She argues that the approach “cement[s] LDs into a framework which regards them as a medical condition,” making accommodations available to students that have documentation and fit a narrow criterion (p. 10).

Harvey-Carter (2008) also addresses the unnecessary burden that is often placed on the individual with LD to self-advocate when “the very nature of learning disabilities often means that LD students have organizational problems, anxiety disorders, or short term memory problems which makes advocating for themselves difficult” (p. 20). Rather than reactively providing students with special modifications, she endorses Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which is based on the principles of Universal Design and affiliated with the social model of disability.

The idea behind UDL is to proactively design accessible curriculum and teaching practices that provide access to all student learners (Harvey-Carter, 2008; Pliner & Johnson, 2004). Based on the seven principles of Universal Design (UD) from the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University, Scott, McGuire, and Foley (2003) created nine principles of UDL: equitable use, flexibility, intuitive, perceptible information, tolerance for error, and low physical effort, size and space for approach and use, a community of learners, and instructional climate (See Scott et. al (2003) for a thorough description of each principle).

Harvey-Carter (2008) provides an application for each principle that is pertinent to lecture-based environments, but not directly applicable to dance studio environments. While UDL for education advances a more inclusive approach to ensuring accessibility, it

glosses over the reality that some impairments require different solutions that sometimes contradict each other. A UDL approach, however, may be the only way to dismantle the idea that accessibility is a "...personal need which requires evaluation, services, or counseling, rather than collective action or exploration" (Titchkosky, 2011, p. 12).

Locating past and present definitions of disability and LD illuminates the felt impact that various conceptions of disability can have in the everyday lives of people with disabilities. Demarcating a simple definition seems impossible, as disability is an unstable identity category that is unique to each individual and society. In order to better understand the complexity of disability (LD), in the following section I review literature that gives credibility to the stories, voices, and experiences of individuals with LD.

Qualitative Research on LD and Higher Education

Enactment of the *Rehabilitation Act of 1973* and the *Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990* expanded and clarified the rights of students with disabilities in higher education (Connor, 2011; Pena, 2014; Troiano, 2003). In the past three decades, the enrollment rate of students with learning disabilities (LD) in higher education has tripled. However, the magnitude and quality of scholarship addressing experiences of students with disabilities (including LD) does not reflect this exponential shift.

Disability and higher education scholar Edlyn Vallejo Pena (2014) critically reviews literature written about students with disabilities in four top-tier journals in higher education (*The Journal of Higher Education*, *The Review of Higher Education*, *Research in Higher Education*, and *The Journal of College Student Development*) between 1990 and 2010. Her findings indicate that only 25 articles were written about

students with disabilities, with a majority coming from *The Journal of College Student Development*. In addition, 88% were published in the 1990s while only 12% were published in the 2000s, pointing to an overall decline in literature on students with disabilities in more recent years. Pena (2014) suggests the decline could be attributed to academic journals targeting a specific readership as well as the development of journals specifically geared toward different types of disabilities. The majority of articles she analyzed focused on students with LDs, and were primarily quantitative in nature (Connor, 2011; Hadley, 2006; Pena, 2014). In the past decade, however, an increasing number of qualitative studies on students with disabilities have appeared.

Given the lack of qualitative studies of students with LD in higher education prior to the mid-1990s, I delimited my search to the late 1990s through 2019. I purposely chose the search terms *learning disability* and *learning difference*, being fully aware that several, if not all, of the studies relied on diagnostic labeling to define LD and to determine participant eligibility. My intention in employing these terms was to ground the study within a larger body of research that calls attention to the visible fissures within LD/disability literature. To broaden the search and draw from other academic disciplines, I also used the terms *hidden disability*, *challenge with learning*, and *artists with disabilities*.

A recent search revealed a plethora of qualitative studies on university students with LDs, primarily from the UK and Australia (Kendall, 2016; Lambert & Dryer, 2018). Surveying recent literature, I found a range of studies that honor the voices of students with LDs. Researchers have explored experiences of first year college students

transitioning from K-12 environments (Chaplin, 2011; Connor, 2011; Hadley, 2006; Randolph, 2012), identity formation of persons with hidden disability (Valeras, 2010)—including the converging identities of being disabled and being an artist (Sulewski et al., 2012)—and systemic and localized barriers in higher education for students with LD (Johnston, 1984; Lambert & Dryer, 2018), and superior creativity of students with LD (Everatt, Steffert, & Smythe, 1999). Next, these themes will be discussed in turn.

School-to-College & First Year College Experience

For students with LDs, the transition from secondary to higher education can be daunting due to higher academic expectations, new social environments, and coming to terms with one's identity (Chaplin, 2011; Connor, 2011). In the 1990s and 2000s research shed light on the college experience for students with LD, focusing primarily on external means of support such as disability programs and services (Albert & Fairweather, 1990; Connor, 2011; Keim, McWhirter, & Bernstein, 1996). Though it is important to look at structural effects of college experience for students with LD, self-knowledge or individualized strategies for success should not be overlooked. After 2005, a small number of studies examined compensatory strategies developed by students with LDs to better understand how universities can provide accessible environments and better accommodations for them (Connor, 2011; Lewis & Lynn, 2018).

Hadley (2006) reported that students who self-advocate and communicate with their professor have an easier time transitioning to higher education, both emotionally and academically. Connor (2011) examined LD individual claims to agency through a narrative analysis that explores the academic, social, and emotional/personal realms of three LD students' transition into college. In the academic realm, students described

approaches that were varied and specific to their learning needs; at the same time, registering with disability services, claiming accommodation, notifying professors of their disability, managing time, and using prescription drugs were helpful for most participants.

Students navigating the social realm reported a wide range of experiences and approaches to adapt to higher education. Some prioritized academic life over social engagement for fear of losing focus or losing time to study, while others experienced difficulty finding accepting friends and turned to student groups to find peers with common interests. Connor (2011) also provides an intersectional analysis to identify the role that race, gender, social class, and sexual orientation play in coping with social and academic demands.

Managing emotions related to disability identity, self-disclosure, and self-acceptance were areas noted in qualitative research with students with LD. In Connor's (2011) study, all participants expressed varying degrees of ambivalence toward their LD labels, particularly in how they perceive themselves. For instance, one participant was reluctant to accept her label, but willingly disclosed her disability to obtain accommodations. Another participant fully accepted the Asperger label and had a keen self-awareness of the meaning and impact of his behaviors. Other studies highlight the emotional act of disclosure, which frequently triggers feelings of nervousness when speaking with professors (Hadley, 2006). Lastly, achieving independence and autonomy was essential to college students with LD for taking ownership of their disability and self-advocacy (Hadley, 2006).

Identity

Disability identity formation was an overarching topic that appeared consistently in the literature. For many students with LD, entering higher education is an opportunity to “refra[me] their disability and in relation to their identity” (Connor, 2011, p. 1007). Yet, for others, LD is central to the way they interact with the world (Connor, 2011). Learning disability and family therapist specialist Peter Troiano (2003) explored identity by examining how nine college students defined their LD, or rather, how they perceived themselves. His emergent theory, which he names “self-styled learning disability,” takes a number of variables into account including time of diagnosis, social/academic support, level of stigmatization, personality, willing to disclose one’s disability, determination level, and ability to self-advocate.

Ultimately, Troiano distinguishes four core identity categories: (1) *definition* - how the individual defines themselves; (2) *identity or locus of control* - whether the disability is external, internal, or hidden; (3) *condition* – whether the disability is permanent/fixed or can be modified with coping mechanisms and strategies; (4) *impact* – the extent to which their lives are affected by their disability. He concludes that LD is a “mitigating factor in psychosocial development of students” and argues that students with LDs should be taught to advocate for themselves and think creatively to effectively disclose their disability to college and university personnel (p. 418).

Probing further into the complex nature of disability identity, senior researcher associates from the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) analyzed the applications of 47 VSA Arts/Volkswagen competition finalists to elucidate “the role of the arts in the evolving identities of young artists with disabilities” (Boeltzig, Hasnain, & Sulewski,

2012, p. 15). While some participants identified primarily as “disabled,” others viewed themselves as “artists first,” meaning that disability played a role, but was not a defining feature of their identity. For most artists, artmaking helped them attain a level of “normalization” through being able to “demonstrate their value despite difficulties,” cope with challenging aspects of their disabilities, and fit in with peers (p. 15). According to the authors, “normalization” identity refers to “acceptance and achievement of the norms of the larger society, with or without acceptance of disability stigma” (Sulewski et al., 2012). For other artists, creating art and being exposed to disability arts and culture drove them toward a progressive “affirmation identity,” which is to accept disability as a primary identity and a source of “disability pride” (p. 15). In both cases, art played an integral role in helping students adopt more positive types of disability identities.

In “Locating Dyslexic Performance,” drama researcher Deborah Leveroy’s (2013) phenomenological study focuses on the relationship between dyslexia “text, identity and creativity” (p. 374). Similar to Sulewski et al. (2012), the arts significantly contributed to constructing a positive disabled identity. However, Leveroy (2013) argues that dyslexic actors can continuously alter or transform their identity through the “performance itself” or acting training, enabling a “re-connect[ion] with their bodies’ experience of being in the world and embrac[ing] their pre-reflective lived body” (p. 380). For instance, acting and performing can help dyslexic actors experience control and a “calmness” that is not experienced in everyday life. In addition, dyslexic actors can use negative experiences such as failure to connect with the characters they are portraying.

Clinical social worker Aimee Burke Valeras (2010) similarly seeks to understand “the process of personal identification (or lack thereof) with being ‘disabled,’” but

utilizes a narrative approach to address the complicated effects of disclosing and constructing hidden disability (p. 1). The stories of six participants reveal how “subtle, ambiguous, fluid, and constantly evolving the lived experience of hidden disability is,” especially when taking other identity categories such as race, gender, religion, culture, education, and so on into account (p. 17).

However, Valeras explains that people with hidden disabilities have a “constant decision-making process...to disclose or ‘pass,’” riding the tension between the dichotomous categories of ‘disabled’ and ‘normal’ or ‘able-bodied’ (p. 11). Angela, one of the participants in the study, suggests that persons with hidden disabilities are *bi-abled*, meaning they can selectively transform their identity depending on their needs within a particular context. This important finding exposes the anxiety and stress involved in having a hidden disability (split identity) as well as the potential to exert agency and power. Valeras (2010) and Connor (2011) highlight the importance that age, race, gender, and sexual orientation hold in identity-formation, recommending further studies that use intersectional analysis. Intersectional analysis examines “intersecting patterns between different structures of power and how people are simultaneously positioned—and position themselves—in multiple categories, such as gender, class and ethnicity” (Christensen & Jenson, 2012, p. 109). Rooted in Black feminism and critical race theory (Crenshaw, 1991), its primary aim is to examine how “social divisions are constructed and intermeshed with one another in specific historical conditions to contribute to the oppression of women” (Olesen, 2018, p. 158).

Barriers

Researchers have uncovered a range of barriers to development for higher education students with LD. School psychology professor Christopher Johnston (1984) looks at governmental constraints involved in assessment and diagnosis, advocating for new educational programs within colleges and universities. He provides a historical and foundational perspective on systemic barriers to providing adequate support for adults with LD at the collegiate level. He describes eight college programs for adults with LDs that reflect the philosophy of the school rather than adhering to guidelines of federal legislation. He suggests that a lack of consistent programming and models of intervention at the college level stunts academic growth for students with LD.

In Hazel Denhart's (2008) phenomenological study, students with dyslexia describe barriers to learning, including "excessive workload," feeling misunderstood by professors, and "difficulty with oral-phonological and written comprehension" (p. 492). For example, in an interview one participant remarked, "When I couldn't look at her lips, I couldn't tell the difference between some of the words she was saying" (p. 492). Denhart's study also reveals that students can be reluctant to disclose their disability, which is important in understanding issues of "invisibility." Despite the academic, social, and emotional success of participants in Connor's (2011) aforementioned study, each individual "felt pressure to leave college for various reasons," an emotional barrier that could potentially discourage students with LD from completing their degree (p. 26).

Further evidence that students with LD face challenges in a number of different domains was found in a qualitative study examining the quality of life of six students with LD studying in online higher education environments through a regional university

in New South Wales, Australia (Lambert & Dryer, 2018). Findings of the study indicated that online learning in higher education had a negative influence on students with LDs' quality of life in terms of psychological well-being (stress, anxiety, and self-esteem), social relationships, and financial situations, most of "which were frequently intricately related to the extra time and effort students invested in their studies in order to manage the learning challenges encountered" (p. 404). Connor (2011), Denhart (2008), Johnston (1984), and Lambert and Dryer (2018) contribute to knowledge of systemic and localized barriers for higher education students with LDs.

Creativity

Recent studies on the relationship between creativity and dyslexia examine hypotheses relating to organization of the brain in individuals with dyslexia and positive attributes that result from having dyslexia. Learning disability scholars Everatt et al. (1999) conducted four studies addressing the relationship between developmental dyslexia and "exceptional creativity ability," and specifically whether the right hemisphere of the brain (associated with visual-spatial processes) is larger than in individuals without dyslexia (p. 28). Findings show differences in creativity among dyslexics and non-dyslexics across a wide range of ages. Adults with dyslexia "presented consistent evidence of greater creativity in tasks requiring novelty or insight and more innovative styles of thinking" (p. 28). However, these abilities were unrelated to visual-spatial abilities associated with the right hemisphere of the brain.

Though neurological connections between creativity and dyslexia help substantiate strengths and advantages of learning disability, social (qualitative) illustrations of dyslexic artistic abilities offer insight into embodied knowledge of persons

with dyslexia. For example, Leveroy's (2013) study on dyslexic actors provided descriptive accounts of participants experiencing an effortlessness in improvising, thinking quickly, and going "off in a weird direction" (p. 383).

Researchers have also explored whether creativity in dyslexic adults might be associated with 'compensatory strategies' that arise from the need to adapt and cope with their environment. Psychology professor Ken Gobbo's (2010) study on the life and work of Robert Rauschenberg lends support for the 'compensatory strategies' hypothesis, further illuminating a connection between creativity and dyslexia. Rauschenberg's work has shaped art in the twentieth century through his unique creative process and approach that developed from his ability to see things in "fragments," identify details while seeing the larger picture, and "combine disparate elements in insightful ways" through different modalities of artistic expression - all of which "he gained from some of the visual differences he experienced as an artist with dyslexia" (par. 7-16). According to Gobbo, Rauschenberg gained courage and freedom through his education to take artistic risks as he felt he had nothing to lose when educators questioned his intelligence (par. 18).

Chapter Summary

Tracing historical definitions and models of disability in general, and LD in particular, provided a framework for understanding the complex nature of disability, including LD as a category of white, middle-class privilege and the related issue of access to accommodations. Though the number of students with disabilities in higher education programs is growing, little research on the topic is evident in academic journals in higher education. However, scholars have made progress examining the experiences of

students with LDs transitioning from high school to higher education, and numerous studies document the fluid and mutable process of identity formation for students with LD, including those involved in the arts. Research has uncovered systemic and individual barriers faced by students with LD, which can deter them from graduating and continuing higher education. The empirically substantiated connection between creativity and dyslexia along with other advantages to living with a LD offer a basis for positive disabled identities and a rationale for involvement in the arts.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Disability studies scholars have shown that “many disabled people have been excluded from full participation in knowledge production about their lives – even within disability studies” (Ignagni & Church, 2008, p. 633). For this dissertation, I aim to offer an alternative to studying people with disabilities by creating opportunities for dancers with LDs to actively engage in the research process. Six individuals with LDs studying dance at higher education institutions in the northeastern and midwestern regions of the United States engaged in one-to-one interviews and journal entries, also agreeing to be observed in their college dance classes, to expose perceived challenges, strategies, and experienced meanings of learning dance in higher education.

This chapter presents the research design created to conduct an interpretive qualitative inquiry. First, I identify key characteristics of a qualitative research methodology and discuss how my study fits within this tradition and why it is the most appropriate method for this dissertation. Next, I describe strategies and procedures utilized to recruit participants, collect and analyze data, and ensure anonymity and confidentiality. I conclude by substantiating the value of working within a qualitative methodology.

Research Design

The research design follows methodological premises and procedures of qualitative inquiry. A qualitative approach broadly studies social phenomena in the natural world to “elicit multiple constructed realities” grounded in perceptual experiences

(Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 53). The paradigm of qualitative research does not belong to a single discipline but emerged through cultural anthropology and American sociology in the early 1900s (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and has been adopted across numerous fields, including dance and education. Qualitative methods used to research students' perceptions of LD in higher education include narrative inquiry (Chaplin, 2011; Connor, 2011; Hadley, 2006; Valeras, 2010; Sulewski et al., 2012) phenomenology (Denhart, 2008; Randolph, 2012), ethnography (Gerber & Reiff, 1991), and grounded theory (Troiano, 2003).

While quantitative research uses statistical data collected in controlled environments to examine phenomena through an “objective” or positivist perspective for purposes of generalization to a population, qualitative inquiry relies on multiple sources to understand participant meanings in natural environments (Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative research is not limited to qualitative methods; some qualitative researchers employ mixed method approaches that combine statistical and interpretive analyses (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The researcher plays a central role in collecting data from interviews, observations, and other audio and visual sources, as well as analyzing and interpreting data. This means the “inquirer is typically involved in a sustained and intensive experience with participants” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 183). However, the goal of qualitative research is to feature participants' voices and meanings of a particular issue or topic.

In order to uphold a transparent participant-centered investigation, researchers demonstrate reflexivity by revealing any personal background, identity, and experiences that might shape the interpretation and direction of the study. Qualitative researchers

strive for holistic accounts in order to achieve understanding that “involves reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation” (p. 182).

Another distinguishing characteristic of qualitative inquiry is its emergent and flexible research design. Due to the complex and tenuous nature of studying vulnerable human beings, subtle and dramatic shifts can occur throughout the research process, requiring alterations to the initial research plan. For instance, changes in participation criteria, research questions, and forms of data collection can occur as the researcher delves deeper into the topic or phenomenon of study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

In data analysis, qualitative researchers use both inductive and deductive procedures. Inductive analysis is typically employed at the beginning of the analysis process to establish “categories and themes from the bottom up by organizing the data into increasingly more abstract units of information” (p. 181). Once a preliminary set of themes is established, researchers work deductively by “look[ing] back at their data from the themes to determine if more evidence can support each theme or whether they need to gather additional information” (p. 181). This analysis process is systematic yet comprehensive and multi-layered.

This study fits well in the qualitative paradigm as it aims to observe, describe, and understand the learning challenges, strategies, and benefits experienced by dancers with LD in the dance classroom. Drawing on multiple forms of data, I endeavor to centralize participants’ voices, interests, and personal motivations in order to understand and represent salient phenomena from their perspectives. Participants entered the research with diverse levels and kinds of dance training, parental support, and educational networks that enable them to self-advocate, revealing a complex web of corporeal

knowledge and disabled identities. Each student, therefore, creates their own meaning or reality based on their educational, cultural, and social background.

As noted above, qualitative research recognizes and values the subjective and interpretive role of the researcher but urges inquirers to reflexively identify preconceived notions and experiences that shape the research process. Living with multiple learning disabilities, I am well aware that I carry my own challenges and biases to the research process. As a member of the population I am studying, it is important to acknowledge experiences and biases that shape the nature of this dissertation and inform interpretation of findings.

In the beginning stages of this research, I sought to maintain a neutral stance through the phenomenological strategy of bracketing or setting aside personal theories and assumptions of disability; I feared that I might imprint the blueprint of my experiences onto the participants. However, during data analysis, I realized that interactions with participants were a dynamic exchange where mutual understanding often occurred. Recruitment and sampling are discussed in the next section.

Recruiting Methods and Participant Criteria

During the conceptualization phase of this project, I was keenly aware of the challenges I would likely face in recruiting dancers with LDs. As discussed in Chapter 2, the transition from high school to college for students with LD is a period where many individuals are eager to shed their disabled identity and weave themselves into the normalized fabric of college life. The likelihood of individuals voluntarily self-identifying as having a LD and discussing private information about their experiences of disability seemed improbable. Enlisting participants was a prolonged course of action that

involved several phases of revision. The first phase took place in the northeastern region of the United States during spring and fall semesters of 2014 and migrated to the Midwest for the second phase of the project during fall semester 2015.

The first phase of recruitment employed a convenience sampling method by collaborating with Disability Resource Services (DRS) facilities and dance departments at five universities located in the New York/New Jersey/Eastern Pennsylvania (NY/NJ/Eastern PA) region of the United States. Convenience sampling is used to gather informants in a geographic location that is convenient or accessible to the researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). At the outset, I planned to recruit eight to ten participants from private and public universities with Bachelor of Arts/Science (BA, BS) or Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) programs in dance. My intention in selecting an assortment of public and private universities was to consider varying levels of academic support systems. For instance, a private university might offer students more substantial academic support than public universities.

Though most of the institutions I contacted supported the research endeavor in principle, some institutions mandated strict requirements that I felt compromised the integrity of the study. For instance, one university insisted that a dance faculty member from their institution serve as a principle investigator (PI) or primary advisor for the study, granting the individual a position of influence and authority that could potentially undermine my intended research methods and procedures. I decided to forego working with the institution.

For the first phase of recruitment, I created strict parameters for participation, seeking only dance students with clinically verified LDs. As indicated in previous

chapters, very few studies have been conducted that specifically focus on dancers with LDs. For the purpose of filling the knowledge gap and safeguarding the “authenticity” of the LD label, I required students to provide government and/or medical documentation to participate in the study.

To delimit the scope of the population and establish consistency among participants, I utilized purposeful sampling. According to Hays and Singh (2012), purposeful sampling involves developing specific criteria of the sample prior to the study. Sampling criteria included the following: eighteen years of age or above; holds government documentation of an LD; is majoring or minoring in a university dance program; and is a part-time or full-time student enrolled in at least one dance technique class (for example, modern, ballet, jazz,) and one dance composition or other creativity-based course (for example, creative process, dance improvisation). Due to the cost of regularly updating LD documentation, which can range between \$500-\$2,500 dollars, I did not require students to submit current documentation (Adult learning disability assessment process). Students with LD and concomitant disabilities, for example, Dyslexia and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), were also welcome to participate.

Due to a low response rate from eligible students, after one semester of recruiting at six higher education institutions, I extended my study to neighboring universities in the northeast region of the United States. In the end, I contacted twelve universities and colleges in the NY/NJ/Eastern PA region, and was approved to recruit at the following: Temple University, Drexel University, Rowan University, Purchase College at State University of New York, Bryn Mawr College, Ursinus College, Cedar Crest College, and Rider University (See Appendix A).

In addition to broadening the range of recruitment sites, I revised the participation criteria to encompass a more inclusive and accessible demarcation of disability. Requiring students to have government and/or medical documentation to authenticate disability not only limited the range of individuals that could participate, but correspondingly infringed upon a definition of disability (LD) that endorses a self-selected claiming of “crip” based on ever changing corporeal and embodied experiences. The sampling criterion was consequently modified from having “government documentation of a LD” to “identifies as having a learning disability;” the remaining sample criteria were unaltered. This shift in criteria did see an increase in numbers of potential participants.

Nearly ten months later, I recruited individuals from the midwestern region of the United States to participate, transforming the project into a multi-regional study. Since the midwestern region encompasses a vast number of states and localities, I delimited the site to the state of Michigan, specifically the western corridor. Out of the ten colleges and universities I contacted, seven of the following were able and willing to support the project: Michigan State University, Oakland University, Grand Valley State University, Hope College, Calvin University, Eastern Michigan University, and Western Michigan University.

During each phase of the recruitment process within the northeast and midwestern regions, I employed a multimodal approach, as this seemed to be the most effective method to gain access to a large quantity or pool of students. First, I sent a mass e-mail to dance students through LISTSERVs of the DRS and dance departments. Next, I posted flyers throughout each campus, hoping to catch the attention of a large array of

individuals (See Appendix B). Though these methods were effective in disseminating information about the study, the most successful avenue for recruiting participants involved a more personal and tangible approach.

With the permission of each program, I attended a designated gathering or dance assembly to speak with students about the project. I typically introduced myself as a graduate student from Temple University, provided a brief overview of the study (purpose, criteria to participate, etc.), and explained why I was conducting the research, including that I am a dancer with a LD. The intent in revealing my disability was not simply to communicate the motivation behind the study, but to provide a safe space for students to “come out” as having a LD.

After disclosing my personal connection to the study, several students and dance faculty approached me afterward to express gratitude for exposing my disability. In fact, one student explained that she had the courage to volunteer once she heard that I, too, had a disability. Students interested in participating in the study received a follow up e-mail with a consent form and a description of the protocol of the study (See Appendices C, D, E).

Recruiting participants to partake in the study took longer than anticipated due to obstacles related to access and reticence from potential participants. The first challenge I encountered occurred during the initial stages of recruitment in the Northeast. When presenting the research to dance chairs, four denied access to recruit individuals to participate. One dance director openly critiqued my research plan and would only consider allowing me to recruit dancers if I amended the research procedures, while others expressed their concern about exposing students with LDs in their programs.

Several schools in the Northeast also required rigorous Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol procedures, which likely discouraged faculty members from engaging in the study. While these concerns were reasonable, they delayed the recruitment process and, in one case, denied access to a program that was known for accommodating students with disabilities. Despite these setbacks, several colleges and universities in the northeastern region expressed interest and enthusiasm for the project.

The next challenge I encountered was the small number of dance majors and minors who self-identified as having a LD. As noted earlier, it is not uncommon for students with LDs to try to shed their disabled identity when they begin college; it is uncertain, however, as to why a small number of dancers do self-identity as having a LD. Within the small pool students that expressed interest in the study, three students from the Midwest opted out of the study due to heavy workloads and school commitments. The additional stress of carving out time to meet for interviews, write reflections, and be observed by a researcher might have deterred some students from participating.

Another possible explanation for the small number of self-identifying dancers with LDs in higher education came to my attention while speaking with a chair of a dance department during the recruitment phase. During our conversation, I mentioned the meager support I was receiving from dance departments as well as the low response rate from dancers with LDs to participate in the study. During this brief encounter, they shared the story of their child, a dancer with a LD who struggled to keep up in a dance program at a neighboring institution. When their child approached the chair of the dance department to receive help, they were denied assistance. Since no one was willing to help, they dropped out of the program. This casual informant suggested that the

experience was not an anomaly; they had heard of similar incidences with other students with LDs in dance programs. They suggested that the demands of academic life and responsibilities required of dance majors (dance rehearsals, classes, etc.) can be too much for dancers with LDs to manage. While I know of no statistical evidence to support the claim, it speaks to the exclusivity that can occur in higher education dance, affirming the need for research on challenges facing dancers with LDs higher education. In spite of the challenges to access and reticence of potential participants, three women in the northeastern region and three women in the Midwest region of the U.S. elected to participate in this study. The next section presents data collection methods designed to unearth experiential understandings of dancers with LDs in higher education dance programs.

Data Collection

I gathered qualitative data through one-to-one informal and in-depth interviews (audio and/or video recorded)—two per participant, non-participant observations, and participant reflective journals. At the outset of recruitment in each region, I invited students to engage in an informal interview to gather baseline biographical information, including a brief history of their dance training, how they came to select their BFA/BA/BS dance program, and when they were diagnosed with or began to identify as having a learning disability (see Appendix F). Preliminary interviews took place at a convenient location on the student's college/university campus.

Within the first two months of the semester in each region, I conducted a 60-minute in-depth interview with each participant at their university or a nearby location

(see Appendix G). According to Catherine Marshall and Gretchen Rossman (2006), qualitative in-depth interviews are purposeful conversations that value and rely on the autonomous ability of the interviewee to formulate and frame responses to research questions. The primary goal of interviews in the present study was to privilege participants' views and perspectives of the "phenomenon of interest" (van Manen, 1997) or central research question (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 101). Interview questions were formulated to gain a holistic understanding of each dance student's experience of their LD while also revealing issues and challenges that are particular to their everyday life. Several interview questions were designed to elicit clear and evocative descriptions that depict feelings, moods, bodily sensations, and sensory impressions of the student's perceptions of taking dance studio classes (van Manen, 1997), particularly in relation to learning challenges and accomplishments. Other questions prompted students to offer suggestions and insights in relation to learning experiences, teaching practices, and accommodations.

Throughout the interview process I encountered hurdles and setbacks that necessitated inventive solutions to forge ahead. A major challenge was scheduling interviews. In addition to the reality that dance students typically have very full schedules with classes, rehearsals, and other obligations, dancers with LDs mentioned that they have to work harder to manage their schedules and allot sufficient time for studying, which for some, can take twice as long as their peers. Consequently, several participants had only small windows of time to meet for interviews. Further, students occasionally forgot to attend interviews, which required another round of scheduling. Technological dysfunctions occurred that required re-interviewing on several occasions.

On a self-reflexive note, a significant challenge was conducting research as a disabled person, particularly with other individuals with disabilities—specifically, accommodating for one’s own needs while staying attuned to the needs of participants. Moments of dissonance occurred during one-on-one interviews, as they required an intense degree of verbal processing and memory retrieval. Perhaps the most difficult aspect of interviewing was responding to what students were saying with appropriate follow up questions. Similarly, sometimes participants did not initially understand my questions since they also had difficulty processing verbal information. However, clarifying questions was sometimes advantageous, as it helped distill my queries and stimulated related topics of conversation.

Communication barriers surfaced when I interviewed students in loud, public locations. Though I tried to avoid noisy environments, on two occasions I was not able to secure a quiet room, and it was extremely difficult to hear and understand what participants were saying; on these occasions I experienced severe fatigue and a throbbing headache, which compromised my cognitive faculties. To help navigate through the challenges I encountered, I devised simple strategies that would aid my ability to listen to and comprehend information. For instance, to aid memory, I jotted down key words to help me remember important topics that I could refer back to. I also made it a priority to convene in a quiet room and allotted moments of silence between questions to fully absorb participants’ responses.

During the observation phase of data collection, I attended two 60- to 120-minute dance classes of each participant—one technique class and one composition or improvisational dance class. Marshall and Rossman (2006) define observation within the

realm of qualitative research as a “systematic noting and recording of events, behaviors, and artifacts (objects) in a social setting chosen for study” (p. 98). Aiming to capture complex interactions unfolding in the dance educational setting, I observed and described the physical environment of the dance studio, interactions between individuals (student and teacher, peer-to-peer), and the student’s actions in the class.

As an education researcher, I assume that “behavior is purposeful and expressive of deeper values and beliefs” (p. 98). My role as a non-participant observer was intended to invite an additional perspective to the experiential accounts of students. Witnessing participants within their respective dance environments brought stories and anecdotes from the interviews to life, offering an array of intersecting and divergent insights and discernments. Observing students often validated and sometimes contradicted the strengths and/or challenges that students articulated in interview. In either case, observations provided a multilayered component to understanding perceptions of dancers with LD in higher education.

In order for students to take an active participatory role in the research process, I invited them to maintain a journal over the course of the semester using Max van Manen’s (1997) guidelines for capturing lived experience (see Appendix G). Each week students were asked to write for ten to fifteen minutes about vivid, memorable moments in their dance studio classes (technique, improvisation and composition) using descriptive language that attended to “bodily feelings and sensory impressions” while avoiding causal explanations and generalizations. I also gave students the option of creating an “audio journal” in which they could verbally record their experience as opposed to writing. However, students overall felt encumbered by the task due to other pressing

school assignments and outside responsibilities; three participants reported via e-mail that they were not able to complete their journals due to the extra time it required of them. Despite this circumstance, this small source of student descriptions provided perspectives that interviews did not capture.

Once the interviews and observations were completed, I planned to moderate two 60-minute group interviews with participants in each region who were comfortable disclosing their identity and experiences with each other. The purpose was to hone information from participants concerning the topic of interest (Lichtman, 2010). Using a semi-structured approach, I hoped to facilitate group interviews in each region by raising predetermined questions based on queries that emerged from individual interviews and to pose questions or discussion topics based on themes that emerged from their reflective journals and/or interviews. The focus groups were also intended to provide a supportive environment for students to share their stories, stimulate each other's thinking, and possibly empathize with one another. Dialogue might have also triggered memories or feelings that were overlooked or discounted in early stages of the study. Unfortunately, the focus groups were eliminated for both phases of the project as I was unable to find a time and day that students within each region were available.

As a researcher working within a qualitative research paradigm, my personal involvement in multiple stages of the study could present ethical challenges. In order to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, I established ethical procedures, which I will discuss in the next section.

Ethical Procedures: Anonymity and Confidentiality

As mentioned previously, the study's ethical design was approved by the Temple University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Interested participants who met the qualifications of the study were given an e-mail with a cover letter outlining the research design, protocols, and individual responsibilities with an attached consent form for participants to complete and bring to the first individual interview (see APPENDICES C, D, E). During the first interview, I verbally explained my intentions for the project, the rationale for the research, and my intention to publish findings. I also verbally reviewed the consent form with each participant to ensure understanding, including the right to refuse consent or withdraw from the project at any time, as well as give verbal consent to audio record interviews.

When observing students in their respective dance environments, I was careful not to disclose the name of the student I was observing to the instructor or the class. However, most of the instructors were already aware of students with LDs in their classrooms through student self-disclosure and/or disability documentation to receive accommodation. In an attempt to prevent the "outing" or exposure of the student to her peers, I was vigilant in casting my focus on all of the students. I also positioned myself in an area of the studio that did not draw attention to the student or make my observation of the student apparent.

Participation in the research did not place students at physical, psychological, or financial risk, but could conceivably have created emotional uneasiness in recalling painful or unpleasant memories in their dance education. To safeguard students from

unforeseen emotional risk and align with the Institutional Review Board's (IRB) ethical procedures, I informed students that their privacy would be protected through the use of pseudonyms and assured them that they were not obligated to answer interview questions and could withdraw from the interview at any time if they felt uncomfortable. Students were given transcripts of the interviews and a final copy of the dissertation prior to publication to make any clarifications or amendments to the content.

Data Analysis

Qualitative researchers have related data analysis to peeling back layers of an onion or continuously mining for meaning (Creswell, 2009; van Manen, 1997). Though I systematically examined the data from interviews, student journals, and classroom observations, it was an iterative and capricious course of action that steered me down circuitous pathways. I began the journey by immersing myself in the data—reading each interview transcript three times and writing notes in the margins pertaining to my initial impressions, key phrases, and personal biases. Reading each transcript in its entirety afforded a holistic sense of the participant and their meanings dancing with LD. During the second read through of the interviews, I highlighted key and repetitive phrases/words as well as evocative descriptions that helped reveal a participant's core ideas. For the third examination of the interviews, I paid careful attention to existing highlighted phrases and comments and began to form connections between them.

Once I completed reading the interviews, I wrote informal summaries of findings for each participant based on the notes I wrote in transcript margins. From these summaries I developed a list of intersecting and repeating concepts that appeared across interview transcripts. Next, I coded the transcripts by assigning labels to selected

segments of text (Creswell, 2008). Coding is defined as the “process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to information” (Creswell, 2009, p. 186).

The first round of coding culled the direct phrases and language of the participants, which drama researcher and qualitative methods specialist Johnny Saldana (2014) calls “in vivo” coding. Focalizing participants’ exact words was important to support the intention that researcher bias would not interfere with privileging the stories and perceptions of dancers with learning disabilities. Once a list of “in vivo” codes was compiled, I grouped phrases into specific categories that materialized in all of the interviews. Initial categories included identity and individuality, therapeutic elements of dance, uniqueness, dance as home, and disability dialogue.

To achieve a yet more comprehensive understanding of the data, I conducted an additional round of coding for three interviews. Selected interviews not only illustrated student experiences but were notable for clarity and vibrancy of participant perceptions as expressed in descriptions, interpretations, and evaluations. Descriptive data included phenomena that are observable and have face value (for example, they stood next to each other, holding hands); interpretation encompasses unique perceptions that others might or might not relate to that form “a plausible hypothesis about the meaning” (for example, she was only dancing with herself); and evaluation involves making a judgment (for example, she was a horrible teacher) (Oliver, 2010, p. 85). To ensure that all participants’ experiences were fully examined, I devised individual summaries of the remaining three students who were not included in the supplementary profile analysis with initial

categories derived from “in vivo” codes. Abbreviated and extensive profiles of all six participants were integral to the next stage of analysis.

After several cycles of coding, I assembled similar and overlapping codes to generate categories and subcategories. In addition, I collated the “in vivo” codes from all transcriptions and profiles according to preliminary interview questions (see APPENDIX F) and semi-structured interview questions (see APPENDIX G). Grouping codes according to research question allowed me to compare distilled student responses while maintaining the contextual integrity of the topic. For example, codes pertaining to interview questions addressing learning/coping strategies in the dance classroom were grouped together.

The method for analyzing observation notes was similar to that for interviews and journals but necessitated a slightly altered technique. The first round of coding delineated between objective information (physical environment, demographics, time, etc.), behavioral observations, and personal suppositions. I did not create independent themes from this material since the data were drawn predominantly from the researcher’s perspective. During the interpretation phase of analysis, I identified parallel and dissonant connections between my observations and participants’ reflections on their studio dance classes. As mentioned earlier, findings drawn from this phase of analysis reinforced and added another layer of interpretation from the interviews/journals.

Finally, through distillation of codes, I generated preliminary themes. During this part of the analysis, I began to consider interpretations and integrate theoretical concepts to bring further meaning and coherence to the themes. I eliminated one theme and performed another layer of analysis. I revisited my research questions and organized

themes to better assess their relationship to experienced meanings, strategies, and challenges to learning dance in higher education dance programs. During the final stage of analysis, I conducted an inductive analysis that determined the thematic content for Chapter 6. Chapters 4 through 6 present a detailed presentation of research findings.

Peeling back the layers to get to the crux of students' experiences in the dance classroom was an ongoing and sometimes unwieldy process. Though the effort to examine the data was predominantly conducted during the "data analysis" stage of the project, impressions and inklings began while collecting the data and continued to be refined through the course of articulating the findings.

Concluding Thoughts

The value of orienting this study within a qualitative methodology lies in its fundamental intent to understand "a particular social situation, event, role, group of interaction" through subjective and intersubjective understandings and perspectives of participants and the researcher within a natural setting (Creswell, 2009, p.194). Students with LDs, a vulnerable and often hidden population, were offered a platform to articulate their experiences, insights, and ideas on learning dance in higher education through various channels of communication.

In the next three chapters, I present findings related to the central research foci of challenges, strategies, and experienced meanings for dance students with LDs in higher education. I provide multiple viewpoints through participants' individual voices, along with what disability scholar Margaret Price (2011) refers to as a "reciprocity of perspectives" or shared meanings" (p. 131). I feature the words of participants

intentionally to acknowledge the power and authority of their experiences as the core data for the study.

CHAPTER 4

PROFILES OF COURAGE

Through an extended process of recruitment, six female dancers agreed to share their life experiences, memories, stories, and insights pertaining to LD and dance in higher education. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 22 and hailed from four institutions of higher education, two in Pennsylvania and two in Michigan, with three student participants in each state. Participants represent a spectrum of ability with varying backgrounds, levels of dance training, personalities, and disabled identities. This chapter begins with brief biographical sketches of each participant to contextualize and unearth their distinctive backgrounds and histories. I then present qualitative findings related to the first question, which asks what challenges these dancers with LDs encounter in their higher education dance programs.

Introducing the Dancers

The three dancer participants in the northeastern region of the United States are introduced first, followed by the three in the midwestern region. To protect students' anonymity, pseudonyms are employed throughout the dissertation.

Audrey

I first met Audrey during a recruitment visit at her college. I vividly remember the moment she approached me to express her excitement and interest in joining the study. She shared how dance has played an integral role in her life and that she would love to share her experiences with me. Audrey began her dance training at age four, primarily

studying classical ballet in a traditional dance studio setting in northeast Pennsylvania. At age 14, she was badly injured in an automobile accident, resulting in a traumatic brain injury (TBI). Though her doctors initially told her she would never dance again, months of physical and dance therapy strengthened her ability to dance. Audrey's experience of relearning patterns of movement through therapeutic modalities, as well as witnessing improvement in others, motivated her to pursue a degree in psychology and minor in theater and dance.

When I interviewed Audrey during spring 2015, she was 22 years old and finishing her senior year. Audrey seemed to have a strong grasp of her identity as a person with a disability. When asked how she identifies herself, she explained "when I'm in a physical environment, I call it a movement limitation, and then in an academic environment...just a processing problem or a learning disability...or a learning difference" (Audrey, 1st interview, 2015). Depending on the context, Audrey applies a term that enables her to navigate and adapt to her environment.

Zoe

Like Audrey, Zoe and I met during a recruitment visit. When Zoe approached me to be a part of the study, she disclosed that she had schizophrenia. During this phase of the project, I was operating under the first sample criterion, which required students to have a documented LD. I informed her by email that she did not meet the sampling criterion for the project, but that I would contact her if I elected to broaden the study. Once the study criterion was amended, I immediately contacted her; she was available and willing to participate.

Zoe's attraction to dance began at age three while attending her older sister's dance performance. Eager to follow in her sister's footsteps, she requested to be enrolled in dance classes. Zoe explained that although her training began at age three, she had only been dancing for approximately ten years since her involvement in dance had been inconsistent. She initially studied dance at a studio in Queens, New York, and then took classes in her public school before returning to her studio in high school. Just before college, she took classes at another public school in New York. Though her training fluctuated over time, she was exposed to and became adept in multiple styles of dance, including African, ballet, hip-hop, jazz, modern, and tap.

When I interviewed Zoe in spring 2015, she was 21 years old and in her second year of her dance program. Her decision to major in dance stemmed from a desire to pursue a career in dance/movement therapy. Like Audrey, her personal involvement in dance therapy, though sometimes negative, was associated with the motivation to improve the lives of others. Zoe became aware of her disability at the age of 15 when she started hearing voices in school. She "learn[s] to manage the difference" through medication and other coping mechanisms, but it is stressful to hear and see things that others do not (Zoe, 1st interview, 2015). Though she identifies as having schizophrenia, she does not self-identify as having a disability, perhaps due to the stigma of mental illness. Zoe revealed,

I don't identify myself as anything because I feel like that lessens the value of who I am...because when people say that and broadcast it, that's when people start lookin' at you differently. (2015)

Zoe is selective in disclosing her disability, but feels comfortable to do so with close family, friends, and dance faculty members at her university.

Leah

Again, my first encounter with Leah took place during a recruitment visit. Unlike the other participants, Leah waited to approach me until the room had cleared and I was leaving the building. She greeted me with a warm smile and said she had a LD and would like to be a part of the study. Our conversation continued as we walked from the dance studio to the entrance of the building. Without hesitation, she bluntly stated that she was diagnosed with ADHD in high school and had struggled with school all her life. I was pleasantly surprised by her candor and willingness to open up after just meeting me.

When I interviewed Leah in spring 2015, she was an eighteen-year-old freshman, minoring in dance. She had just made the decision to withdraw from the dance major program, opting to minor in dance as an alternative to keep dancing. Leah's dance journey began in first grade, when her mother enrolled her in a creative movement class. In sixth grade (age 12), she started to explore tap, ballet, and jazz dance in a traditional studio setting, ballet being her dance genre of choice. She continued to study ballet and jazz dance in high school but switched to a private arts school to focus her energy on ballet training and expand her dance repertoire to include modern dance.

While discussing Leah's experience of her LD in dance, she stated that ADHD does not directly affect her dancing. Leah explained that in academic contexts, particularly when taking tests, she receives extended time through her LD documentation. However, she does not think of herself as disabled or having a LD. According to Leah,

Everyone has ADD at some level, like everyone gets distracted...everyone procrastinates, everyone wants a little more time, but I just so happen to be lucky enough to actually get the extra time. (initial interview, 2015)

Noting the extra time she receives, Leah describes herself as lucky in her status as a student with LD. Her definition of disability is akin to the social model.

Olivia

During fall semester 2015, I received an e-mail from Oliva conveying interest to participate in the study. In contrast to previous participants, I did not have the opportunity to connect with Olivia in person prior to interviewing her. During our initial interview, she exuded a buoyant energy. When discussing what initially attracted her to dance, she revealed that her mother had been a professional dancer with a contemporary company based in the suburbs of a midwestern city. Olivia's mother was pregnant with her while she was dancing in the company. In her words, "it kind of just happened, and I came out of the womb dancing, so I never looked back" (Olivia, 1st interview p.1).

When Olivia was three years old, her mother enrolled her in creative movement classes where she recalls floating like a butterfly and twirling ribbons around. During her formative years, she trained in classical ballet at several dance studios, or wherever her mother was teaching, before settling at one particular school from age nine until she graduated from high school. Olivia also danced with her high school dance team, where she engaged in several styles of dance including pom, hip-hop, and jazz dance. She is a transfer student at her current university.

During the time I met Olivia, she was 22 years old and was completing her senior year of a BFA Dance program. She became aware of her disability in fifth grade when she began to struggle with learning in school and "was always in trouble for something," mostly for being rambunctious (2015). In 2013, she was tested and diagnosed with mild ADHD, a diagnosis she wishes she had received earlier in life; she explains,

It was challenging for me because I didn't know what was wrong and I was like why the heck am I not getting these things and everyone else can get them? (2015)

Olivia prefers to be identified as having ADHD because, she says, "then I know what I have" (2015). However, she does not openly disclose her disability to many people as she does not think it is necessary but will if someone enquires about it or shares that they, too, have ADHD.

Sophie

After a recruitment visit to a midwestern school, Sophie e-mailed me to express interest in participating in the study. On a fall afternoon in 2015, I met Sophie for the first time for our preliminary interview; she greeted me with a soft-spoken voice and warm smile. At the time of the interview, Sophie was an eighteen-year-old beginning her freshman year in a dance major program. Discussing Sophie's dance background, she humorously noted that she "didn't have much of a choice" when her mother enrolled her in ballet, tap, and jazz dance classes at a local recreation center in New Jersey (Sophie, 1st interview, 2015). Today she is grateful for her mother's decision, as she cannot envision her life without dance.

When Sophie was eight years old, she began experimenting with hip-hop and lyrical dance, which continued until she moved to another state in eighth grade, where she joined a competitive dance studio. In high school, she danced in a company at her high school while continuing to train at the competitive studio; it was this point in time that Sophie discovered modern dance, a genre that inspired her to pursue dance in higher education.

Sophie identifies as having a LD due to her struggles with anxiety and depression. During the second semester of her freshman year in high school, she recalls an incident where she experienced suicidal thoughts and a compulsion to self-harm. Though she does not verbally state that she has a LD, issues with mental health have inadvertently affected learning in and outside the dance classroom. However, dance has fulfilled a cathartic role in her life and aided in her creative and personal expression.

Danielle

At a recruitment visit in the Midwest, a professor in the dance department informed me that a student expressed interest in the project after seeing a flyer in the hallway. Immediately after speaking with the students, that student eagerly approached me to volunteer for the study. Danielle's earliest childhood dancing memories trace back to pre-ballet/ballet classes when she was two years of age. Since then, her training has included an amalgamation of ballet (ten years), jazz (ten years), modern/contemporary (five years), pointe (two to three years), tap (eight years), and hip-hop (five years). From ages two to 13, she trained at a park district dance studio and joined its dance company when she was in fifth grade. After injuring herself in eighth grade, she quit the company and switched to a different studio, where she joined its dance company.

When I met Danielle in fall 2015, she was a twenty-year-old junior majoring in dance (BFA). Though she initially planned to major in nursing, she discovered that a career in dance was the only thing she imagined herself doing. Growing up, Danielle had an aversion to reading, and noticed that she could sometimes read upside down and backwards, often mixing letters with numbers. She recalls telling her mother, "Mom, I think I'm dyslexic" (Danielle, 1st interview, 2015). It wasn't until her first year of college,

however, that she began to self-identify as having dyslexia. Danielle also mentioned that she was diagnosed with anxiety and depression disorders, but mostly associates herself as having an anxiety disorder.

Challenges to Learning, Creating, and Performing Dance

As discussed in Chapter 3, data for this study are drawn primarily from one-to-one interviews, supplemented by class observations and student journals, to illuminate meanings of university student dancers with self-identified LDs. In presenting the findings of this study, I seek to preserve the integrity of participant meanings while also providing a focused and accessible text for the reader. To support the latter value, I use direct quotations from interviews and journal entries, eliminating unproductive repetition and other forms of extraneous language, such as filler words, for example: “like”, “um”, and “so” that could obfuscate students’ key meanings.

Initially, I was reluctant to introduce research findings with “problem” aspects of disability, as this could be perceived as falling into a deficit-based narrative of disability or the familiar trope of “overcoming disability” that is frequently depicted in the media. An ableist narrative typically begins by featuring the diagnosis or “problem” of an individual with a disability, positioning disability as a tragedy or loss. As the story progresses, the individual slowly or suddenly overcomes or defeats disability through determination or easy solution. However, in affiliation with Tobin Siebers’ (2013) theory of complex embodiment, “deficits” do not reside solely within the dancers but through the particular ways that the institutional provision of higher education dance fails to offer inclusive learning, instead exacerbating or even creating challenges for dancers with LDs.

Additionally, exposing challenges provides a context for dancers' motivations to create inventive learning strategies in higher education dance programs, a topic addressed in Chapter 5.

As discussed in Chapter 2, learning disabilities are difficult to define, and can present themselves in subtle and obvious ways. In their article on college students with LDs, Frances K. Stage and Nancy V. Milne (1996) write, "The casual observer may not realize that difficulty processing information can cause a person to cope differently from others in learning and living situations" (p. 2). Unlike academic settings where students with LDs can often choose to remain "invisible" by listening, reading, and writing within the confines of their desks, dance technique and composition classes require corporeal demonstration of knowledge and understanding, which obliges the student with a LD to confront and expose their limitations. One participant aptly describes this unique visibility of students in dance education: "It's really obvious if you're not there, like mentally or focused. It's really obvious cuz you'll see it in the dancing" (Leah, 2nd interview, p. 22).

Expanding participation criteria from requiring a documented LD to *identifying* as having a LD shifted my conceptualization and approach to discussing "challenges" of dancers with LDs. Initially I was concerned that the term "learning disability" would dissolve into an amorphous marker of difference. However, loosening the criteria deepened and focused the analysis on processes of learning, creating, and performing dance, as opposed to participants' specific types of disability. Examining the data revealed a spectrum of individual challenges as well as some shared by all by one participant.

Participant accounts depict a multifaceted and nuanced portrait of how challenges in learning, creating, and performing choreography manifest and intersect in the dance classroom. Witnessing students in their dance classes often verified and brought to life individual challenges discussed in interviews and described in journal entries, particularly the more visible ones related to physical impairment or movement recall. In some cases, however, observations contradicted messages students conveyed in interviews and journal entries, occasionally exposing challenges that were not discussed or were downplayed in conversations with students.

As “dance engages all aspects of the brain, body, and mind” (Warburton, 2011, p. 67), I will not parse down dance students’ described challenges according to a short list of traditional categorical frameworks such as physical, emotional, cognitive, and social. As discussed in Chapter 2, these functions integrate in complex ways in learning, creating and performing dance (Connor, 2011; Hadley, 2006). Instead, I stay close to participants’ own finer-grained lived experience constructs of challenge to identify shared and discrete meanings, many of which, broadly speaking, hinge on questions of embodiment. Findings in this chapter are interpreted through theories of embodiment, including the “embodiment thesis,” which posits that “mental activity depends ... on the body” (Legrand, Grunbaum, Krueger, 2009, p. 279), Sieber’s (2008) “theory of complex embodiment,” described in Chapter 2, and the “cognitive load hypothesis,” which considers the limitations of shifting attention from one task to another (Warburton et al., 2013).

“My LD”

Five participating dancers tied a variety of challenges in their dance technique classes to their individual LDs, although several did not wish to label themselves as “disabled.” Leah was the only participating dancer who did not attribute challenges to her LD.

Audrey associates her challenges with a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). Most of the time she can remember specific movements, but has difficulty executing them physically, which inhibits her from learning choreography quickly and accurately:

I can visualize myself doing things, but the actual motor coordination of doing it might take more time, like...with the weight distribution of my foot, it took me four weeks to be able to input that correction to my routine, but now that I can do it, I’m not going to forget it. (Audrey, 2nd interview, p. 19)

Audrey’s description draws attention to the symbiotic relationship between cognition and body in the process of learning, a premise of the embodiment thesis, which postulates:

Many features of cognition are embodied in that they are deeply dependent upon characteristics of the physical body of an agent, such that the agent’s beyond-the-brain body plays a significant causal role, or a physically constitutive role, in that agent’s cognitive processing. (Wilson & Foglia, 2011, p. 7)

Audrey’s dyspraxia from TBI limits her ability to correctly perform choreography, yet rigorous practice ultimately contributes to the cognitive process of memory retrieval. Observing her “open level” (beginning to advanced) ballet class elaborated some of the challenges of her LD as described in interview, such as balance. During *plié*, *tendu*, and *dégagé* warm up exercises, she performed movements correctly, but struggled with balance when required to hold a position in *relevé* and when returning to standing erect from *port de bra* moving forward and back.

Zoe's LD, Schizophrenia, also involves two kinds of embodiment challenges: she can struggle to achieve and maintain focus but also become hyper-focused on movement tasks. As noted above, Zoe's challenge with focus occurs when she hears voices, a condition of her schizophrenia. During both interviews, she described how focus affects her ability to perform choreography. Her descriptive accounts relating to focus convey dichotomy; she might struggle to achieve and maintain focus or become hyper-focused, both resulting in inadequate performance of movement phrases. Zoe articulated the tension between these competing states while discussing challenges she experienced in a ballet class that I observed:

A challenge is staying focused and trying not to overthink or over articulate something... I try to manipulate it so many times that I either get it wrong and become overly frustrated or just do it right and stop. (Zoe, 2nd interview, p. 10)

To gain a clearer picture, I asked Zoe to give a specific example. She continued,

Even when we're doing *frappés*, your leg is supposed to be right here on the foot [points to bottom of her ankle] and I would probably hit it once or twice and then cross it a couple more times. I wanna get it right, but I'll over think it. (p. 10)

In the above description, Zoe's desire to perform the movement correctly challenges her capacity to fully attend to performing *frappés*. Zoe's description, which reveals the detrimental effects of shifting attention from one task to another, is reflective of the cognitive load hypothesis, which contends that "cognitive resources are limited, and to allocate attention and processing power to one task is to rob from any other task with overlapping resource needs" (Warburton, Wilson, Lynch, & Cuykendall, 2013, p. 1733). The term emanates from the burgeoning area of dance cognition, which is rooted in cognitive science, a "loose affiliation of disciplines" including "cognitive psychology,

neuroscience, artificial intelligence, linguistics, and philosophy” (Warburton, 2011, p. 66). The “embodied-cognitive load hypothesis” is useful in conceptualizing what can occur when attention shifts from the task at hand and why one might struggle to focus during such moments.

Zoe explained that when she loses focus, she forgets movement sequences: “I’ll find myself going across the floor and not knowing what to do or realizing I didn’t pay attention enough to know what to do” (Zoe, 2nd interview, p. 11). I captured such a moment in class when I observed her “weaving in and out of performing the prompted movements” (Zoe, Ballet observation, May 27, 2015). I wrote, “At the beginning of the combination, Zoe did different movements from the rest of the class but caught herself and got back on track” (May 27, 2015). The attentional control theory is useful in understanding how distracting thoughts or foci directly affect working memory. According to Eysenck et al. (2007), one of the effects of worry is that it can act as “cognitive interference,” preventing “processing and temporary storage of working memory” (p. 337).

Olivia’s main challenge is learning new choreography quickly and directional changes. A journal entry from November 9, 2015 encapsulates Olivia’s frustrations: “We learned all new exercises today. I felt flustered. I was really upset when I couldn’t get the exercises correctly.” Olivia’s attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) can interfere with her ability to recall choreography or perform directional changes in the amount of time provided when her mind is “all over the place” (Olivia, 1st interview, p. 4). Olivia disclosed her challenge with directionality in interviews. During our first interview, Olivia noted:

I constantly go the wrong way when I'm doing that and then I try to figure it out, but then I figure it out on the wrong leg or I'll figure it out but turn the wrong way, but then I'll finish it the right way, I'll do some weird stuff. (Olivia, 1st interview, p. 10)

Olivia understood what she is supposed to do, but in the immediacy of performing movement, turned the opposite direction or used the opposite foot, all of which she is acutely aware of at the time. Scholarship on the effects of anxiety on attentional processes relates to the concept of cognitive load and clarifies what occurs when anxiety-producing thoughts disrupt attention and performance. According to attentional control theory, "anxiety impairs processing efficiency because it reduces attentional control (especially in the presence of threat-related distracting stimuli)" (Eysenck, Derakshan, Santos, & Calvo, 2007). When I asked Olivia how she best learns in a dance class, she explained that it is most helpful when the instructor slowly breaks down the movement and allows students to perform at a slow pace: "I have to do it really slow and then I'll have to do it at normal speed" (Olivia, 1st interview, p. 9).

Danielle's LD is three-pronged; in addition to living with dyslexia and an anxiety disorder, she suffers from severe chronic migraines that can limit her ability to attend class: "There was a point where I couldn't go to ballet because I literally felt so dizzy, I was going to throw up because of a migraine" (Danielle, 2nd interview, p.21). Danielle's dyslexia is not apparent in her dance technique classes unless she is assigned to read or write: "I don't know if it shows so much in my dance...unless there are times when we have to pull out the textbook" (Danielle, 1st interview, p. 15). However, struggling to learn dance combinations sometimes trigger panic attacks associated with her anxiety disorder:

it's usually when I don't know a combo or I don't get it and we're showing people...then I'll start panicking that everyone is watching me and that they know I messed up." (Danielle, 2nd interview, p. 21)

Even though Danielle conveyed little trouble with learning choreography quickly, she acknowledged that a slower pace is helpful when she struggles to coordinate complex movements. For instance, when asked to recall a time when she struggled to learn, she described learning a *petite allegro* in a ballet class. She explained that she "could not get the feet right" and became very frustrated, which led her to ask a classmate to break the movement down for her saying, "I need it slower" (Danielle, 2nd interview, p. 14).

Sophie attributes her challenges in dance to her LD, anxiety and depression. When Sophie experiences depressive phases, she sometimes refrains from attending dance class: "there are sometimes where I need to go to class and I'm like, 'I just really can't do class right now' and I am just so emotionally drained" (Sophie, 1st interview, p. 15). However, she has not missed a dance class due to mental illness since attending university: "I actually want to go to class here, so it hasn't for dance classes" (Sophie, 1st interview, p. 15). Before and after dance class, Sophie internalizes negative thoughts and feelings, which she describes as an inner battle:

I think it's definitely an internal thing, um so it's kinda like a battle with myself... maybe I didn't do that well in ballet class or something, like it was a tough day, I would be like beating myself up over it like all day. (Sophie, 1st interview, p. 12)

Leah similarly admitted that she struggles with focus in her dance classes when her mind is preoccupied on academic responsibilities outside of the dance classroom: "I just think about the essay that's due tomorrow and then I'll start panicking on the inside" (Leah, 2nd interview, p. 11). In response to what is a roadblock to learning, creating, or

performing dance, Leah explained that feeling fatigued or tired contributes to her lack of focus:

...definitely when I'm tired. Like if I'm in a certain mood where I'm stressed, like I'm thinking about you know, other things I have to do and I'm like, "oh, I should be doing that right now" instead of you know, just doing plies and stuff. (Leah, 2nd Interview, p. 11)

When I asked Leah what happens to her dancing when her mind is focused on other responsibilities, she replied:

I like start like spacing and not really being in the moment in the dancing. (Leah, 2nd interview, p. 11)

Leah did not attribute the challenge to focus and feeling fatigued to her attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD); instead, she commented on how her school work pulls her away from dance: "I feel like I wanted to skip a bunch of dance classes because I wanted to work on my homework for other classes, but I didn't" (Leah, interview 2nd, p. 12).

When speaking with Leah, the struggle to establish friendships and social connections emerged as her greatest challenge, rather than her documented LD of attention deficit hyperactive disorder. Her difficulty connecting with other dancers plays a profound role in her educational experience. In our conversations about learning, creating, and performing dance, Leah repeatedly brought up her disinclination and struggles to establish relationships with other dancers.

I typically don't interact with other dancers while I'm in dance class. I've always been like this, like I'm not really friends with the dancers I'm in class with. I don't know why, I honestly don't. It's not that we don't get along, it's just that I'm not attracted to them in like a friendship sort of way. I feel like sometimes they can be a little snooty. (p. 9)

Leah revealed that she desires friendships with other dancers, but often feels excluded:

Sometimes I'll be sad. I do want friendships, but I feel excluded. This is silly, but I've always felt excluded, like I might be paranoid. It's just really

easy for me to feel excluded, even if people aren't generally, aren't deliberately excluding me...if I'm not friends with them, I'm excluded. Like there's two options and it's one or the other. (p. 10)

Though Leah entered the program with a first-year cohort, she does not feel she is part of the group: "I'm not that close with them, especially the first years. We all came in together so I don't know what I missed socially where I'm not part of the group" (p. 11).

As alluded to above, Leah's struggle to develop friendships with other dancers extends beyond university life. She describes a difficult time connecting with dancers at her home studio:

I started late, so a bunch of girls had known each other since they were like three. I really hated the social life there—everyone was so skinny and, you know, gorgeous flexible legs. I don't have the ballet body...but I don't really care, I was there to dance. It took a while to convince myself, "I'm just here to dance, I don't care that I'm not part of that group. (p. 13)

Further illuminating her beliefs about friendship and dance, Leah shared that she had wanted to attend a ballet conservatory after high school, but decided against it:

In my experience, I can never be friends with other dancers or people I dance with. I don't know why and it's not like I never tried...it just never happened. That's why I thought I would be all alone if I went to a conservatory. (p. 30)

Yet, while observing her Jazz I class, I noticed that Leah was socially active, whispering to other members of the class before and after they traveled across the floor. In contrast, during the Modern class I observed, she communicated with no one, even when assigned to work with a partner (Leah, Modern Observation, June 4, 2015). At the beginning of the class, the instructor encouraged students to set a goal for themselves for the end of the year. After the warm-up, students were instructed to find a partner. Leah and Zoe, both participants in the study, looked around hesitantly until the instructor paired them together. After teaching the combination, the instructor encouraged dancers

to talk to one another as they reviewed the choreography and discuss their personal goals. During this exercise, Leah and Zoe did not talk to one another while other paired students talked to one another and appeared to give each other verbal and tactile feedback. Although these observed peer social interactions gave ambiguous impressions, her verbal descriptions conveyed struggle and longing for social connections with her peers.

Emotional Challenges

An accessible classroom neither forecloses emotion nor is overrun by it but makes constructive and creative space for it. (Price, 2011, p. 80)

Dating back to the early 1990s when the concept of LD was first conceived, emotional challenges such as anxiety and depression were informally associated with individuals with LDs (Acker, 1990; Li, 2003; Nelson & Harwood, 2011; Wilcutt & Pennington, 2000). Some literature suggested that students with LDs have significantly more emotional disorders than those without (Bender & Wall, 1994; Cohen, 1986). In the present study, three dancers with LDs described anxiety, depression, and stress in their experiences of learning and performing dance.

Though emotional challenges varied among the six student dancers with self-identified LDs, five participants' anecdotes indicated that learning and performing dance were accompanied by feelings of inadequacy. Such feelings can be aggravated by feeling watched or judged by others and by negative self-talk. Some students, particularly those with anxiety or depression, made explicit connections between emotional challenges and learning and performing dance, while others alluded to emotional challenges. Leah was the only participant who did not describe emotional challenges to her ability to create, learn, or perform dance.

Feelings of inadequacy. An overriding challenge described by all but Leah was feeling inadequate while learning dance choreography. Some students expressed feelings of inadequacy in comparing their progress to their peers while others were affected by negative self-talk. Olivia asks, “Why can’t I get this? Everyone else can get it, why can’t I?” (Olivia, 2nd interview, p. 9). She elaborated on the effects of such comparison:

I feel stupid and I feel down on myself and I’m really hard on myself, so when it happens, you can just tell my whole being shuts down and I’m just, ‘screw this.’ (p. 9)

Feelings of inadequacy can be exacerbated by perceptions of being watched and judged by instructor and peers:

We did pique turns and I just fell over, I couldn’t get my balance and I was feeling really annoyed with myself... I was feeling so frustrated and embarrassed and it was all self-inflicted. No one in the class was making me feel uncomfortable, but I was hyperaware of people looking at me and I felt like people were secretly judging me, or the teacher was unhappy with me. I was so annoyed, I just walked out (Audrey, 2nd interview, p. 7).

Some participants who described comparing their progress to other dancers were very aware of the gaze of their peers and instructor. In such instances, the dancer might become disengaged in the activity or overcome by anxiety.

Danielle described a movement fundamentals class where her anxiety was aggravated during an assignment to create a warm-up. She was fearful of doing the time-sensitive assignment incorrectly and compared her abilities to other students in the class:

She told us to go off and make a warm-up for ourselves and for the life of me, I could not do it and I was like, ‘I can’t do it, what if it’s wrong?’ I was like, ‘But everyone else is doing great’... The pressure just got to me and I was looking at people’s papers and thinking, ‘I don’t know what to do, how are you making this 20 minutes?’ It just made me so anxious. (Danielle 2nd interview, p. 15)

Later, Danielle disclosed that she did not finish her warm-up and received a low grade on the assignment. For her, self-consciousness in the presence of peers and instructor was associated with anxiety and loss of incentive to learn. An example of Danielle's anxiety being triggered by the gaze of her peers and instructor is reflected in the following internal monologue of racing thoughts during a ballet class:

I love adagio, but her adagio was so hard, and again, my anxiety was just like, 'I have to be on my leg, I have to balance, everyone's watching me, I don't like it and I can't balance, 'where's my balance?'" (Danielle, 1st interview, p. 17).

Phenomenological and ethnographic studies reveal that students with LDs often encounter insensitive interactions with peers and feel misunderstood by their peers and/or instructor, which contributes to feeling devalued and marginalized (Denhart, 2008; Nelson & Harwood, 2011; Stage & Milne, 1996). A twenty-year longitudinal study of students with LDs chronicled early school experiences of being bullied, teased, and ridiculed (Higgins, Raskind, Goldberg, & Herman, 2002).

Negative self-talk. Feelings of inadequacy were also evident in participant accounts of negative "self-talk." Definitions of self-talk range from simple constructions such as, "what people say to themselves either out loud or as a small voice inside their head" (Theodorakis, Weinberg, Natsis, Douma, & Kazakas, 2000, p. 254) to more complex classifications that delineate uses of self-talk, such as instructional and motivational (Hardy, 2006). Sports psychology researchers Theodorakis et al. (2000) suggest that negative self-talk "gets in the way because it is inappropriate, irrational, counterproductive, or anxiety-producing" (p. 254). In the present study, participants recounted the use of covert self-talk, as in "a small voice inside one's head...cannot be heard by another individual" (p. 254) as opposed to overt verbal articulations.

For some of the dancers in this study, negative self-talk disrupted their participation or full engagement in dance technique or dance composition classes. Discussing how depression affects her learning in dance, Sophie illustrated her inner dialogue when she is having a “bad day” and does not feel like attending class: “Sometimes I doubt myself and I second guess myself thinking, ‘I can’t do this,’ or ‘I can’t do this movement,’ or ‘I don’t think I could ever do this movement’” (Sophie, 2nd interview, p. 21). She later elaborated that when she feels depressed, she struggles with motivation: “When I’m feeling like that, I still want to dance, I just don’t have the motivation to do it” (p. 15). Drawing from an earlier anecdote, Danielle also exhibits negative self-talk when she doubts her abilities to create a warm-up when she says to herself, “I can’t do it, what if it’s wrong?” (Danielle, 2nd interview, p. 15).

Zoe articulated an instance when negative self-talk reflected a lack of motivation to participate in choreography class: “Sometimes I’ll just sit there and be like, ‘I can’t do that’ and I’ll just look and not even try” (Zoe, 2nd interview, p. 11). She went on to explain that in instances where she doesn’t want to be in the class anymore, she feels disappointed in herself: “I mean the teacher tries to work with me, but in my body, I’m already at the point where I don’t even want to be in the class anymore...I feel disappointed in myself because I know I could have done better” (p. 11). Sophie disclosed that when she is depressed, she could benefit from emotional accommodations, but doesn’t feel there is an existing infrastructure to support students with emotional needs:

Times when I’m really down and I can’t focus and I can’t think straight, those are the times where I feel like I would like some help. And it’s kinda weird because there isn’t like any dance help with that. Counselors are

fine, you can talk to them and stuff, but it doesn't really have anything to do with dancing. (Sophie, 2nd interview, p. 15)

Chapter Summary

This chapter began with six “profiles of courage” in order to provide a biographical sketch of each participant to contextualize and unearth their distinctive personal backgrounds and histories in dance. The remainder addressed challenges faced by dancers with LDs in this study, as manifested primarily in learning and performing dance choreography in dance technique classes. Students described challenges such as balance and lack of focus, as well as difficulties with directionality, information processing, pace of instruction, anxiety, and fatigue. Five dancers with LDs illustrated emotional challenges such as feelings of inadequacy with accompanying frustration, self-doubt, embarrassment, and negative self-talk. The next chapter explores how six student dancers with LDs navigate through challenges in dance in higher education through creative learning and coping strategies.

CHAPTER 5

LEARNING AND COPING STRATEGIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION DANCE

In Chapter 4, I explored challenges that six dancers with LDs encounter when learning and performing dance choreography in their higher education dance programs. Illustrating distinctive challenges for participants unearthed experiential facets involved in being a dancer with a LD as well as the ways disability can be exacerbated by the learning environment of the dance classroom. Understanding the intricacies of these challenges is important to imagining avenues for increased accessibility in the dance classroom.

Challenges such as turning the wrong direction, getting distracted, processing at a slower speed, losing balance, or feeling frustrated provide fertile ground for generating coping and learning strategies. In this chapter, I present inventive strategies that participating dancers with LDs have created in order to cope with the demands and challenges of higher education dance. In these revealing moments, students created and discovered new avenues to flourish through personal agency and self-directed pedagogies. I begin the chapter by providing an overview of how six dancers with LDs view their disabilities, illustrating how conceptions of disability play a critical role in how participants create strategies as well as exert agency to cope and learn in their respective dance programs. I then present the dancers' self-created and directed strategies that are specific to their learning experiences and challenges.

Participant Philosophies of Disability & Accommodation

Before delving into the various ways six dancers with LDs navigate their higher education dance programs, I discuss how dancers' perceptions of their LDs shaped their approaches to learning in dance. In the words of disability studies scholar Alison Kafer (2014), "How one understands disability in the present determines how one imagines disability in the future; one's assumptions about the experience of disability create one's conception of a better future" (p. 2). Throughout interviews and journal entries, participants oscillated between notions of disability as an internal, individual struggle (akin to the medical model of disability) and as a universally constructed phenomenon where disability is a natural part of human existence encompassing a broad range of physical and mental variations (Davis, 2002; Zola, 1989).

When the participating dancers with LDs discussed their views on receiving accommodations or additional assistance in the dance classroom, the majority placed great responsibility on themselves to succeed in a dance-learning environment and expressed disdain for differential or "special" treatment, desiring a maximum level of normalcy in the dance classroom. Further, in adopting this universal view of disability—that everyone experiences challenges in learning dance—some of the dancers with LD believed they were (or should be) ineligible to receive outside help or accommodations. For example, Zoe did not want accommodations because,

Everyone has something personally going on with them in a sense, so you can't really just sit here and be like "well, let me pinpoint myself out and just be different from everyone else." I feel that is unfair. (Zoe, 2nd interview, p. 15)

Leah similarly dismisses her eligibility to receive accommodations, stating that she is "lucky" to receive them as opposed to qualified: "I think everyone has ADD at some

level. Everyone gets distracted, everyone procrastinates, everyone wants a little more time, I'm just lucky enough to actually get the extra time" (Leah, 1st interview, p. 6).

Other participants, like Olivia and Audrey, preferred to handle challenges in dance independently in order to prove their abilities and maintain the status quo. For instance, Olivia explained that she was reluctant to disclose her LD to her dance instructor in fear that she would be treated differently: "I don't want to get special treatment for anything, I don't think that's for me, like even in my academic classes...I just want to be able to do it" (Olivia, 1st interview, p. 8). In speaking about favored accommodations and strategies for learning, Audrey similarly conveyed a desire for normality: "I really try and keep technique as normal as possible...being able to perform normally in a regular class is kind of the whole reason I am taking ballet classes here" (Audrey, 2nd interview, p. 8).

Phenomena of aversion or resistance to receiving "special treatment" or accommodations appear throughout literature addressing college students with LDs and individuals with hidden disabilities (Denhart, 2008; Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003; Valeras, 2010). Valeras (2010) explored identity construction through analysis of self-narratives of six individuals with "hidden" LDs. The study revealed that individuals with hidden disabilities are often confronted with doubt and suspicion when disclosing their disability since it is less visible and assumed to be less challenging than a physical disability. Such interactions contribute to what scholars refer to as the "imposter phenomenon," which is when an individual with a LD or hidden disability feels a sense of guilt for identifying as disabled and is fearful of giving false impressions or cheating the system (Denhart, 2008; Valeras, 2010).

In academic settings, students with LDs or hidden disabilities can be reluctant to access or request accommodations out of fear of encountering hostility or interrogation (Denhart, 2008; Valeras, 2010). Rather than outwardly expressing fear of being misunderstood for receiving help or accommodations, dancers with LDs often internalize false conceptions of LD, as reflected in statements that accommodations are “unfair” or an outcome of good fortune. Individuals with hidden disabilities often strive to hide their impairment, minimize its impact, and might not even think of themselves as disabled (Olney, Kennedy, Brockelman, & Newsom, 2004; Valeras, 2010).

Dancers in the current study confirmed extant findings, expressing apprehension about receiving “special” treatment along with a partiality for normalcy, placing responsibility on themselves to navigate through challenges in dance. Though these dancers with LDs viewed disability as a widely experienced phenomenon, five participants perceived their LD as an individual responsibility or weight to bear. For example, during my first interview with Sophie, she described her experience with LD as an internal struggle: “I think it’s definitely an internal thing, so it’s kinda like a battle with myself” (Sophie, 1st interview, pp. 12-13). Describing her struggle with depression or having a weight on her shoulders during class, she explained that her LD “isn’t the teacher’s fault, it’s just something that I have to deal with internally” (p. 16). Leah similarly placed responsibility on herself, basing her ability to succeed on the level of effort she exerted: “anything that I’ll complain about, like it’s just me being lazy...” (Leah 2nd interview, p. 28).

In the examples above, by placing blame and responsibility on themselves, the dance students with LDs endorse a view of disability akin to the medical model. As

introduced in Chapter 2, the medical model views disability as a fixed pathology that “is centered on the idea that there is a certain standard that humans beings should meet in terms of how they look, act, and what they should be able to do” (Valeras, 2010, p. 6). In internalizing disability as an individual struggle and “problem,” several dancers with LDs’ strategies were contingent on their level of effort and self-sufficiency.

Other students similarly place responsibility on themselves to succeed in dance, articulating a sense of autonomy and ownership of their learning. For instance, Danielle acknowledged challenges, but expressed determination to “recuperate” herself according to her own standards through the act of dancing:

I have struggles, but I can recuperate myself and prove to myself that I’m going to be okay doing what I do, and I have these problems, but I’ll get through it, and like dance is that way. (Danielle 2nd interview, p. 24)

Like Danielle, Audrey embraces a “self-help” approach to learning dance, suggesting it is best achieved through self-knowledge and overcoming challenges: “like knowing yourself and your personal limitations, but still having room to overcome those limitations” (Audrey 2nd interview, p. 8). While talking with Zoe about what would help her succeed in the dance classroom, she comparably adopted a self-governing philosophy of learning, suggesting that “pushing yourself” is essential to learning and creating dance: “It all starts with yourself, and I don’t feel like anyone can help you more than you can help yourself (Zoe 2nd interview, p. 20).

Although Danielle, Audrey, and Zoe share a self-determined approach to accommodations and strategies for learning, they concurrently fall into a common disability trope of “overcoming” disability. The ableist notion of “overcoming” is often reflected in media depictions of disabled characters who transcend or conquer their

disability through effort and pushing boundaries (Claire, 2017). According to Ferri, Connor, Solis, Valle, and Volpitta (2005), “The conventions of disability scripts often focus on stories of overcoming through individual struggle, cure, and rehabilitation, often with the assistance of a nondisabled character” (p. 64). From this perspective, disability is viewed as a hindrance to success that can be overcome or even eradicated through enough effort.

The “overcoming” view of disability is critiqued by disability studies scholars for devaluing disability as a way of being by placing blame on the individual rather than looking to larger social forces involved in the challenges they encounter, such as inaccessibility (Claire, 2017; Ferri et al., 2005; Newman-Stille, 2018). While participating dancers with LDs’ self-determination to succeed and “rehabilitate” themselves in various ways might reflect ableist notions that seek to erase signs of disability, it also demonstrates an autonomous, agentic approach to learning.

Along with internalizing and taking it upon themselves to rehabilitate or reduce signs of their disabilities, students in this study simultaneously projected a view of disability that embraces individual differences in learning processes and ways of being in the world. When encountering challenges, several participants shifted from conceiving disability as something inherently “wrong” with them to acceptance of their unique way of operating in a learning environment. For example, in relation to her dyslexia, Danielle said, “It’s not my fault,” and went on to talk about a challenging moment learning dance when she took the blame off herself saying, “my brain just wasn’t there” (Danielle, 1st interview, p. 15). When discussing her struggle with balance and processing information, which require her to take more time to learn choreography, Audrey similarly purported,

“That’s the way my body chooses to interpret new information” (Audrey, 2nd interview, p. 9).

Danielle’s and Audrey’s attitudes resonate with a feminist disability perspective that recognizes the constructed nature of disability and instability of the body that becomes apparent when confronted within a normative learning environment. Disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2011) articulates the emergence of disability through the dynamic interaction of environment and body: “The body becomes disabled when it is incongruent both in space and in the milieu of expectations” (p. 33). While Audrey and Danielle did not place great emphasis on the learning context itself, they acknowledged and accepted the dynamic and unstable nature of the body as a way of accepting disability as a natural part of their existence.

In a similar manner, Zoe, Olivia, and Sophie articulated overall acceptance of their disabilities in the context of learning dance. For example, Zoe accepts schizophrenic auditory hallucinations when she says, “if I’m hearing someone next to me, I’m just communicating on a different level” (Zoe, 2nd interview, p. 24). In a similar way, Olivia demonstrates ownership and confidence in her disabled identity when she explains,

If you’re joking around like, “Oh my word, you’re so stupid,” that doesn’t hurt my feelings, but if you’re like, “you don’t get this, you’re so dumb”...I’m like no I’m not dumb, I just don’t understand it, can you re-explain? (Olivia, 1st interview, p. 13)

In response to peers questioning her absence in class, Sophie responded by confidently accepting her coping strategy saying, “For me, it was my reason, so I can’t really do anything about it” (Sophie, 2nd interview, p. 16).

Unlike the other five participants, Leah explained that she does not experience or “cope with” her disability in her dance technique classes: “there’s nothing to cope with”

(Leah, 1st interview, p. 6)...“I don’t think it affects my dancing at all, really” (p. 24). Congruently, she did not discuss any strategies for learning, creating, or performing dance. Leah’s perspective aligns with Garland-Thomson’s (2011) social constructivist viewpoint that positions disability as an identity category that is in constant flux and contingent on the effects of the surrounding environment. In other words, Leah’s disability only exists or presents itself if the surrounding environment or context creates barriers that inhibit her from learning, creating, or performing dance. However, she spoke at length about her struggle establishing personal and relational connections, a phenomenon I discuss at length in Chapter 6.

Regardless of whether participants fully accept or fully deny their disabilities, these dancers with LDs articulated a keen understanding of their abilities, which enabled them to assess their specific needs in the dance classroom. This self-knowledge contributes to their success in learning, creating, and performing dance through self-constructed strategies discussed in the next section.

Self-Constructed Strategies for Coping with Challenges in Higher Education Dance

Participants crafted inventive ways of navigating challenges encountered in the dance classroom through what I am calling self-directed pedagogy, a form of radical pedagogy (Bracher, 2006). Some strategies were overt in nature while others were understated and privately administered. Through data analysis, common practices emerged along with subtle individual differences that reflected participants’ diverse spectrum of abilities and ways of being in the dance classroom. In this chapter I explore ways that six dancers with LDs created and employed self-directed individualized

pedagogies through self-advocacy, self-talk, and recuperating strategies. I draw from the tenets of social and educational constructivism and radical pedagogy to interpret and analyze findings related to strategies six dancers with LDs have devised to cope and succeed in higher education dance programs.

Findings in this chapter reflect and illuminate a constructivist model of learning where students play an active role in the learning process. In basic terms, constructivism hinges on the premise that knowledge is created as opposed to discovered (Gallagher, 2005). Rooted in philosophy and psychology (Amineh & Asl, 2015), psychologists Jean Piaget (1973) and Lev Vygotsky (1986) were the leading forerunners of modern constructivism. Piaget held a cognitive constructivist perspective that relied on theories of human development to understand the basis of learning (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969), while Vygotsky's (1986) social-cultural lens examined how learning and knowledge are influenced by individuals, community, and culture. Vygotsky is credited as the pioneer of social constructivism, "a theory of knowledge in sociology and communication theory that examines the knowledge and understandings of the world that are developed jointly by individuals" (Amineh & Asl, 2015, p. 13).

An assumption of educational constructivism is that "learners have to construct their own knowledge—individually and collectively" based on their own perceptions and experiences (Davis, Maher, & Noddings, 1990, p. 3). At the same time, the individual's "process of knowing has its roots in social interaction" and is "mediated through interaction (language) with others" (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002, p. 6). This chapter relies on a social constructivist view of learning to consider how students individually put

current and past knowledge into practice in devising self-directed, radical pedagogies for learning.

Self-directed strategies are reflective of radical pedagogy, an alternative approach to teaching and learning that requires fundamental change. Though the term is widely contested amongst theorists and scholars, education scholars Fedotova & Nikolaeva (2015) distinguish two major views of radical pedagogy; the first is associated with “deeply politicized aspects of educational institutions, politics and practices” that should be “oriented to radical social change” while the other considers radical pedagogy as “cutting-edge developments in the field of education: the latest theories, techniques and methods that promise to re-invent significantly the processes of teaching and learning” (p. 787).

Students’ self-directed pedagogies in this study by-pass institutional politically affiliated policies of accommodation by exerting agency to implement learning strategies that uniquely meet their needs through self-advocacy, self-talk, and recuperating strategies. This self-directed approach radically bypasses solving complex pedagogical problems with theoretical rhetoric by devising their own learning accommodations and strategies for learning that prioritizes their experiences and expertise.

Self-Advocacy

Self-advocacy is a term that many higher education students with LDs are familiar with, particularly if they were diagnosed or aware of their LD earlier in life and experienced a high level of parental support within their education (Troiano, 2003). As someone who fit these criteria, I vividly recall tutors and special education teachers drilling in the idea that I must advocate for myself in order to succeed. Self-advocacy

occurs when an individual identifies their own needs and independently requests or appeals to have those needs met (Hadley, 2006; Troiano, 2003). Literature on students with LDs endorses the importance of self-advocacy as key to navigating through higher education and helping students with LDs transition and adjust to college life (Connor, 2011; Hadley, 2006; Troiano, 2003).

Dancers with LDs in this study described self-advocacy in two main ways: 1) directly strategizing with instructors to create a learning plan, and 2) establishing rapport with peers or instructor to receive immediate support in dance technique classes. Among the six students, Audrey, Olivia, and Danielle most clearly advocated for their learning or coping needs. Each one differed in their approach to self-advocacy, but all confronted learning challenges in order to devise creative solutions that contributed to fruitful learning experiences. Rather than adhering to prescribed accommodations that are typically offered within lecture-based courses through medical documentation, these three dancers with LDs independently created strategies that collectively resemble Sieber's (2008) theory of complex embodiment, which embraces nuanced distinctions among people with disabilities.

Discussing her strategies for learning in dance, Audrey narrated an occasion when she employed self-advocacy by directly conveying her learning needs to her instructor. Audrey explained that at the beginning of her sophomore year, she approached her instructor and said,

I am kind of a different case than you're used to, I have some balance issues and some processing issues, so the things that you tell me, I will be able to hear you and understand you, but for me, it may take one or two classes for me to make those changes that you suggest. And it's not because I'm ignoring you or I'm not taking your advice, it's just because

that's the way my body chooses to interpret new information. (Audrey, 2nd interview, p. 9)

Here, Audrey discloses her disability unapologetically and exerts agency by stating exactly what she needs and what the instructor might expect. She takes an arguably radical posture as an active and critical subject to advocate for a pedagogy that is best suited to her individual needs. Below, Audrey elucidates how she specifically negotiated with her instructor to devise adaptations for particular movements in an advanced ballet class:

For technique, I have some that are self-imposed. For example, when we do pirouettes, I've arranged with the teacher that maybe I can do one pirouette, but if she's expecting multiple, I need to practice balancing in passé. Or, if we're doing really fast jumps across the floor, I might need to like take a beat in between. (p. 8)

In devising her own radical pedagogy, Audrey employs an approach to self-advocacy that subverts “traditional classroom dynamics that privilege teachers over students and ‘academics’ over lived reality” (Florence, 1998, p.110). Audrey counteracts social and power dynamics of the student/teacher relationship by using dialogue to articulate her needs while working with her professor to discover learning solutions that will support her success in the dance classroom. Education scholar Namulundah Florence (1998) purports that,

Dialogue is central to a transformative pedagogy...[it] enables the deconstruction of teachers' image as privileged sources of information, but also empowers students, creating space for reconstruction of 'knowledge' and the learning process. (p. 110)

Audrey's initiative to dialogue with her professor established a mutual discernment of her learning needs and enabled space to construct a pedagogy of access and inclusion.

Danielle and Olivia advocated for their learning needs by establishing rapport with peers or instructor. Opportunities to self-advocate presented themselves in what Margaret Price (2011) refers to as “kairotic spaces,” which are “the less formal, often unnoticed, areas of academe where knowledge is produced and power is exchanged” (p. 60). Price defines kairotic spaces as “neither rigid nor objectively determined” interactions that encompass one or all of the following criteria: real-time unfolding events, impromptu communication, in-person contact, a strong, social element, and high stakes (p. 61). A defining characteristic of kairotic space is “the pairing of spontaneity with high levels of professional/academic impact” (p. 61). Participants’ stories illustrate exchanges between them and their peers or instructors that were often initiated by the participant and cultivated through informal, spontaneous interpersonal connections.

During our second interview, Danielle drew attention to three occasions when she enlisted her peers to help her manage her ballet, tap, and composition classes. Danielle described two distinct moments when she struggled to learn—primarily with pace, memory, footwork, and rhythm—and self-advocated. The first incident occurred while she was attempting to execute a *petite allegro* phrase in her ballet class. Danielle knew precisely what she needed to be able to perform the combination accurately and took action by enlisting the help of her classmate: “I just asked someone to break it down for me and I was like, ‘I need it slower,’ so then somebody broke it down for me...” (Danielle, 2nd interview, p. 14).

Another time that Danielle sought peer help was in dance composition class. During an interview, she explained that she often struggles with reverting to “habits” or familiar movements when creating choreography. She recruited her classmates to help

her develop in this area: “it’s nice that I can go to those two girls and just be like, ‘I’m doing my habit, what looks good, I need some help...’” (p. 4). In most dance composition classes peer collaboration is fairly typical and often built into assignments and class activities. However, Danielle’s request is an example of how dancers with LDs can use learning strategies not only to cope in dance, but to hone their skills and abilities in informal learning situations. In other words, Danielle’s ability to self-advocate enabled her to proactively improve her choreographic skills as opposed to self-advocating out of the necessity to cope and get by.

Observing Danielle’s composition class provided additional insight into the dynamic between her and her two female classmates. I noted that they worked together “organically,” collaborating to create movements and riffing off of each other’s ideas. The power dynamic constantly shifted as each dancer took turns inhabiting the role of the facilitator (Danielle Dance Comp observation, Dec. 7, 2015). I also noticed that Danielle readily asked her peers to review a movement sequence and asked questions when she needed extra clarification, substantiating her interview comments about her level of comfortability in asking her peers for help.

Enlisting peer help in devising a self-directed pedagogy reflects a feminist disability approach to liberation that values the function disability plays in adapting to each other’s needs and depending on one another through collective learning. Garland-Thomson (2011) delineates the difference between feminist theory and feminist disability theory by surveying the boundaries between autonomy and dependency:

An equality model of feminist theory sometimes prizes individualistic autonomy as the key to women’s liberation. A feminist disability theory, however, suggests that we are better off learning to individually and

collectively accommodate bodily limits and evolutions than trying to eliminate or deny them. (p. 34)

A feminist disability perspective transmutes notions of individuality by revealing the value and necessity of collective dependence that promotes shared accountability in learning. In devising strategies for learning, dancers with LDs' reliance on others is an advantage that contributes to a relational mode of learning.

Like Danielle, Olivia exercised self-advocacy through relational means. However, instead of establishing a rapport with her peers, Olivia cultivated a mentoring relationship with her dance professor that enabled her to feel emotionally and educationally supported. In interviews, Olivia consistently mentioned a female dance professor, commenting on her appreciation for her teaching approach and general support in the dance classroom. Olivia said the following about her professor during our second interview:

She's been a great mentor, she's just amazing! I cannot say any bad words about her. She has helped me so much with dancing and choreographing, everything! She really takes it slow when I need it, she can tell that I get frustrated easily and she knows that I struggle. I'm pretty sure I told all my professors that I have ADHD so I think they know but she doesn't give me special treatment by any means, she really helps me get less frustrated. (Olivia, 2nd interview, p. 10)

In addition to disclosing her LD, Olivia discussed frustrations, challenges, and hopes in learning and performing dance with her professor. Each time she narrated instances when she felt "good" about her dancing, her professor played an integral role in creating such moments. For example, Olivia described a time when she expressed concern to her professor about surviving in the professional world of dance since she has a difficult time recalling choreography. She reflected how her professor encouraged her and gave her practical learning approaches to apply (Olivia, 1st interview, p. 8).

According to LD literature, developing a rapport with instructors is a common strategy used by students with LDs in higher education (Connor, 2011; Hadley, 2006). Hadley (2006) contends that developing rapport with instructors is not only useful in communicating needs, but that it “might help the student with a learning disability be viewed as responsible and committed to learning in the eyes of professors” (p. 15). Other studies have shown that interacting with faculty has a significant influence on academic integration and success (Astin, 1993; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Hamrick, Evans & Schuh, 2002).

Observing Olivia in her composition class provided further evidence that she actively and intentionally invested in the relationship with her instructor. For instance, when I walked into class the first thing that caught my attention was that all the other students were scattered around the room, but Olivia was standing next to the professor, informally chatting with her about her daughter, who was playing off in the distance. When the class started, students were asked to brainstorm ideas for their final dances and work independently. Olivia confidently asked questions and stayed close to her professor for the majority of the class.

Olivia’s experience is useful in understanding a side of self-advocacy that extends beyond “academic” needs to the emotional and personal realm. This is notable considering research reported in Chapter 4 showing that students with LDs encounter emotional challenges to learning and often feel emotionally unsupported (Kendall & Flannery-Schroeder, 1995; Kendall and Ingram, 1989; Nelson & Harwood, 2011). The next section focuses on how participating dance students with LDs experienced self-efficacy and determination through positive self-talk.

Positive Self-Talk

Another strategy participating dancers with LDs utilize to support their learning in higher education dance is positive self-talk. Five dancers described incidents when they employed positive self-talk—or affirmative, constructive inner dialogue, as a learning and coping strategy (see Chapter 4 for full definition of self-talk). Participants gave examples of positive self-talk used to inspire self-confidence in dance learning, for example: “Oh, I’m actually doing that pretty well...I get it, I can do this” (Danielle, 2nd interview, p. 9).

In this section, examples of dancers’ positive self-talk illuminate their perceptions of self-efficacy in learning and creating dance.

Olivia and Audrey described being conscious and deliberate in using positive self-talk as a learning strategy. Olivia was particularly expressive in sharing how positive self-talk helped her to cope and learn in higher education dance, specifically to provide perspective and calm her mind:

I talk to myself a lot... I feel like I have a good angel and a bad angel on my shoulder when I’m talking in my head...I’m like, “Come on Olivia, you can do it, it’s not that hard, you can’t think of it as being hard, this is easy.” Because once you get it, you’re like, “Oh, that was so easy, why was I even worried about it?” I do that all the time, I talk to myself, definitely to calm down and not get frustrated. It’s helped me a lot... (Olivia, 2nd interview, p. 14).

According to education researchers Dale Schunk and Ellen Usher (2012), self-efficacy can “exert its influence through cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection processes” (p. 22). Olivia’s inner dialogue is a cognitive, affective, and motivational affordance of self-efficacy. Positive self-talk enables her to recall past learning

experiences when she was able to succeed, “calm down,” and remain motivated to continue learning dance movement.

Audrey integrates positive self-talk into her learning “routine,” which helps her to evaluate and accept her performance and abilities after each class. She adopted this method of acceptance when recovering from her accident and was struggling with balance: “It’s become really routine for me to like, ‘oh, today’s a good day’ or ‘oh, I’m with it today’ or ‘oh, today is an off day, I’m having a bad day.’ It’s really natural” (Audrey, 2nd interview, p. 12). Olivia similarly applies positive self-talk as a comfort strategy when she feels frustrated at the end of class: “I walk out and just take a deep breath and then I’m like, “okay, tomorrow’s a new day”” (Olivia, 2nd interview, p. 10).

Schunk and Usher (2012) suggest that individuals with high self-efficacy “persist in the face of failure and recover their sense of efficacy after setbacks. As a consequence, they develop competence” (p. 23). Olivia’s and Audrey’s descriptions of positive self-talk reflect strong self-efficacy in that they can recover from and accept setbacks, believing they can improve for the next dance class.

Danielle and Sophie described their use of positive self-talk while creating dance for composition classes. Sophie illustrated a time when she struggled to create a solo and reached a point where she felt capable once she started working with the element of stillness. During the class, Sophie recalled saying to herself, “Yeah, I can do that!” She elaborated,

When usually I’d be like, “That’s too long. People are gonna get awkward and you’re gonna feel awkward.” But, surprisingly, doing it I didn’t feel awkward...a little breakthrough happened. (Sophie, 2nd interview, p. 14)

Sophie's experience illustrates how self-efficacy or "belief in one's personal efficacy for learning might follow a transformational experience" (Schunk & Usher, 2012, p. 21) in dance.

Danielle recalled using positive self-talk while creating choreography with two peers. The specific moment occurred when she was learning unfamiliar movement created by her classmates and was surprised by her ability to execute the movement correctly. She described the moment saying, "I looked in the mirror and I was like, 'oh, I'm actually doing that pretty well...okay, I get it, I can do this'" (Danielle, 2nd interview, p. 9).

Danielle's and Sophie's anecdotes on positive self-talk relate to experiences of accomplishment or realization of success in creating dance. Though neither dancer discussed using positive self-talk as a conscious, self-constructed strategy, both narratives support the notion that "successful performances raise self-efficacy..." (Schunk & Usher, 2012, p. 21) and can be enhanced through positive self-talk.

Zoe's ability to practice self-talk is complicated by the competing voices she hears that are associated with her schizophrenia. As mentioned in Chapter 4, hearing voices can impede her ability to focus. When learning and performing, Zoe explained that the voices are not always a hindrance when she tries to redirect the voices by directly addressing them, employing a form of meta self-talk: "maybe I should pay attention and learn something new, because obviously you're not helping me right now" (Zoe, 2nd interview, p. 24). Zoe also employed positive self-talk when describing what takes place in her mind as she performs. She described a performance in her creative dance class that was fear inducing:

In the moment of performing, I felt discomfort because I don't feel I'm at a place where I'm able to do things on my own. Creating a dance, a whole dance entirely by myself—I've done it before, but I haven't done it in front of people. (Zoe, 2nd interview, p. 5)

In an effort to gain a fuller picture, I asked Zoe what she saw, felt, and heard during that moment. She replied, "I was just trying to hear myself tell myself that I can be something or somebody based on what I'm doing" (p. 5). Here, Zoe does not explicitly suggest that she uses self-talk as a coping strategy; however, it is evident that she does employ positive self-talk, especially when she experiences discomfort while performing dance.

One of the contributing factors to developing "resilient" self-efficacy is "overcoming obstacles through perseverant effort" (Bandura, 2009, p. 1). Through the strategy of positive self-talk, participating dancers experienced self-efficacy in the idea that they could persevere through challenges. Social cognitive psychologist Albert Bandura's concept of self-efficacy is relevant to findings related to the use of positive self-talk in creating and learning dance.

Bandura's (2009) social cognitive theory (SCT) rests on the perspective that learning and human behavior are "extensively motivated and regulated through the exercise of self-influence" (p. 1). He defines self-efficacy as, "people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives" (p. 2). Self-efficacy, which is influenced by a person's specific capabilities and by environmental factors, is thought to play a critical role in motivation, performance, emotional well-being, and self-regulated learning (Bandura, 1986, 1997, 2009), where learners initiate and direct rather than rely on teachers, parents, and other authority figures. In the next section, I illustrate self-constructed recuperating

strategies used by dancers with LDs to cope with and persist in their higher education dance programs.

Recuperating

In addition to self-talk, five dancers created recuperative strategies such as prayer, meditation, breath, tuning into internal bodily sensations or removing themselves from the classroom during stressful moments. Through such strategies, participants were able to minimize psychological and emotional hindrances reported in Chapter 4. When I asked participants what helped them cope with learning challenges in dance, several mentioned breathing or meditative techniques of yoga. Olivia explained, “I’ll take a yoga class that helps me bring everything back together. I just started meditating a lot at home...” (Olivia, 2nd interview, p. 14). During an experience of frustration learning dance choreography, Olivia used her breath to calm her nerves: “I took a deep breath and tried to let it roll off my back” (p. 9).

Danielle used a meditative strategy she called a “recuperating warm up” to cope with stressful experiences in the dance classroom (Danielle, 2nd interview, p. 17). To create the warm-up, she drew from exercises acquired in former theatre and dance experiences, along with selected yoga inspired movements from a class assignment. She explained that the following “recuperating warm-up” helps her focus and settles her nerves before performing or learning dance choreography:

Recuperation is laying down on the ground to start off with and focusing on breathing, then you roll to one side in the fetal position and breathe there and then roll to the other side and do the same thing... you slowly come up to a sitting position and then I flip to all fours and do the black cat and the happy dog three times and then push up to downward dog and work through my feet and then walk the feet in and pli , stretch, pli , stretch, pli  roll up. (pp. 22-23)

As mentioned in Chapter 4, anxiety interferes with Danielle’s ability to focus and learn choreography. Her self-constructed “recuperating warm-up” has a calming and centering influence.

Another recuperating strategy employed by four participants is to physically remove themselves from the dance classroom when they lose focus or to cope with frustration or overwhelming anxiety. Within higher education dance classes, participation and attendance are highly valued and often make up a significant percentage of a student’s grade. Most institutions of higher education require professors to include attendance policies in their syllabi. This is in the best interest of the institution since attendance is often a measure used for institutional ranking and funding, as well as of student pride and satisfaction (Giguere, 2017). The rationale is that to learn dance, one has to be physically present. According to Margaret Price (2011), “studies of classroom attendance generally agree that presence is correlated with higher grades,” leading researchers to conclude that students should attend classes since it is ‘within’ their control (p. 65). Addressing student presence and absence in higher education, Price (2011) remarks:

The conflation of presence, goodness, freedom, control, and individuality is used to construct pedagogies that presume that, first, presence is the sine qua non of learning in higher education, and second, that the ‘choice’ of whether or not to be present belongs to the individual student. (p. 65)

For some dancers with LDs, however, presence in the classroom is not always a choice, as it can be detrimental to their emotional wellbeing.

Discussing her strategies for learning dance, Zoe noted that she often sits down at the side of the room and meditates when she is having a difficult time focusing. She first employed this strategy, which she referred to as “taking breathers,” as a young girl after

her parents said to her, “maybe you have to sit down somewhere cuz you can’t listen” (Zoe, 2nd interview, p. 18). In our second interview, Zoe narrated a time when she exerted agency over her learning by saying, “Listen, I’m just going to go sit down and meditate or say something to myself or go pray on the side cuz I can’t focus right now” (p. 18).

Zoe’s self-constructed strategy of stepping aside to pray or meditate transgresses dance technique classroom norms related to time by exercising “crip time,” a term from disability culture and disability studies that adopts “a flexible approach to normative time frames” in order to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities (Price, 2011, p. 62). The term “crip time” was first used in Alison Kafer’s book *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013) where she critiqued queer theory’s concept of “queer time” for overreliance on disability through references to illness and dying while also discrediting the presence of disability. Crip time has been appropriated by several prominent disability studies scholars (Kuppers, 2014; Price, 2011; Samuels, 2017). In *Feminist, Queer, Crip* Alison Kafer (2013) describes crip time as an active call to re-conceptualize time and any expectations surrounding it in order to meet the needs of people with disabilities:

Crip time is flex time not just expanded but exploded; it requires reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time, or recognizing how expectations of “how long things take” are based on very particular minds and bodies...Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds. (p. 27)

Zoe’s strategy of sitting out crafts a learning environment that alters conventional time frames in the service of regaining focus. In addition to sitting to the side, Zoe described times when she left a dance technique class to refocus her thoughts when she was hearing voices. She explained, “Most of the time I’ll just either walk out and go to the bathroom

and then come back or I will sit there until class is over and try to go meditate somewhere” (Zoe, 2nd interview, p. 16).

Similar to Zoe, Audrey utilized the recuperating strategy of absence to cope with feeling frustrated or overwhelmed in the dance classroom. During a conversation about coping strategies, Audrey said, “I found it helpful to stand near the door, and that was a coping strategy even from the beginning, because then I felt like I could leave if I was feeling overwhelmed (Audrey, 2nd interview, p. 14). Later in the conversation, she candidly depicted a specific moment when she left the classroom after struggling with a ballet combination:

I was so annoyed with myself and I mean, M knows that I struggle with that kind of thing, so she would not be mad at me, but I felt so embarrassed and annoyed. I think one of the girls in my class was like, “Oh, it’s okay, like don’t worry about it,” but I was so mad and I left. (p. 8)

As indicated in the above anecdote, Audrey’s perception was that her instructor and peers understood her struggle; yet, she responded to frustration by deliberately leaving the classroom. Given Audrey’s propensity to self-advocate, it is possible that she negotiated terms with her instructor to leave as needed.

Olivia’s method of absence was less of an intentional strategy and more of a coping response to feelings of nervousness and frustration when turning the wrong direction in her modern technique dance class:

in modern class when we’re doing the exercise, I’ll be doing it correctly and then my brain will be like, “no, that’s the wrong way, you need to do it this way”, so then I get nervous and mess up and I’m like “dammit”, and I just walk off. (Olivia, 2nd interview, p. 11)

Rather than viewing the strategy of absence as a beneficial tool for coping, Olivia viewed “absence”, or in her case walking to the side, as a bad habit: “I try not to make that a

habit though because it's not a good one to have" (p. 11). Put in this way, Olivia perceives absence as a choice rather than a necessity.

In Sophie's case, she described how severe depression would sometimes absent her altogether from dance classes in high school:

There were times when I needed to go to class and I'm like, "I just really *can't* do class right now" or...it sucks when something happens right before class and I am just so emotionally drained and I can't go to class. But it hasn't happened here yet. (Sophie, 1st interview, p. 15)

Though Sophie has not had to employ the strategy of absence at university level, her narrative is useful in understanding the action she could take if depression significantly interferes with her dance technique classes in the next three years of her dance education. Through the strategy of absence, Zoe, Audrey, Olivia, and Sophie exerted agency to cope with emotional hindrances that challenged classroom norms of presence and participation.

Turning to Dance for Release

Finally, a long-term recuperating strategy and coping mechanism described by five of the participating dancers was the act of dance itself. As discussed in Chapter 4, participants encountered emotional and psychological hindrances in their dance programs. Student descriptions indicate that dance provided a reprieve from challenges from their disabilities through releasing emotions in creative and immersive dance experiences. Students' accounts focused on creating and performing dance rather than the act of learning dance, indicating the importance of providing opportunities for students to create and perform in higher education dance programs.

One of the ways students gained relief from psychological and emotional challenges of their LDs was through communicating and channeling meanings or effects

of disability into choreography and performance. Danielle spoke about how she benefitted from the opportunity to transfer or channel feelings of anxiety associated with her LD into dance composition:

It's about having a hard struggle in life and my hard struggle is...trying to bring up my GPA, with everyone worrying about a 4.0 and I'm worried about not being on academic probation for the third time. My Comp piece has helped me put my struggles into movement. (Danielle, 1st interview, p. 16)

I was stressing out and I just didn't know what to do so I took all of that stress and hard hitting and put it into the dance...it was a nice stress reliever and I just wanted to punch a wall so I did that, but with a dance. (p. 8)

Danielle described a solo she created for her dance composition class that not only relieved stress related to anxiety, but thematically and metaphorically portrayed her experience of working through anxiety:

I did my piece on my anxiety this semester...it was like industrial sounds and then I did a lot of, not angry, but straggly movement and kind of sharp pain, like painful movement. I actually had this part where I stood up from the ground and then fell and stood up again and fell and just kept falling. It was nice doing that part because that's actually how I felt all semester. No matter how many times I got up, I just kept falling, and it was nice having that be a release because I was able to express, even though people in the audience were probably like, "that's weird." It was nice having that release and expressing myself. It was escaping. I was anxious here but now it's transferred to the stage and so now I don't need to be anxious anymore. (Danielle, 2nd interview, p. 5)

In both of Danielle's accounts, dance choreography and performance provided opportunities to relieve anxiety and stress by physically and metaphorically portraying her experience of anxiety.

In *Dancing for Health: Countering and Preventing Stress*, Judith Lynne Hanna (2006) examines the interplay between stress and dance, noting that "Throughout time people have danced to cope with stress, the relatively new umbrella term for concepts

like conflict, frustration, trauma, anomie, alienation, anxiety, and depression” (p. 55). She claims that dance can be a modality for “preventing, escaping, and dissipating stress” (p. 30).

Apart from amelioration of stress through intrinsic qualities of dance, the act of creating and performing provided Danielle with the means to demonstrate and communicate her experience of disability. According to dance philosopher Karen Bond (2014), “contemporary researchers and writers across the range of dance contexts concur that dance’s value rests in part on its ability to express the ineffable” (p. 5). In other words, “dance can often express what words cannot” (Hanna, 2006, p. 34). Though Danielle was able to verbally articulate her experience of disability throughout each interview, the act of creating and performing her disability experience provided creative and kinesthetic means to relieve feelings of anxiety.

Through creative movement and choreographic opportunities, Zoe similarly experienced temporary relief from her LD of schizophrenia by silencing the competing voices in her head and “listening to dance” (Zoe, 2nd interview p. 24). Zoe also shared that when she is feeling depressed, she often turns to dance to help her release anger: “It’s something that gets me through, being able to move. It’s like you just learn to take your anger out on the floor” (Zoe, 1st interview, p. 2). Explaining that she dances with her niece or dances in the shower to “get away”, she remarked, “dance is my coping skill” (Zoe, 2nd interview, p. 24). Audrey similarly benefitted from her ability to channel stress and anger through dance, stating,

It makes my head clearer, it helps me work out if I’m angry or stressed about something, it helps me work through that in a really positive way. (Audrey, 1st interview, p. 1)

Sophie also drew attention to the temporary relief she experienced from depression through the intrinsic qualities of dance, particularly her ability to experience joy through dance. As Sophie matured and became more aware of her body and emotions, dance played an increasingly significant role in her life: “Once I got older it was kinda a release and it made me happy...I dunno, just moving makes me feel good” (Sophie, 1st interview, p. 1). She elaborates,

I really started listening and feeling where my body was moving made me feel like I could express my emotions through it, so now I don't have to contain it internally. (Sophie 2nd interview, p. 2)

Leah, who struggles with feeling fatigued, similarly comments on how dancing makes her “feel good”:

because it just feels good, especially my ballet class, like it just feels good, releases endorphins and all that good stuff. (Leah, interview 2nd, p12)

Sophie could not imagine life without dance, which appreciably contributed to her emotional well-being by helping her relinquish encumbrances in life: “I just can't see myself not dancing. If I wasn't, then I wouldn't feel the same and I would probably feel bad because I dance as a release” (p. 9). When she “goes all out” she experiences temporary relief from worries and anxieties: “I would just go all out because all those things that were weighing me down just kind of went away when I did whatever I wanted” (Sophie 1st interview, p. 2), In another conversation, she elaborated,

If I'm angry or something and I don't want to agree with the music or something, I'll go against it, but there was this one time in the studio where the lights were out and we were dancing, we were improvising, and everybody was doing their own thing. I felt like I was at peace. I had no limitations, I had no rules, nothing was holding me down, there was no string attached and I could do whatever I wanted, and that's when it felt very therapeutic for me. (Sophie, 2nd interview, p. 24)

Olivia was the only participant who did not articulate using dance as a recuperating tool to cope with stress and anxiety she experiences as a part of her LD. However, she alluded to the release she experiences through dance improvisation: “I feel like I can breathe when I do it” (Olivia, 1st interview, p. 5). In Chapter 6, I expound on Olivia’s affinity with dance improvisation and the value it possesses in enabling her to connect to and express her authentic self.

Participants’ intuitive strategy of using dance as a learning and coping mechanism is supported by dance cognition research. Hanna’s (2014) *Dancing to Learn: The Brain’s Cognition, Emotion, and Movement* draws upon brain sciences and dance to examine “how movement skills impact and are impacted by cognitive and emotional communicative processes” (xix). Hanna (2014) discusses the powerful effects of dance on creating “positive plastic changes in the brain to varying degrees, reorganizing neural pathways, and the way the brain functions” (p. 67). In other words, Hanna (2014) believes movement “affects the brain for improving dance and other mental activity” involving memory, divergent thinking, problem solving skills, and motivation.

Chapter Summary

The six student dancers with LDs in this study shifted between viewing disability as an internal struggle needing to be ameliorated and understanding disability as a socially constructed condition of existence. Most participants strive for “normalcy” in the dance classroom environment and are determined to succeed through their own efforts, creating ways to cope with and navigate challenges in the dance classroom. All six dancers described their active role in devising strategies such as self-advocacy, self-talk,

recuperating activities, and dance as a relief. Some strategies, particularly those involving self-advocacy, might be created in conjunction with peers and dance faculty members while others are individually or privately administered. Self-directed pedagogies contributed to success in learning, creating, and performing dance in the students' respective higher education dance programs. Chapter 6 turns to participants' relationship to self and others in higher education dance programs.

CHAPTER 6
THE RELATIONSHIP CONTINUUM:
PERSONAL TO COLLECTIVE RELATIONLITY

Thus far, I have presented research findings pertaining to the challenges participating dancers with LDs encounter in the higher education dance classroom (Chapter 4) and how they navigate and cope with challenges through radical self-created and self-directed pedagogies (Chapter 5). This chapter offers a thematic analysis of participants' experienced meanings of relationship that span across a continuum of inner, personal self to a dynamic intersubjective relationality. Findings in this chapter emerged through inductive analysis, an approach that "allow[s] research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies" (Thomas, 2003 p. 2). Inductive analysis was employed to break down complex data "through the development of summary themes or categories from raw data ('data reduction')" (p. 3).

In macro-terms, student descriptions emphasize both self-oriented and relational, agentic meanings, incorporating metaphors such as *family*, *home*, and *community* to depict their dance education programs as places of safety and comfort—places where they can be "seen," "be myself," and "weird," a term that three of the dancers (Sophie, Olivia and Danielle) used to describe their personal style of movement and choreography. Further, for these young dancers with LDs, individuality and relationality are not polarities, but an intersubjective domain of lived experience that is perhaps uniquely accessible in holistic dance education settings, where learning is charged with the vital energies of body, mind, space, and time.

I begin the chapter by exploring participants' relationship to their authentic, inner selves in their dance programs. A further section of the chapter addresses each student's valuing of relationship in their dance education setting—their meanings of “connection” with others. These relational profiles are presented in the same order as the ‘profiles of courage’ introducing Chapter 4: Audrey, Zoe, Leah, Olivia, Sophie, and Danielle. Building on these individual narratives, I offer a collective analysis related to categories of being seen, connected, and helped by peers and instructors in the higher education dance environment.

Excerpts from interviews and classroom observations are interlaced throughout to provide nuanced situated accounts of each participant's individual and shared learning experiences. As in previous chapters, I prioritize student voices from live one-to-one interviews, employing classroom observational data for supplementary perspectives and triangulation.

Relationship to Self

In this section, I explore participating dancers' experienced meanings of relationship to self in dance. This category emerged at the conclusion of the data analysis after multiple readings and interpretations of the raw data from student interviews and journals along with a holistic analysis of findings in Chapters 4 and 5. In Chapters 4 and 5, participant challenges and strategies reflected a strong sense of self-knowledge that ties into being their true selves in dance.

In Chapter 4, participating dancers with LDs' exhibited a strong relationship to self through an ongoing inner dialogue of positive and negative self-talk. Positive self-

talk reflected participants' ability to feel confident in their abilities, often motivating them to persevere and accept themselves, while negative self-talk disrupted their engagement in dance, often leading them to doubt their abilities and compare themselves to others. In Chapter 5, participants demonstrated self-knowledge in identifying personal limitations and strengths to create personalized self-directed pedagogies. Some of the strategies employed by participants involved tuning inward through prayer, meditation, breath, and dance, indicating the importance of connecting to the self, particularly through embodiment, in order to cope with the demands of higher education dance.

“Just Being Myself”

“In the [African] class, it's really more about being yourself.” (Zoe)

The theme of “being myself” builds on findings in Chapters 4 and 5 where students show self-knowledge. This category focuses on participants' relationship to their inner selves and progresses to relating self to others. The relationship to self begins with solitary moments of moving authentically through individual aesthetic expression and extends outward through distinguishing self by showing and expressing self to others.

Sondra Fraleigh's (2019) concept of *intrinsic dance* and Kimerer LaMothe's (2015) philosophy of “bodily becoming” serve as reflective lenses for findings in this section, illuminating the significance of participants' personal dance aesthetics, deep engagements, and human consciousness in dance.

In her book *Dance and the Lived Body: A Descriptive Aesthetics*, Sondra Fraleigh (1987) examines dance through the lens of existential phenomenology. Her concept of *intrinsic dance* claims that dance is an art form that extends beyond movement to an intentional aesthetic purpose. She argues that the intrinsic value of dance rests within the

experience of the lived body, and is therefore, embedded with personal, affective aspects of the self, body, and movement. In her words, “to experience the dance is to experience our own living substance in an aesthetic (affective) transformation. To express the dance is to express the lived body in aesthetic form” (p. xvi). Intrinsic dance speaks to the connection between authenticity and creativity in dance: “As we express our embodiment in dancing, we create it aesthetically and experience it more freely” (p. 19).

Kimerer LaMothe’s (2015) philosophy of “bodily becoming” offers insight into participants’ crafting and becoming their authentic selves through dance. Her perspective strays from a materialist paradigm by focusing on ontological possibilities of dance, claiming that “movement constitutes matter itself” (p. 23). She positions dance as a phenomenon that emerges from “form and expression” and “sensory self-consciousness of that bodily movement” (p. 7). In “bodily becoming,” we create and become patterns of sensation and response. LaMothe suggests that, “As we become new patterns of sensation and response, these movements gather in us not only as a habit and ability but also forms of emerging self-consciousness” (p. 5).

Relating to self through dance was a major theme amongst dancers with LDs in this study. Audrey, Sophie, Danielle, Olivia and Zoe articulate this relationship:

Dance has always been a part of who I am and how I move. (Audrey 1st interview, p. 1)

I don’t see myself doing anything else...I’ll never ever not be a dancer. (Sophie 2nd interview, p. 21)

I’m a mover, that’s what I do, I move. (Danielle 2nd interview, p. 23)

I came out of the womb dancing, so I never looked back” (Olivia, 1st interview p.1).

When I dance, I can just feel myself in a way (Zoe, 2nd interview, p. 22)

Theology scholar Hye Hyun Han (2016) captures the interconnection between movement and authenticity: “through the creative expression of physical gestures and emotional movement in our inner world, our authenticity will speak through our bodily movement” (p. 37). For participating dancers with LDs, connecting to their “authentic” inner selves through dance enabled them to be themselves and feel connected to their own way of moving. This is reflected through experiences in dance classes where they felt free from restrictions to explore their personal dance aesthetic and deeply engage in dance.

Authenticity is an expansive and multifaceted concept; Googling the term yielded 187,000,000 results and hundreds of synonyms. Authenticity has been widely discussed and debated in Dance Studies (Dyson, 2009; Freshwater, 2012), particularly its vexed relationship with performance. Theater and performance studies researcher Helen Freshwater (2012) exposes the tension between performance and authenticity:

The term authenticity is supremely slippery, as well as being over-stretched. Its association with genuineness, honesty, integrity, and uniqueness meant that it was widely adopted as a term of approbation at both ends of the cultural spectrum during the twentieth century. (p. 155)

With specific reference to dance improvisation and authenticity, Clare Dyson (2009) claims that authenticity is difficult to ascertain from a spectator’s perspective due to the constructed nature of performance environments and extensive training that can contribute to the illusion of authenticity. However, in this study, participants share personal narratives and experienced meanings. While they do not use the word “authentic” in their descriptions, they speak to staying true to themselves and becoming their true selves in higher education dance. Students associate their sense of “true self”

with personal experiences of dance, which Fraleigh (1987) suggests “provides a unique aesthetic context for self-knowledge and self-expression” (p. 28).

Sophie, Audrey, and Olivia described instances where dance improvisation enabled them to feel free to express and be themselves. In response to a time when she felt free of limitations in dance, Sophie described an improvisation jam session:

The studio lights were all out and we were dancing, we were improvising and everybody was doing their own thing. I felt like I was at peace because I had no limitations, I had no rules, nothing was holding me down, and there was no string attached. I could do whatever I wanted to do. (Sophie, 2nd interview, p. 24)

Sophie went on to explain that moving in her own way rather than conforming to someone else’s bodily aesthetic felt good: “Just being me and moving how I move, not how someone else moves, I think that’s what made it feel really good to me” (Sophie, 2nd interview, p. 25).

Audrey similarly recalled a time when she was choreographing alone in the dance studio and used improvisation as a catalyst to connect with herself:

It was just me...I started running my hand along the curtain in the dance studio to the sound of the pan flute in the background to the piece and I felt serene. I did chaînés across the floor and it was all improvisational, to the music for my own self. (Audrey, 2nd interview, p. 5)

Echoing Sophie’s perceptions of improvisation, Audrey identified its ability to enable self-expression without being forced to move in a specific way: “...this is such a natural way for me to express who I am and for me to move, it’s not imposed on me” (p. 5).

Olivia comparably values her ability to be herself through dance improvisation. In response to what comes easily to her in dance, she explained that improvisation allows her to move in her own way without being told what to do: “I can just move however the

heck I want, I don't have to move the way I'm being told to move" (Olivia, 2nd interview, p. 4).

In contrast to Olivia, Audrey, and Sophie, Danielle and Zoe spoke about being themselves through various dance genres. Danielle explained that she feels herself when dancing jazz, contemporary, and modern dance. However, in response to how she feels when she is performing specific styles of dance, she spoke broadly about how dance enables her to be herself through perceptions of freedom from judgement and worry: "I feel freer, like there's no judgement, like I'm in a cloud and I can be myself... it's just me and music and dance and art and there's not a worry in the world" (Danielle, 1st interview, p. 2). Zoe similarly turns inward in order to be herself through dance as a whole:

When I dance, I can just feel myself in a way, where it's just like, I don't have to hear anything anybody says, I can just be myself (Zoe, 2nd interview, p. 22)

Zoe also mentioned that African dance provides freedom to "express herself" and determine her authentic self: "Being in African class, your movement doesn't determine who you are, *you* determine who you are" (Zoe, 2nd interview, p. 3).

In contrast to participants who valued dance forms that enabled them to "let go" and express themselves freely, Leah found dance improvisation challenging for those very reasons:

I keep everything together so it would take a lot of concentration to completely let go... My improvisation tends to gear towards one kind of movement or aesthetic – it's flowy and balletic and I know that. (Leah, 2nd interview, pp. 24-25).

Leah's authentic expression is related to a personal aesthetic grounded in her "home base" of ballet (Leah 2nd Interview, p. 3): I know the ballet technique and I know all the

steps” p. 14), from which she has the ability fuse with other styles.

The music was really awesome, fun music that’s Caribbean inspired - it’s ‘pumpin’ and has a good beat. The actual movements were more for my dance aesthetic and it just kind of morphed” (p. 2).

In participant descriptions presented above, dancers with LDs stressed the importance of “being myself,” which was often tied to perceptions of freedom from limitations, rules, and imposed aesthetic codes. Even though improvisation and other dance techniques may be laden with technical constraints and particular conventions of moving, students described freedom to express their true selves; Fraleigh (1987) notes that “we are not unconditionally free, we have constraints, but are free in our powers of self-projection to create, to question, to initiate change” (p. 17). In the following section, four participating dancers with LDs connect to self and establish relationship to others by differentiating themselves through distinctive movement aesthetics that “project their own being” (p. 17).

Olivia, Sophie, and Danielle show and become self through their “weird” aesthetics. Olivia described her “natural” way of moving as “loose and awkward” (p. 5). Olivia not only values her ability to express herself but also to differentiate herself from other dancers through her “awkward” and “weird” movement aesthetic:

I’m a really awkward and weird mover now, which is good because it’s something different that I can bring to the table. (p. 4)

I don’t want to move like anyone else. I want to be my own person and my own dancer. (Olivia, 1st interview, p. 5).

Sophie and Danielle also place value on a “weird” aesthetic in dance composition classes. Sophie values weirdness for its ability to showcase her originality while Danielle values weirdness for revealing her maturity as a choreographer. After verbalizing that she

“likes weirdness,” Sophie described a time when her “weird” movements were perceived as original choreography by her classmates, affirming her personal aesthetic:

In one solo I feel like I did pretty well because I did some weird things and I got feedback from my other classmates –from my peers. They told me they’ve never seen that before and that’s good because I try to make it seem like you’ve never seen that before, movement that is completely new (Sophie, 2nd interview, p. 6)

Referring to her growth as a choreographer in dance composition class, Danielle alludes to becoming self through embodiment of a “weird” aesthetic:

I never used to be that weird. I have weird contraction-y low to the ground movements. It’s definitely different for me but I also like it because I can tell that it’s a mature change cuz it’s not like, “and battement...and pose,” like competition-y and I’m not as shy as I used to be. (Danielle, 2nd interview, pp. 6-7)

Danielle and Olivia project their authentic selves through creative agency within performance. Interlaced throughout interviews, Danielle comments on how she “proves” her authenticity through dance: “I’m a mover, that’s what I do...it allows me to prove who I am and what I am and what kind of person I am” (Danielle, 2nd interview, p. 23). One of the ways she “proves” herself is communicating and channeling meanings and effects of disability into choreography and performance, a self-constructed coping strategy that discussed earlier in Chapter 5. Revealing her lived experience of anxiety mirrored a willingness to disclose her true self to the audience through an agentic act of creativity. Although she describes the experience of performing the dance piece as a “release” and “escape,” she also remarks, “it was nice expressing myself” (Danielle, 2nd interview, p.5).

Since learning dance choreography (discussed in Chapter 4) is sometimes difficult for Olivia, opportunities for showing and outwardly expressing self to others in

performance is valued. During an interview, she described a memorable dance concert that showcased her ability to embody a character during a guest residency at her university. Through a sensory self-consciousness and response to expressive impulses, Olivia participates in the “rhythms of bodily becoming” (LaMothe, 2015, p. 6) through embodiment of a character. The piece, “Under Glass,” was based on the stages of being a woman in contemporary society. Olivia was cast as a humorous and sassy woman. In the quotation below, she explains that though it was initially difficult to display her emotions, she was able to fully embody the character once she felt confident with the choreography:

For the third section I walk out by myself. I do a mini solo...I come on and I'm supposed to be funny but my movement's not quite funny so I have to find facial expressions to do it and at first it was really hard for me to do, but now I love it...that is the moment that stood out to me the most. In the beginning of the semester, I was not sure of the choreography and now that I know the choreography, I can really play with it and make people laugh. (Olivia, 2nd interview p. 7)

Dancers with LDs established relationship to self through their personal dance aesthetics, gradually turning outward by proving and showing self to others. In the next section, the continuum of relationship for dancers with LDs extends further to peers and instructors through physical, social, emotional, and intellectual support and engagement. Relational theory offers a theoretical framework to understand how “the human self is fundamentally relational” (Llewellyn & Llewellyn, 2015, p. 16). According to psychology researchers Shauna Shapiro, Kirk Warren Brown, and John Astin (2011), liberal arts programs within higher education were grounded in the maxim “Know thyself.” However, they go on to explain,

In most colleges and universities minimal attention is given to the development of self-awareness or self-understanding, although the development of such insight may be a central skill enabling individuals to

understand themselves, the behavior of others, resolve conflict, and so on.
(p. 506)

Individual Meanings of Relationship to Others

Relational theory suggests that human beings not only “enter into and live in a range of relationships that influence and shape the course of their lives directly or through socialization, but also that relationship and connection with others is essential to the self” (Llewelyn & Llewelyn, 2015, p. 16). In the following section, individual accounts of participants reveal experienced meanings of relational connections and disconnections in their respective higher education dance programs. I conclude with a synthesis that holistically presents students’ value of learning within a safe and supportive environment where they feel seen, connected, helped, and lifted.

Audrey

I begin with Audrey, a final year student, who used none of the language employed by other participants to describe relational meanings: *friendship, connection, safety, comfort, trust, family, home, community*. As recounted in Chapter 4, Audrey experienced difficulties working with others in the dance classroom, often preferring to work alone and avoiding close proximity to others:

Having other people close throws me off...distracts me. The second someone passes me, I go all drifty. Having people near makes me afraid to experiment and it’s harder to focus on my own timing. I like to practice alone...when I’m alone in the studio, I’m a lot freer. (Audrey, 2nd interview, p. 11)

Observing Audrey’s dance composition class, however, provided an elaborated perspective on her relationship to others within her dance program through her engagement in a collaborative, supportive, and inquiry-based learning environment. I

noticed that she was actively engaged in other students' work. She gave frequent feedback to her peers that was encouraging and constructive. When it came time for her to show her dance, her peers were receptive and shared helpful insights about her work. However, her piece titled "Where You Are" focused on social isolation and exclusion. While she was explaining the meaning of her piece to the class, I wondered if she was drawing inspiration from her own experience:

This was an abstraction of being quieted, of me or a person trying to speak about who they are and what they are and the outside world keeps shutting them down. I chose a lot of floor movements...with distance between people, to show how someone can feel isolated in a room full of people when they don't measure up to social expectations. (Audrey, Dance Comp observation, p. 4)

After the class Audrey spoke with me briefly and expressed how much she loves the composition class and finds her classmates "really helpful," projecting a sense that she does feel part of this cohort and their shared goal.

Zoe

Perceived support from dance instructors and social connections with peers plays a vital role in Zoe's experience of studying dance in higher education. She referred to the dance department as a "family" and a place where she feels at "home." This sense of belonging is an evolving process for Zoe, whose LD is Schizophrenia. A year prior, when she was a first-year student, she recalls, "I just felt like I didn't belong cuz normally I come in here and I'm like, well no one is gonna talk to me so why am I here?" (Zoe, 2nd interview, p. 7).

Observing her in Ballet and composition classes, I noticed that Zoe often retreated to a corner away from her peers or would keep to herself in class. However, she reflected that the longer she performs and dances with other students, the more she is able to

connect and “integrate.” Referring to herself, she says, “the more you integrate, the less it’s anti-social...” (p. 8). Though physical and social interaction can be difficult for Zoe, her dance program provides valued opportunities to connect with peers and instructors.

In discussing a time when Zoe felt good about learning dance at her college, she described the family-like environment of her African dance class, a place where she experiences “community”:

It just felt family oriented. Coming into African, they always tell us that dance is a community base, so when it feels like a community, you’re interacting with the community, and when you’re interacting with the whole community, you feel welcomed. (p. 2)

When I inquired how the class felt like a community, Zoe illustrated moments of unity or ‘togetherness’ among the dancers, both in and outside the classroom. She also highlighted the inclusive atmosphere of the class, remarking that *all* students take part or are welcome to participate:

We dance together, we laugh together, we do everything from trying to work on one person’s group to the next person’s group...after the class is over, we still talk to each other. Like the whole class, not just one-half of the class or one group. (p. 2)

Zoe described physical and social interaction with peers that she does not experience in other areas of her life— they are unique to dance:

Once you walk in the door, everything just goes away. And then you become like somebody’s best friend. And then, when you dance with people, it’s just like an interaction that you *get*. It’s not something that I can explain, but it’s like you just become somebody else and you just become united with somebody in a certain way that you probably wouldn’t on the street. (p. 2)

Another instance when Zoe felt connected to her peers was during an outdoor improvisation class with Japanese performance duo Eiko and Koma. Students were directed to sink into the grass and feel the internal sensations in their bodies. Later on,

they were told to dance with a partner and move with their eyes closed. Zoe communicated that trusting a partner was “nerve racking” and anxiety inducing, but ultimately pushed her to face her fears and connect with other dance students.

You’ve got to have trust and trust is something that I don’t feel like I have in many people, or people in general. Either way, I had to learn to overcome an anxiety of not wanting to get near someone. I’m still probably learning...that was really nerve racking, trying to be able to put my body into someone else’s hands. (Zoe, 2nd interview, p. 14)

I didn’t even want this person to be touching me, but then I’m like ok, maybe I’m gonna make a new friend or something and just become more connected with people around me, which probably led me to become more connected in other classes. (p. 14)

Zoe also articulated the importance of connecting with instructors on a personal level. Being “in tune with” and knowing the instructor is aware of her “situation” affords a sense of safety: “being able to connect with the teacher, to actually be around them and safe in their classroom, to feel like I won’t go through an episode or anything while I’m there...” (p. 15).

Leah

Stories of friendship, inclusion and exclusion, and the desire to ‘connect’ in dance were interlaced through my conversations with Leah:

I typically don’t interact with other dancers while I’m in dance class. I’ve always been like this, like I’m not really friends with [them]... Sometimes I’ll be sad. I do want friendships, but I feel excluded. (Leah, 2nd interview, pp. 9-10)

As described in Chapter 4, Leah does not experience significant challenges in learning dance itself. However, the struggle of connecting with other dancers plays a profound role in her educational experience, although she was able to identify moments of

“community” when she felt “safe” or “comfortable.” Performance played a role in her ability to feel connected to other dancers in her program.

All the dance classes get together and they just have a good time and people from the outside aren’t let in so people feel comfortable and safe. It was a good experience and people were like, “wooo!” I dunno, it felt like a community, which I rarely feel. (Leah, 2nd interview, p. 4)

I asked her to elaborate on how the event feels like a community. Her initial response indicated that “knowing through seeing” is important to Leah:

There are a bunch of people there that you see around, but you don’t know, and then you see them on stage and you’re like, “oh cool, you dance and you’re actually really good! I didn’t know that about you.” (p. 4)

She continued on to speak about the ways performance can provide opportunities—even the first step to developing meaningful relationships and friendships with other dancers: “Afterwards you’ll meet people and be like, ‘oh yeah, I saw you in dance finals, you were really good.’ It can make connections for people” (p. 5). In addition to making social connections with other dancers, Leah highlighted the supportive, fun, and unifying aspects of the performance setting:

Like people are cheering you on... I don’t know most of those people but still felt this common “oh we’re all here together and it was fun and I don’t really know you, but I’m going to watch you dance and you’re awesome. And we’re all awesome.” (p. 5)

Yet, as described in Chapter 4, in our conversations about learning, creating, and performing dance, Leah repeatedly brought up her struggles around relationships with other dancers. She desires or values the idea of friendly relationships with other dancers, but often feels excluded.

While observing her Jazz I class, however, I noticed that Leah was socially active, often functioning as a leader to help students who were struggling. In contrast, during the

Modern class I observed (described in Chapter 4), she communicated with no one, even when assigned to work with a partner. Although these observed peer social interactions gave ambiguous impressions, her verbal descriptions conveyed both resistance and longing for social connections with her peers.

Olivia

Olivia had spent a year studying dance at a neighboring institution where she did not feel supported. During both interviews, she spoke emphatically about the competitive and exclusive nature of her previous dance program, which ultimately led her to transfer to her current institution: “I was in a vulnerable state...it just was not a good place for me” (Olivia, 2nd interview, p. 7).

Everyone was cut throat, like they wanted to kill each other...no one was nice, everyone was mean, just for themselves and I could not take it any longer. And the same with the professors, like they picked their favorites from freshman year the first day of class, and they stuck with those girls and didn't care who you were. (p. 12)

Olivia enrolled in her present BFA Dance program as a third-year student.

Entering halfway through the program as a transfer student might have hindered her from establishing meaningful relationships; however, Olivia connected with her new dance program, extending the metaphor of *home* to include *family*:

Everyone's like a family...it's really nice because you feel comfortable dancing with whoever you need to dance with, like in our choreography. I have a lot of good friends even though I've only been here for a year and almost a half now. I feel like I've known them for like, 12 years. It was so refreshing to come here and be like, “wow, these people are really nice,” like just genuinely good people. (pp. 12-13)

In the following anecdote, she illustrates how a home-like environment affords her ability to choreograph:

My choreography class has made me feel at home and safe...I feel I can do whatever I want and just share that space with them. We bounce ideas off each other, and it's never once been, "I don't like that, you need to change that," or hurtful. They're always compassionate and bouncing ideas, like I take their opinions and it's really nice. (p. 17)

Curious to hear more about the role of relationships in Olivia's learning experience, I asked if she could describe what the social aspect of dancing was like at her university.

Olivia said, "Coming here, everyone has an open heart and wants you to succeed" (p. 12), going on to mention again how the dance department is like a family.

Sophie

First year dance major Sophie's perceptions of connecting to her dance peers and instructors was marked by physical and emotional connections with peers and acceptance from instructors. Unlike Zoe and Olivia, Sophie does not invariably feel a relational connection in dance technique classes. Rather, she experiences this intermittently, articulating its subtle and extraordinary qualities: "If we're all agreeing on something...those little tiny moments where we *all* laugh at something or everybody, not just some of us" (Sophie, 2nd interview, p. 12). As a whole, however, Sophie spoke positively about the relationships she has developed during her short time in the dance program. My initial conversation with Sophie suggested that forming meaningful relationships was an important value of her learning experience.

During a conversation about a time Sophie felt "good" about performing dance, she discussed a piece she was rehearsing centered on the theme of "family." In addition to relating to the theme, she commented that the cast is "a really big family...that feels really nice—family is really important" (p. 12). She highlighted a moment when the group gathered in a circle and shared stories about their families and cried, which made

her “feel much closer to everyone...I feel like I know them more and I think that’s what makes us a little tiny family” (p. 12).

Sophie felt pleasantly surprised by the mutual respect and friendliness she encountered in her university dance program, which was rarely present in her high school dance studio settings:

There’s not as much drama. There is some, but I expected a lot more. Everybody talks to everybody, tells everybody how they feel...in a nice way, which is good. It’s like everybody respects each other most of the time. (p. 13)

Danielle

As a third-year student, Danielle has established a sense of home in her dance program through support and assistance from peers and instructors. In her view, a dance home is a place where students are encouraged and challenged through thoughtful care and attention. The notion of “finding a home” was a recurring motif in Danielle’s past and present accounts of studying dance. Prior to arriving at college, she studied at several dance studios that she had left because she “didn’t find a home” (Danielle, 1st interview, p. 4). I asked Danielle to reflect on what “home” means to her. She was able to differentiate experiences in dance that feel like home from those that don’t:

They always say home is where the heart is, and like, my heart is in dance. I feel like this is my home. The park district wasn’t my home... I was always being discouraged and wasn’t being pushed. Someone was always better than me, like there was a favorite, whereas my other studio was a home—it was more loving and everyone was pushed the same even if we weren’t on the same level. (p. 5)

Based on the above description, Danielle perceives “home” as dance itself, but more specifically a caring and attentive dance environment where she feels encouraged yet challenged and that is available to all members.

Synthesis: Being Seen, Connected, Helped, Lifted

Participants expressed the importance of physical, social, emotional, and intellectual support within their dance programs. This section provides a holistic account of dancers with LDs' relationship to others in their dance in higher education programs, weaving a scenario of possibility for a mutually constitutive relational framework for learning in higher education dance.

Socially, dance education provided access to friendships and social interactions that are unlike social engagements outside the dance classroom. "Being seen" was highlighted as a step towards developing meaningful relationships and friendships with other dancers in the program:

I always used to be the tiny person that no one sees but surprisingly here people do see me and it feels good. I actually have a best friend and people talk to me. I guess it's like a new start. It's nice. In the beginning, I was kinda scared. I wasn't talking to anyone, everyone already had their little groups and I was like, "darn I missed my chance," but I guess I didn't because now I have a friend. I have more than one friend actually and that's great—it's much better. (Sophie, 2nd interview, p. 13)

Dance education can offer the college student with LDs meaningful social-emotional connection with peers as they physically support each other in the dance: "Even in the movement we are very connected, touching, lifting people up, and it just feels good because we're all working together. I like that a lot" (Sophie, 2nd interview, p. 12). Further, the corporeal solidarity of working and moving together can engender feelings of mutual respect, connection, and unity amongst peers.

Emotional connection with instructors was also valued by participating dancers with LDs along with the importance of pedagogical reassurance; such connection plays an important role in feeling cared for and supported, particularly when instructors are

aware of the student's disability and accommodate them accordingly. "New" studio professors and "academic professors" might not understand the LD student's needs in the classroom and need to be informed. Dance students with LDs might feel reluctant to speak with instructors and can be encouraged to do so. Students in the current study tended to evaluate their college instructors favorably in comparison to those in previous studio environments. For example:

The instructors here aren't going to judge me. I'm much more comfortable. We do have evaluations and one-on-one where we talk about my progress and how I'm doing, and it's really casual. I feel they're going to give me good constructive feedback, so I don't feel bad about that. Before I usually felt like, "oh darn, I wasn't doing that right," but here I'm, "ok, I can do that. (Sophie, 2nd interview, p. 5)

Yet, dancers with LDs might also perceive that instructors fall short in their duty of care:

I second-guess myself. Reassurance would be nice. I haven't heard any instructor talk about how they wonder if everybody's okay. The only time I've been asked that is in the one-on-one self-evaluation thing, and I feel like they didn't even really mean it, like they didn't really care. (p. 21)

Peer Support

They just helped me a lot. (Olivia)

Dancers with LDs connected to their peers through support and assistance, which was one of the self-constructed strategies discussed in Chapter 5.

We get stuck in a few habits, especially working on solos, so it's nice that I can go to those girls and be like, "I'm doing my habit, like what looks good, I need some help." They'll stop and help me. (Danielle, 2nd interview, p. 4)

As a dancer, you're expected to be around people, at least sometimes. I know it's necessary. I just started being able to work with a partner this semester...a way I am growing as a dancer. (Audrey, 2nd interview, p. 17)

Peer support described in interviews and observed during choreography classroom visits included enthusiasm, encouragement, constructive criticism, problem-solving, and availability, framed in language like “that was really cool to see,” “powerful, meaningful, and provocative” (Zoe, observation #2, p. 3); “where is the initiation coming from in this part—it is a big factor in your theme” (Olivia, 2nd interview, p. 17); and “I liked how you explored soft and hard. I thought it was a mixture of both, it all just flowed together (angular and circular)” (Sophie, observation #1, p. 2).

College dancers with LDs can experience both tension and gratitude while receiving peer feedback on choreography:

I was comfortable enough with them to dance in front of them. And some of them helped me make up what I was doing...sometimes it was a little frustrating because they would be like, “do that over, take that out, that um, maybe, and it was kind of like ok, we’re gonna have some problems [laughs].” (Zoe, interview, p. 6)

I was actually happy to know that someone cared enough for me to not like go to the floor and just look crazy, even though at the end of the day, I was like, maybe I’m not gonna do this anyway. (p. 6)

Dancers with LDs may receive peer support in the technique class as well. Peers can help intellectually by breaking down movements, providing directional cues, and offering emotional support through shared understanding and encouragement.

“I needed it slower and someone broke it down for me” (Danielle, 2nd interview, p. 14).

Peers can assist the dancer with LDs to mediate frustration or anger arising from physical or creative challenges.

I get really mad when I don’t do something correctly, but you know what? Everyone here is SO nice and so kind. All my friends want me to succeed, they want me to do well, so my girlfriend’s like, “oh you know you’re turning the wrong way.” They actually call me out and help me. Normally dancers don’t do that and are not the nicest people, so it’s nice to have that

because I can see and understand... You can help each other do well.
(Olivia, 1st interview, p. 11)

I thought the music is ever moving and you didn't move in the way we expected to see. I thought that was really interesting, good for you for staying with something really frustrating and keep going (Sophie, observation #1, p. 2).

Sometimes peer support can reach familial proportions:

“It's like, if I ever need something, I can go to one of the dancers and they would be RIGHT there” (Danielle, 2nd interview, p. 5).¹

In technique classes if I don't quite get a step, everyone is willing to drop everything, or they'll say, “I don't get it either, don't worry.” (p. 4)

Such support might be available during acute states of injury or illness:

I had that incident with the fainting and the dresser falling on me. They were so forgiving. I still get to choreograph and I didn't lose my spot on the Ballet Club board. Like normally when you don't do what you're supposed to, you get kicked from your position, but they understood... that's a community. (p. 4)

Student dancers with LDs might or might not disclose their disability to peers, but value the opportunity to connect with others who have learning “complications”:

Especially here in the dance department, there's a few people that have it and we talk about it sometimes, or if they don't have ADHD they have something else going on, some other type of complication, so we'll talk about it and work it through. (Olivia, 1st interview, p. 13)

Conversely, College dancers with LDs might feel excluded from or limited in their opportunities to perform due to their disability: “It would be great if people like me or dancers with disabilities were given the same opportunities as non-disabled dancers” (Audrey, 2nd interview, p. 20). Sometimes this limitation might be self-imposed, but nevertheless can impair social connection with peers and exacerbate isolation.

Chapter Summary and Reflections

This chapter highlighted participating dancers with LDs' continuum of relationship to self and others through authentic expression and engagement in their higher education dance experiences. Students' stories illustrate how college dancers with LDs can experience personal authenticity and relationship through shared dancing, performing, creating, and problem-solving, along with accommodation and support from instructors and peers.

With individual variations, participants used metaphors such as home, family, and community to describe their dance programs as places where they experience relational connections through friendship, comfort, safety, connection, and support. Several participants had tried previous college programs before settling on their present institution. Social, emotional, physical, and intellectual connections in their current dance programs provided an inter-relational framework for learning in perceived safe and supportive environment, while perceptions of social exclusion and alienation hindered full participation and active engagement in dance. Danielle and Olivia, Leah, Sophie, and Zoe's descriptive accounts suggest that they feel acclimated to their dancing communities, each articulating the value they place in their respective programs. Of all the participants, Audrey's disability is the most visible, possibly making it a contributing factor in her exclusion or sense of exclusion from performance opportunities.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Introduction

The disposition of the body determines perspectives, but it also spices these perspectives with phenomenological knowledge—lifeworld experience—that affects the interpretation of perspective. (Siebers, 2008, p. 23)

This chapter discusses the research findings from Chapters 4, 5, and 6. Chapter 4 presented findings related to challenges participating dancers with LDs have experienced in higher education. Chapter 5 illustrated inventive strategies dancers with LDs developed to cope with the demands and challenges of higher education dance. Chapter 6 addressed participants' relationships to self and others in their higher education dance programs.

Throughout the data analysis, I attempted to fit participants' stories and expressions into neat categories in hopes of establishing a common thread that seamlessly tied all the participants together. While it is useful to identify themes that apply to all participants, I came to realize that smoothing over and severing the frayed edges of experience that invite dissonance and tension into the conversation was a disservice to my participants and the study at large. I learned to embrace these tensions by allowing the data to speak for itself, discovering that both individual and shared meanings were apparent and significant findings. With the intention of uncovering the subtleties and complexities unique to each participant while also presenting collective meanings that were apparent for the majority of participants, I structured Chapters 4, 5, and 6 to

showcase both facets of experience. Reflecting on the research findings yielded a connection to Tobin Siebers' theory of complex embodiment.

Siebers' (2013) theory of complex embodiment is interwoven throughout the discussion of findings, operating as a cogent theoretical lens that illuminates experienced meanings of dancers with LDs in higher education dance. Conferring with disability studies literature is useful not only because it is integral to the topic studied but because "embodiment is central to the field of disability studies" and facilitates a greater understanding of the social and corporeal factors that are simultaneously experienced and constructed by participants (Siebers, 2008, p. 23). I also discuss how findings from this study extend Sieber's theory through the embodied phenomenon of dance, which recognizes, accommodates, and accepts different embodiments by enabling individual aesthetic expression and agency.

As described in Chapter 2, Siebers (2008) brings two opposing paradigms of disability (the medical and social model) together to create a nuanced and comprehensive way of conceptualizing disability and impairment. The medical model, which focuses on biological aspects of disability, situates disability within the individual body, while the social model situates disability in the environmental and social factors that create it: "disabling environments produce disability in bodies and require interventions at the level of social justice" (p. 25).

The medical model focuses almost exclusively on embodiment while the social model ignores embodiment altogether. Siebers (2008) reimagines the concept of embodiment by raising "awareness of the effects of disabling environments on people's lived experience of the body" as well as other corporeal factors affecting disability that

stem from the body (p. 25). Along this line, he views “social representations and the body not as unidirectional as in the social model, or nonexistent as in the medical model, but as reciprocal” (p. 25).

Corporeal and Social Tensions

Participating dancers’ varying backgrounds, levels of dance training, personalities, and disabled identities are complexly embodied through conjoint corporeal and social factors that reflect a broad continuum of abilities as in Siebers (2008) “spectrum of human variation” (p. 25). In Chapter 4 participants identified individual challenges associated with their LDs such as balance, focus, directionality, information processing, pace of instruction, anxiety, and fatigue. Challenges were often tied to individual disabilities and were corporeal, supporting premises of the medical model.

However, environmental factors played a contributing role in creating inaccessible learning experiences. Taken-for-granted expectations integral to dance technique training, such as learning at a quick pace with little to no room for adjustment or additional time, for instance, created an environmental barrier that reinforced disability as a deficit or problem. Whatley and Marsh (2017) suggest that “assumed structures” of dance classes should be re-evaluated since “traditional [dance] class structures are generally built upon the presumption of a non-disabled, non-impaired dancing body” (p. 10).

Participants oscillated between notions of disability as an internal, individual struggle akin to the medical model of disability and as a universally constructed phenomenon associated with the social model, where disability is conceived as a natural part of human existence (Davis, 2002; Zola, 1989). For example, Sophie described her

experience with LD as an internal struggle: “I think it’s definitely an internal thing, so it’s kinda like a battle with myself” (Sophie, 1st interview, pp. 12-13) while other participants shifted from conceiving disability as something inherently “wrong” with them to accepting their way of operating in a learning environment.

In relation to her dyslexia, Danielle said, “It’s not my fault,” and went on to talk about a challenging moment of learning dance when she took the blame off herself saying, “my brain just wasn’t there” (Danielle, 1st interview, p. 15). Whether participants internalized their disability or projected a socially constructed view of disability, the majority of participants placed responsibility on themselves to succeed in dance, desiring a maximum level of normalcy in the dance classroom. The desire for normalcy reflects the ideology of ability. In his book *Disability Theory*, Siebers (2008) defines the ideology of ability “at its simplest the preference for able-bodiedness” and at its most extreme:

It defines the baseline by which humanness is determined, setting the measure of the body and mind that gives or denies human status to individual persons. It affects nearly all of our judgements, definitions, and values about human beings, but because it is discriminatory and exclusionary, it creates social locations outside of and critical of its purview, most notably in this case, the perspective of disability. (p. 8)

The ideology of ability threatens any desire to accept and value the body as it is. Although participating dancers with LDs’ self-determination to succeed and “rehabilitate” themselves in various ways reflects ableist notions that seek to erase signs of disability, it also demonstrates an autonomous, agentic approach to learning, which I discuss in the next section. As Siebers points out, a desire to “pass” as able-bodied is not an “avoidance of social responsibility or manipulation for selfish interests but is a form of embodied knowledge—forced into usage by prejudices against disability—about the relationship between the social environment and human ability” (p. 24). Whether fully

accepting or fully denying their disabilities, participating dancers with LDs articulated a keen understanding of their abilities, likely contributing to the ability to assess their specific needs in the dance classroom through self-constructed strategies.

Self-Knowledge and Determining Social Representation

Siebers theorizes the relationship between body and representation as “mutually transformative” meaning that just as one’s body can be changed or affected by social representation, we can also determine our own social representation through situated embodied knowledge (p. 290). Participants’ self-constructed strategies allowed them to determine their own social representation, assisting them to navigate through higher education dance.

According to Fraleigh (1987) embodiment is not passive but “clearly represents our expressive body-of-action and its aesthetic idealization” (xvi). In dance, the dancer has the capacity to “project her own being” in an immediate way through creative and aesthetic intention (Fraleigh, 1987, p. 18). While social and environmental constraints are involved in the act of dancing, Fraleigh (1987) asserts that the body is not determined by limitations. Self-constructed and constructing strategies align with the central premise of the theory of complex embodiment, which is to “give disabled people greater knowledge of and control over their bodies in situations where increased knowledge and control are possible” (Siebers, 2008, p. 27).

Siebers claim that “situated knowledge adheres in embodiment” (p. 23) is inherent to dance. Unlike other art forms, in dance the body and the art form are inseparable. Fraleigh (1987) rejects an instrumental view of the body, distinguishing dance as an embodied art form that positions the dancer as both subject and object:

Dance is a creative and aesthetic extension of our embodiment. The body and the dance are inseparable. The body is the dance, as the dancer is the dance; the body is concretely there in the dance. The body is not the instrument of dance; it is the subject of dance. The body cannot be an instrument, because it is not an object as other instruments are. Even when it is objectified in dance, it retains its subjectivity. (pp. 31-32)

By engaging in dance, an embodied artform, one comes to know, present, and determine the self. Canadian philosopher Francis Sparshott (1988) submitted that of all the arts, dance is the most closely connected to self-knowledge as it involves the dancer's own body as a whole.

The lived significance of emotions and feelings associated with challenges, strategies, and relationality in higher education dance, including feelings of inadequacy and anxiety; connection to others through social/affective engagement; channeling or calming certain emotions through dance; and showing "true self" through choreography and performance reveal the power emotions play in self-knowledge and determining social representation within dance studio learning contexts. Martha Nussbaum (2001), a philosophy and human rights scholar who studies the significance of emotions in quality of life, enlightens this discussion: "Taken as a group, a creature's emotions summarize the way it conceives of its very identity in the world, its sense of what selfhood is and what is central to selfhood" (p. 107).

According to John M. Dirkx (2008), editor of *Adult Learning and the Emotional*, "Emotions have for many years been regarded as largely undesirable within teaching and learning settings, that is, as obstacles to reason and the development of knowledge" (p. 11). Dirkx attributes the dismissal of emotions to the Enlightenment's emphasis on rational thought and scientific reasoning, which viewed emotions as something to overcome as opposed to a valuable source of knowledge. Romanticism, however, resisted

the myth of rational superiority, “emphasiz[ing] the importance of emotion and feeling for understanding the human being” (Han, 2016, p. 9).

Definitions of emotion widely vary, spanning from the essentialist claim that emotions are innate physiological responses to particular stimuli to the philosophy that emotions are socially constructed and contingent on cultural contexts (p. 11). A third perspective, one that is relevant to embodied learning in dance, is that emotion is embodied. Sociology scholar Debra Lupton (1998) explains that the relationship between embodiment and emotion is not simply experiencing the bodily sensation of emotion, but the idea that “Embodiment is integral to, and inextricable from subjectivity” (p. 32). Similar to Siebers theory of complex embodiment, this perspective fuses polarized views of emotion by acknowledging the concurrent experience of emotion as bodily states interpreted through sociocultural lenses.

Findings reveal that participants held a keen understanding of their abilities and challenges based on embodied experiences in dance. They described an array of challenges that were made visible through the dance experience. However, knowing these challenges, perhaps because they were so visible and apparent, forced participants to develop self-constructed strategies specific to their individual needs. Dancers in this study also demonstrated a situated knowledge of self and body through the experience and desire to show their authentic selves and inhabit their true selves with others in dance.

Embracing Disability & Self

Dancers with LDs expressed the value of connecting to themselves and others within their respective dance programs, collectively stressing the importance of being

seen as their ‘true selves’ in dance. The collective desire to show and be their true selves in dance indicates a valuing of disability. Within the framework of complex embodiment, Siebers (2008) positions disability as an “epistemology that rejects the temptation to value the body as anything other than what it was and that embraces what the body has become and will become relative to the demands on it, whether environmental, representational, or corporeal” (p. 27).

Participants claim disability by expressing and being true to their uniqueness in higher education dance. Participants desire to share their experiences through dance works in opposition to the ideology of ability. For example, Danielle comments on how she demonstrates authenticity through dance: “I’m a mover, that’s what I do...it allows me to prove who I am and what I am and what kind of person I am” (Danielle, 2nd interview, p. 23). One of the ways she displays herself is by channeling meanings and effects of disability into choreography and performance, a self-constructed coping strategy discussed in Chapter 5. Revealing her personal experience of anxiety revealed a willingness to disclose her true self to the audience through an agentic act of creativity. Valuing authenticity, participating dancers did not attempt to erase signs of disability as the ideology of ability incites, but embraced what the body is and what it may become.

A major finding of this study was the difference between the struggle for authenticity in technique classes versus dance composition and performance-based opportunities in the dance classroom. In Chapter 4, the majority of individual challenges revolved around constraints in dance technique classes. Composition, improvisation, and performance, however, were utilized by the majority of participants to serve as coping

strategies for learning and facilitated experiences of personal and relational authenticity in higher education dance.

In her book, *Poetics of Contemporary Dance*, dance writer and historian Laurence Louppe (2010) explores the creative practices of contemporary dance by “focus[ing] upon the resources that the practice itself has chosen” (p. 12). She identifies essential components of improvisation:

The producing of materials (matériaux) through improvisation – insofar as in choreographic thinking compositional components only find their legitimacy in the qualitative resources of the dancing subject or subjects of (as individuals or in the framework in which they come together), to the exclusion of external givens. (p. 158)

Louppe explains that in contemporary choreography, improvisation is a necessary and integral component to training and a “means of investigating the material and oneself” (p. 160). The way Louppe frames composition and improvisation as innately personal and relational acts that use the material/matter of the self along with the “relational network of bodies” casts light on dancers with LDs’ propensity for engaging in composition and improvisation to access personal and relational authenticity. Through compositional and improvisational practices, the intersection of self and other can be materialized, known, and expressed through the act of dance making and is unique to dance as an art form.

Louppe (2010) offers a theory of the body that aligns with Sieber’s theory of complex embodiment through the recognition and acceptance of different embodiments. Louppe distinguishes dance from other artforms in describing the body as an active matter/material, postulating “the idea that the body is an unstable aliveness” (p. 361). In “dance-making” dance is made from “the power of the body to exude aliveness out of its own matter” (p. 366). Louppe offers a complementary perspective to Sieber’s theory of

complex embodiment as she similarly acknowledges the chaotic and unstable nature of body but frames it as active, fluid and evolving to show and value what it is and what it will become through its own spectrum of variation. For Louppe, dance is a form of “extreme freedom” (p. 135).

Louppe points to the value dance brings to disability through her recognition and acceptance of different embodiments that account for individual aesthetic expressions inherent in the act of dance making and engagement. For dancers with LDs, engaging in dance enables them to “express the lived body in an aesthetic form,” gaining a greater understanding of one’s self and others (Fraleigh, 1987, p. xvi).

Chapter Summary

Tobin Siebers’ (2013) theory of complex embodiment provides a critical framework for understanding the experiences of dancers with LDs in higher education through a lens of embodiment that claims the value and variability of disability. Like dance, a disability perspective begins and ends with the body, contending with its instable and chaotic nature. Dance brings disability to a visible place where it must be contended with. Despite the fact that students with LDs are sometimes able to hide their disabilities, findings from this study reveal the visibility of disability in the dance classroom. The next chapter concludes the dissertation with a final overview, and reflections, and recommendations.

CHAPTER 8

SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CLOSING REFLECTIONS

This chapter brings the dissertation to a close. I begin with an overview of the study's purpose, background literature, and methods and procedures. Next, I summarize the research findings and offer some final reflections. The concluding portion of the chapter presents recommendations for future research and a culminating reflection.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to illuminate challenges, learning strategies, and experienced meanings of dance for students with Learning Disabilities (LD) in higher education dance programs. The aim of this research is to shed light on an underrepresented population in dance education research and its ultimate hope is to strengthen the call for accessibility in the dance classroom. While literature on students with LDs in higher education is substantial, this is the first study to focus on dancers with LDs in higher education. This research contributes to a general body of literature pertaining to students with LDs in higher education that has developed over the past three decades (Albert & Fairweather, 1990; Chaplin, 2011; Connor, 2011; Denhart, 2018; Everatt, Steffert, & Smythe, 1999; Hadley, 2006; Johnston, 1984; Keim, Mc Whirter, & Bernstein, 1996; Kendall, 2016; Lambert & Dryer, 2018; Leveroy, 2013; Lewis & Lynn, 2018; Troiano, 2003; Valeras, 2010) as well as dance education research and disability studies research (Connor, 2011; Everatt, Steffert, & Smythe, 1999; Gobbo, 2010; Harvey-Carter, 2008; Sulewski et al., 2012; Valeras, 2010; Whatley, 2007, 2008).

Research questions that oriented the study include: 1) aspects of learning, creating, and performing dance that are most challenging for participants; 2) learning and coping strategies the dancers use to work through challenges and how they were developed; 3) how these dancers with LDs view their disabilities and how their conceptions influence their outlook and approach to learning dance; 4) perceived benefits from participating in higher education dance programs; and 5) learning environments and teaching practices dancers with LDs encounter in the dance classroom. The orienting questions provided solid frames for students with LDs' descriptive accounts of experienced meanings in higher education dance.

As my access to student meanings deepened, orienting research questions were amended to better reflect the six dancers' data descriptions. For example, I came into the study with the assumption that dancers with LDs experience benefits in dance, which is reflected in question four. However, through the final stages of data analysis, the lived theme of relationality emerged, through dancers' rich disclosures of their experiences of 'authenticity' to self and others emerged. Question five, which focused on learning environments and teaching practices, was beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Research questions were addressed in Chapters 4, 5, and 6: Chapter 4 presented challenging aspects of learning, creating, and performing dance for participating dancers with LDs (question 1); Chapter 5 illustrated participant experiences and perceptions of disability and the self-constructed strategies they created to cope with the demands of higher education dance (questions 2, 3); Chapter 6 addressed the fourth research question through an interpretive extension on the concrete question of benefits to a thematically

powerful focus on authenticity and relationality – students’ valuing of “truthful” relationship to self and others in their higher education dance programs.

Background Literature

Framing disability in conceptual models provided a theoretical lens to approach disability throughout the study. A survey of literature revealed a lack of research in dance education for dancers with LDs in higher education. A survey of qualitative studies on LD in higher education offered salient context pertaining to: experience of first year LD college students (Chaplin, 2011; Connor, 2011; Hadley, 2006; Randolph, 2012); identity formation (Sulewski et al., 2012; Valeras, 2010); systematic and localized barriers to learning for students with LDs (Johnston, 1984; Lambert & Dryer, 2018); and superior creativity of students with LD (Everatt, Steffert, & Smythe, 1999). This study builds on existing research to create an evidence-based bridge to higher education dance grounded in student experiential descriptions of self-disclosure, self-advocacy, disability identity, barriers in higher education, creativity, and memories of involvement in the arts.

Methods and Procedures

Qualitative data were provided by six individuals with LDs studying dance in higher education institutions in the northeastern and midwestern regions of the United States. Participants engaged in one-on-one in-depth interviews (audio recorded) and wrote reflective journals, enabling me to privilege their perspectives and views in relation to the “phenomenon of interest” (van Manen, 1997) or central research question (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Providing an additional perspective to students’

experiential accounts, I observed two dance classes of each participant – one technique class and one composition or improvisation class. Through numerous rounds of systematic data analysis, elucidated in Chapter 3, I endeavored to reach the heart of students with LDs' experienced meanings in higher education dance.

Summary of Findings

In Chapter 4, participant accounts depict a multifaceted and nuanced portrait of challenges experienced in learning and performing choreography in the dance classroom. All but one dancer tied a variety of challenges in their dance technique classes to their individual LDs, including balance, lack of focus, difficulties with directionality, information processing, pace of instruction, anxiety, and fatigue. One 'outlier' in the group did not identify any physical challenges related to her LD, or parallel others' expressed feelings of inadequacy in their dance programs, which they associated with feeling judged, watched, and compared to others, and with negative self-talk. Feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt could disrupt full engagement in dance technique or composition classes.

Chapter 5 illustrated how the six dancers with LDs viewed their disabilities, revealing how perception plays a critical role in how they create strategies and exert agency to cope and learn in dance. Participants oscillated between notions of disability as an internal, individual struggle (akin to the medical model of disability) and as a universally constructed phenomenon where disability is a natural part of human existence encompassing a broad range of physical and mental variations (Davis, 2002; Zola, 1989).

When participants discussed their views on receiving accommodations or additional assistance in the dance classroom, the majority placed responsibility on themselves to succeed in a dance-learning environment, expressing disdain for differential or “special” treatment, almost as if they *wanted* their disability to be ‘invisible.’ Further, in adopting this universal view of disability—that everyone experiences challenges in learning dance—some of the dancers with LD believed they were (or should be) ineligible to receive outside help or accommodations. The above-mentioned ‘outlier’ was perhaps an extreme example of this attitude, yet she did identify as a dancer with LD and volunteered for this study. Perhaps she epitomizes the idea of LDs as invisible.

Along with internalizing and taking it upon themselves to rehabilitate or reduce signs of their disabilities, students in this study simultaneously projected a view of disability that embraces individual differences in ways of learning, coping, and being in the world. Whether fully accepting or fully denying their disabilities, these dancers with LDs articulated keen understanding of their *abilities*, and were able to attend to their specific needs in the dance classroom through self-constructed strategies.

Participants crafted inventive ways of navigating challenges in the dance classroom, describing their active role in devising strategies such as self-advocacy, self-talk, recuperating activities, and dance itself as a relief. Some strategies, particularly those involving self-advocacy, were created in conjunction with peers and dance faculty while others were individually or privately administered. Research findings illuminate a constructivist concept of learning where students play an active role in the learning process, and collectively resemble Sieber’s (2008) theory of complex embodiment, which

highlights the nuanced distinctions among people with disabilities. Students described how their self-directed pedagogies contributed to feelings of success in learning, creating, and performing dance in their higher education settings.

One of the ways students gained relief from psychological and emotional challenges of their LDs was through communicating and channeling meanings or effects of disability into choreography and performance, that is, through dance itself. One participant drew attention to the temporary relief she experienced from depression through embodying the intrinsic qualities of dance, particularly her ability to experience joy through dance.

Chapter 6 highlights the emergent theme of relationality to self and others described in different and similar ways by all dancers. Some used the terms home, family, and/or community to describe their dance programs as places where they felt comfortable, seen, safe, and or connected. Students' stories illustrate how feeling socially, physically, and emotionally connected to peers and instructors can contribute to a sense of safety and comfortability, while perceptions of social exclusion and alienation can hinder full participation and active engagement in dance.

Another expressed value was that of becoming, being, or expressing "self," a kind of 'real' or 'true' self in dance. Further, students associated a variety of genres including dance improvisation, jazz, modern, and African dance with feelings of individual self-expression and freedom. Half of the participants described freeing and therapeutic qualities of dance improvisation that enabled them to feel at peace, move in unique and distinct ways, and express their "natural" ways of moving.

Closing Reflections

Tobin Siebers' (2013) theory of complex embodiment provides a phenomeno-critical framework for understanding the experiences of dancers with LDs in higher education through a lens that magnifies the value and variability of disability. Participating dancers' differing backgrounds, levels of dance training, personalities, disabled identities, and contextual circumstances are complexly embodied through conjoint corporeal and social factors that reflect a continuum of abilities as in Siebers' (2008) "spectrum of human variation" (p. 25). Findings from this study extend Siebers' theory to the embodied phenomenon of dance. At its best, dance recognizes and accommodates different embodiments, accepting individual aesthetic expression and agency. Further, dance brings disability to a visible place where it must be contended with. Despite the fact that students with LDs might desire and are sometimes able to hide their disabilities, this study reveals the visibility of disability in the dance classroom, along with the presence of what could be called "hidden curricula" in student dancers' radical self-directed pedagogies.

Participants described an array of individual challenges, some of them shared by one or more others, including feelings of inadequacy, lack of support from and difficulty connecting with peers and faculty, anxiety, stress and depression. Recall when Sophie disclosed that when depressed, she could benefit from emotional accommodations, but doesn't feel there is an infrastructure to support students with emotional needs:

Times when I'm really down and I can't focus and I can't think straight, those are the times where I feel like I would like some help...there isn't any dance help with that. (Sophie, 2nd interview, p. 15)

Similarly, when asked what kind of accommodations would help them succeed in dance, Zoe said, “I feel like emotional support is the only thing that a person ever needs” (Zoe, 2nd interview, p. 24). Such student disclosures indicate the importance of emotional support for students in higher education dance programs, a need that seems increasingly pressing during this era of global pandemic.

Connecting with self, peers, and instructors was integral to learning for all participating dancers with LDs. Participants provided a multifaceted and nuanced portrait of their challenges in learning and performing choreography and techniques. Experiential accounts of challenges revealed that authenticity in dance was, perhaps, inevitable through the visibility of LD. For example, when participants turned in the wrong direction, lost their balance, or fell behind, they had no choice but to expose their vulnerability. At the same time, participants’ self-knowledge supported their success in learning through self-constructed strategies.

Along with internalizing and taking it upon themselves to rehabilitate or reduce signs of their disabilities, students in this study simultaneously projected a view of disability that embraces individual authenticity in learning processes and ways of being in the world. Siebers (2013) theorizes the relationship between body and representation as “mutually transformative” or “reciprocal,” meaning that just as one’s body can be changed or affected by social representation, we can also determine our own social representation through situated embodied knowledge (p. 290). Self-constructed strategies such as positive self-talk, absence, and dance as a medium to express emotions and disability experience were all acts reflecting authentic engagement.

Problems of definition aside—the slipperiness of the concept of authenticity (see Freshwater, 2012), students’ stories illustrated a dynamic phenomenon that I am calling “relational authenticity” in which strategies of self-advocacy involved collaboration and reliance on peers and instructors. Dancers’ descriptions of being affirmed, accepted, and seen by peers and instructors through composition and performance opportunities reveal their valuing of relational authenticity in higher education dance. Participating dancers also discovered ways to connect with *themselves* through choreographic and performance opportunities where they could share their personal aesthetic and “be themselves” in dance.

Exploring experienced meanings of six dancers with LDs in higher education for this study strengthens the rationale for privileging the voices of dancers with LDs. Such first-person studies will afford dance educators better understanding of challenges, strategies, and meaningful facets of students’ learning in dance. Findings reveal that participants held a keen understanding of their abilities and challenges in dance. They described an array of challenges that they perceived as visible to others in their dance environments. However, knowing these challenges, perhaps because they are so visible to others, might have motivated participants to develop self-constructed strategies specific to their individual needs, and to value the authentic relationality evidenced in their expressed *desire* to show their ‘true’ selves in dance. Further research is needed to examine these ideas beyond speculation.

Recommendations for Future Research

Exploring experienced meanings of six dancers with LDs in higher education for this study strengthens the rationale for privileging the voices of dancers with LDs in order to better understand challenges, strategies, and meaningful facets of learning experiences in dance. Research findings provide insight into the ways dance in higher education can be more accessible and inclusive for students with and without LDs. In this burgeoning field of inquiry, thoughtful, well-designed research is necessary to further illuminate the complexity of this underrepresented group of learners in dance.

A topic of inquiry that fell outside the scope of this study involved examining learning environments and teaching practices that dancers with LDs encounter within higher education dance (orienting research question 5). Further examination of learning environments could be achieved through a mixed-methods study with extensive observations of instructors, in-depth interviews with dance educators and students, and wide population surveys of dancers with LDs.

In addition, longitudinal studies with larger sample sizes would build on the foundational work of this research in order to understand the evolution of students with LDs' experiences throughout their four-year dance programs. Such studies could survey dancers' evolving perceptions of disability as well as the challenges, strategies, and benefits of learning dance. Longitudinal studies could also examine underlying motivations that contribute to student retention in dance programs, or conversely, why students decide to withdraw from dance programs. This topic of potential inquiry emerged during this study while talking with a chair of a dance department who shared

the story of her daughter, who had to drop out of the dance program due to lack of academic and emotional support.

Lastly, studies that employ intersectional methodologies are needed to better understand individual, intersecting identities of dancers with learning disabilities and their relation to structural and institutional power. According to sociologists Ann-Dorte Christensen and Sune Qvotrup Jensen (2012), intersectional analysis is rooted in feminism and aims to “explore intersecting patterns between different structures of power and how people are simultaneously positioned—and position themselves—in multiple categories, such as gender, class, and ethnicity (p. 110). Intersectional analysis could potentially expose dynamic power relations and oppression that exist within higher education for dancers with LDs using micro and macro-level analysis.

Final Reflections

When I took my first ballet classes twenty-seven years ago, I struggled to process the teacher’s instructions and her negative affect. After this introduction, I abandoned dance for almost a decade. Rediscovering dance in adolescence, I experienced the power that dance can hold to heal and to empower, guiding me forward to pursue a career in dance, something I never imagined would happen. These two time periods, and the learning challenges and accomplishments that took place in between, brought me to the questions that foreground this dissertation study.

Throughout the research process, I allowed myself to enter into the stories of participating dancers with LDs, seeking to understand their unique paths and perspectives rather than imposing my own. Now that the research has been completed and experienced

meanings have risen to the surface, I am able to identify clear points of connection between the participants' and my experiences in dance. Here, the dichotomy of dance is revealed. Dance can simultaneously be a help and a hindrance, a site of frustrated learning and the unequivocal element of education that makes one feel capable and true to oneself.

Writing and researching for this dissertation has made me more aware of my own learning and teaching practices and has increased my desire to listen rather than project or impose my educational biases onto my students. It has also given me increased pride in my disabled identities as I align myself with the group of dancers in this study who courageously forge new and imaginative pathways to creating, performing, and learning dance. My hope with this dissertation is to influence dance educators, administrators, and scholars to forge new pathways for inclusion and understanding by listening to dancers with disabilities' stories and ideas rather than providing or imposing limited accommodations.

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APPENDIX A

INITIAL EMAIL TO UNIVERSITIES (NORTHEAST)

Dear (fill in university name),

My name is Cassandra Hulderman and I am a doctoral student from the dance department at Temple University. For my doctoral dissertation, I am conducting a research project on the lived experiences of dancers with learning disabilities in dance programs at five universities located in the New York/New Jersey/Eastern Pennsylvania region of the United States.

I am writing you to ask permission to recruit students through your department to participate in the project. I plan to recruit students through e-mail LISTSERVs and flyers posted throughout the campus. I attached the e-mail recruitment letter explaining the purpose of the research, basic procedures, and requirements to participate in the research project.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Temple University Institutional Review Board. Please contact them at (215) 707-3390 or e-mail them at: irb@temple.edu for any questions involving the rights of human subjects or for verification purposes.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the research project itself, please contact me at tub74693@temple.edu

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Cassandra Hulderman
Ed.M. Doctoral Candidate
Boyer College of Music and Dance
Dance Department, Temple University

APPENDIX B
SAMPLE RECRUITMENT FLYER

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This semester-long project, taking place this spring (2015), gives students the unique opportunity to offer suggestions for improving accommodations in the dance classroom and reflect on their learning and dance practices.

You can participate if you:

- are 18 years of age or above
- are majoring or minoring in dance
- are enrolled in dance technique and composition courses
- are part-time or full-time student
- identify as having a learning disability

Contact Cassandra Hulderman at hub74693@temple.edu or 206-949-8313 for more information.

APPENDIX C

LETTER/EMAIL TO DANCE DEPARTMENT STUDENTS

Dear [university name] students,

My name is Cassandra Vander Well and I am a doctoral student from the Dance Department at Temple University. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research project.

In order to participate in this project, you must meet the following requirements:

- 18 years of age or above
- Minor or majoring in the University's dance program (BA, BFA, BS)
- Part-time or full-time student
- Enrolled in one dance technique class (e.g., modern, ballet, jazz, African, etc.) AND one dance composition or creative-based course (e.g., creative process, dance composition, improvisation, etc.)
- Have government documentation of a learning disability (This can be outdated. Documentation does NOT have to be recent)

If you decide to participate in this semester-long project, you will be asked to take part in two private, audio-recorded and/or videotaped interviews (your choice) with Cassandra Hulderman, at your college campus. At the end of the semester, you will be given the option of attending a group interview where students will dialogue with one another to share ideas and stories.

Throughout the project, students will be asked to record their experiences in dance through reflective written or verbal journals. I want to assure you that this will not require an extensive amount of time. Lastly, Cassandra Hulderman will attend two dance classes to observe each student in their educational setting.

This project gives students the unique opportunity to offer suggestions for improving accommodations in the dance classroom, reflect on their learning and dance practices, and hear their own perspectives, ideas, and experiences alongside other dancers that identify as having a learning disability or learning difference.

If you'd like to participate or have any questions about the project, please contact me at tub74693@temple.edu

Sincerely,

Cassandra Hulderman,
Ed.M. Doctoral Candidate, Boyer College of Music and Dance
Dance Department, Temple University

APPENDIX D
CONSENT FORM

Consent Form to Take Part in PhD Dissertation Project

Working Dissertation Working Title: *Illuminating Invisibility: A Qualitative Investigation of Students with Learning Disabilities in Higher Education Dance Programs*

Investigators and Department:

Karen Bond – Temple University Dance Department, 215-204-6280
Sherril Dodds – Temple University Dance Department, 215-204-4959
Cassandra Hulderman – Temple University Dance Department, 206-949-8313

Purpose of Research:

This qualitative study will investigate perceived benefits and barriers to learning dance in higher education for individuals with learning disabilities. The researcher’s objective is to illuminate intersections between inclusion, self-advocacy, and identity to expose perceived benefits and barriers to learning dance in higher education for individuals with Learning disabilities.

General Research Design:

I understand that I am being asked to participate in a research study for a doctoral dissertation being supervised by the Temple University Dance Department. The research will take place over the course of a semester (approx. 12-15 weeks) and will take the form of individual interviews, observations, participant reflective journals, and a group interview. We expect about ten people will participate in this research project.

Procedures to be Followed:

Within the first month of the semester, participants will engage in a one-to-one interview at their respective university or in a nearby quiet location that is accessible to the participant.

Within the first or second month of the semester, the participant will engage in a private 30-60 minute one-on-one interview at the student’s university or a nearby quiet and accessible location.

Students will be asked to keep a journal over the course of the semester to take an active participatory role in the research process. Writing tasks will not require an extensive amount of time (approx. 15 minutes) and are intended to capture vivid or noteworthy moments in their dance studio classes. Students will be given the option to use a “verbal journal” in which they will orally dictate their journals.

During the second or third month of the semester, the researcher will attend two 60-minute dance classes of each participant, including one technique class and one composition or improvisational dance class to observe the individual in their learning environment.

At the end of the semester, students will have the option of participating in a 60-minute group interview at Temple University or Rutgers University. Participants will engage in conversation with other students participating in the research project about their experiences in dance and suggestions for teaching and learning practices. Students traveling longer distances will be financially reimbursed for gas and/or train tickets. Participants are not required to attend the group interview to participate in the study.

I agree to participate in the group interview. Remember, this is optional.

Initials: _____ Date: _____

Confidentiality:

Efforts will be made to limit your personal information, including research study and medical records, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete secrecy. For example, though the research investigator has put in safeguards to protect your information, there is always a potential risk of loss of confidentiality.

Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the IRB, Temple University, Temple University Health System, Inc. and its affiliates, and other representatives of these organizations, and the Office of Human Research Protections. We may publish the results of this research. However, we will keep your name and other identifying information confidential. You will also have the option of reviewing or amending any documents the researcher intends to publish at least one month before publication.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Temple University Institutional Review Board. Please contact them at (215) 707-3390 or e-mail them at: irb@temple.edu for any of the following:

- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Your signature below indicates that:

- Someone has explained this research study to you.

- You freely volunteer to be in this research study.
- You can choose not to take part in this research study at any time.
- You can agree to take part in this study now and later change your mind.
- You have been offered the opportunity to ask questions and all your questions have been answered.
- You understand that you will receive a copy of the final document and of any published materials related to information I have provided for this research.

Your signature documents your permission to take part in this research.

Signature of subject

Date

Printed name of subject

Signature of person obtaining consent

Printed name of person obtaining consent

This research project is being conducted as part of Cassandra Hulderman's doctoral dissertation with the supervision of her doctoral advisors Dr. Sherril Dodds and Dr. Karen Bond. If you have any additional questions or concerns directly pertaining to the study, please contact Cassandra at:
Email: tub74693@temple.edu

Phone: 206-949-8313

APPENDIX E COVER LETTER

Cover Letter Accompanying Informed Consent

Dear (name of potential participant),

My name is Cassandra Hulderman, and I am a doctoral student in dance at Temple University. I am beginning a semester-long study on the lived experiences of dancers with learning disabilities in higher education dance programs, and I would like to invite you to participate.

You are being asked to take part because you responded to the research flyer or e-mail and have self-identified as having a learning disability and therefore may contribute valuable knowledge to this project. As part of the study, I am interested in your experiences, ideas, and opinions about being a dancer with a learning disability in higher education.

If you decide to participate in the study, you will be asked to attend a private, audio recorded, interview at your college campus to gain an understanding of your background in dance and basic biographical information. This interview will take place at the beginning of the semester. Later in the semester you will be asked to join a 30-60 minute, in-depth, private, tape-recorded and/or videotaped (your choice) interview on your college campus. This interview will involve a deeper understanding of your experience as a student with a learning disability studying dance.

For this research project, it is important that you are an active member of the research process. For this reason, I will ask you to keep a journal over the course of the semester. Each week you will be asked to write (or provide an oral recording) for ten to fifteen minutes with reference to vivid or noteworthy moments during your dance studio classes. You will be given the option to use a “verbal journal” in which you orally dictate your journal as opposed to writing it on paper. Each month I will collect and review the journals to determine if you need additional prompts or assistance.

During the semester, I will attend two of your dance classes to witness your dancing. The instructor and the class will be notified that I am coming to observe for a research project, but no one will know you are participating in the study or that you identify as having a learning disability.

At the end of the semester, you will be given the option of attending a group interview where you will have the opportunity to dialogue with other students participating in the research project. By optional, I mean you do not have to participate in the group interview to be a part of the research project since it will require you to disclose your

learning difference or learning disability to others. If you wish to participate, I will give you questions we will discuss prior to the interview so you know what to expect.

As a result of this project, you may choose to talk about issues that have made you unhappy or frustrated in the past or even currently. The topic may provoke memories of unhappy situations in your dance education. However, I assure you that the interview questions are designed to help you reflect on your learning experiences in order to provide ideas and suggestions for improving your educational experience in the dance classroom. If at any time during the interviews the discussion becomes too uncomfortable, you may decline to answer a question, skip to another question, or stop the interview and leave. Also, in visiting me, you might be concerned about disclosing your learning difference. To protect your privacy and guarantee your confidentiality, your name will not be used anywhere in the analysis, writing, presentation or publication of the study. To further protect your privacy, I will use a pseudonym (fictitious name) in place of your name.

Your decision to participate or not will not affect your relationship with me, with your respective university, or your college. If you decide to take part in the study, you may choose to withdraw at any time without penalty. Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the research project, contact Cassandra Hulderman at tub74693@temple.edu

Sincerely,

Cassandra Hulderman
Ed.M. Doctoral Candidate
Boyer College of Music and Dance
Temple University Dance Department

APPENDIX F

PRELIMINARY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interviewer:

- Express gratitude for participating in the interview.
- Review consent form and allow participant to ask questions regarding the study.
- Ask student to state name, age, and year of study.
- Ask interviewee to give permission to audio or videotape session.
- Explain the purpose of the interview and ask student if they need clarification for any of the interview questions.
- Assure interviewee that s/he would like to pause, decline to answer, or stop the interview, this is fine.

Questions:

1. What initially attracted you to dance?
2. Please describe your dance background, including what age you started formally training in dance, what styles of dance you studied, for how long, in what type of setting (i.e., studio, public/private school, community center, etc.), and any noteworthy performances or events.
3. Please describe your choreographic background/experience.
4. What motivated or prompted you to pursue a degree in dance?
5. What dance program are you currently enrolled in? (Ex: BFA/BA/BS)
6. When did you become aware of (or diagnosed with) your learning disability?
7. Please describe the nature of your learning disability or how it manifests in everyday life.
8. How do you prefer to be identified? (Ex: person with a learning disability, learning disabled, differently abled learner, no label, dyslexic, etc.)

End interview with follow-up comments:

Thank you to the interviewee.

Explain that I will send her/him a copy of the transcript.

Confirm all contact details.

Ask Interviewee if s/he has any further questions.

Schedule the second interview and explain journal-writing requirements.

APPENDIX G

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interviewer:

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview.

Do you give your permission for this interview to be audio recorded?

Please state your name.

If any of the questions are unclear, please feel free to ask for clarification and take as much time as you need to respond to the questions.

If you wish to decline to answer a question or walk away from the interview at any stage, that is fine.

Questions:

1. To begin, please describe a dance experience that stands out for you during your time in the dance program at (fill in university). What class were you in? What was the environment like? What did you see, feel, sense, etc.? What sort of bodily sensations do you recall? (refer student to van Manen's guidelines)
2. Please describe a time when you felt good about learning dance at (fill in university). What class were you in? Paint a vivid picture of how you felt, what you heard, saw, smelled, etc. (refer student to van Manen's guidelines)
3. Please describe a time when you felt empowered while learning, creating, or performing dance?
4. What comes easily to you in learning, creating, or performing dance?
5. Please describe a memorable time when you struggled to create, learn, or perform dance during your time at (fill in university). Prompt student to give multi-sensory descriptions.
6. What tends to be a challenge for you when learning, creating, or performing dance?
7. Do you receive learning accommodations for your dance technique or composition classes at your respective university? If so, what accommodations do you receive?
8. Have you ever self-advocated to receive accommodations? If so, what happened? If you have not, what deters you from asking for accommodations?
9. What learning or coping strategies do you use to navigate your way through dance training in higher education?
10. How were these learning/coping strategies developed? Describe how these learning/coping strategies were developed? When were they developed?
11. Throughout your dance training, what teaching methods or approaches have helped your learning process? If you can, please describe the environment, what type of class you were taking, when it occurred, etc.
12. Are the teaching methods you described in the previous question (#11) employed in your dance classes at (fill in university)?
13. What suggestions do you have for improving teaching approaches or methods used in higher education dance programs that would facilitate your learning process?

14. What type of learning environment do you prefer when learning dance?
15. How has your learning difference given you an advantage in learning, creating, or performing dance?
16. How has your learning difference hindered your ability to thrive in dance?
17. What type of learning supports or accommodations would you benefit from or what learning accommodations would you like to see implemented in higher education dance classrooms? (Think big! What is your vision?)

Max van Manen's guidelines for capturing lived experience description (1997):

- Avoid causal explanations, generalizations, interpretations, theories
- Describe from the inside: feelings, the mood, emotions
- Focus on particular example/s, event/s, happening/s – experiential anecdotes
- Go for vivid example/s that stand/s out in your memory
- Attend to bodily feelings and sensory impressions

Source: van Manen, Max (1997). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action-sensitive pedagogy*. New Palz: SUNY Press.