

Access, Inclusion and Excellence: Evaluating Stopgap Dance Company's IRIS Programme

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INCLUDE. RESPOND. INTEGRATE. SPECIALISE.

RIMAP

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Photography: Chris Parkes & Callum Graham

Executive Summary

Among the numerous barriers to dance for disabled people, one of the key challenges in the UK has been the lack of progressive training routes for disabled dancers who wish to develop their talents. Stopgap Dance Company sought to address this barrier by creating an inclusive talent development programme called IRIS. Consisting of four levels of increasing complexity, IRIS seeks to provide parity with mainstream training routes to help students progress their skills and confidence in dance.

The aim of this research project was to evaluate IRIS in its first two years while it was piloted with five groups. The evaluation took into consideration the participants' experiences and outcomes of the programme using a longitudinal, mixed methods research design.

Focus groups and interviews revealed the numerous ways in which the dancers benefited from the programme, the opportunities afforded and the social relationships they could forge. Parents and teacher participants attested to the dancers' greater independence, confidence, and concentration over time, in addition to their technical and creative development. These interviews and focus groups gave insight into how such improvements were facilitated, through the Company's ethos, its caring and inclusive approach, and specific teaching strategies. The dancers also reported high levels of wellbeing according to validated questionnaires. In order to provide a quantitative measure of the dancers' abilities, surveys were completed by students and teachers, and the researchers and Stopgap team developed a valid and reliable assessment tool specific to IRIS. Using this tool, the dancers were judged by expert evaluators to have moderate to high levels of dance skills, and the surveys indicated improvement in creativity over an academic year.

Overall the findings of this research suggest that being involved in an artistic community with like-minded peers, supportive teachers, and inspiring role models, provided a wealth of benefits and opportunities that contributed to the dancers' wellbeing and quality of life. Furthermore, given the right environment, material and support, disabled dancers' technical and creative abilities can be developed as part of a structured programme. IRIS and talent development programmes like it present exciting opportunities to further diversify the dance sector, from the dancers performing on stage to the choreographers that devise work and the teachers who train them.



Introduction

The aim of this research project was to examine experiences and outcomes of Stopgap Dance Company's IRIS programme in its pilot two years. IRIS is an inclusive contemporary dance syllabus focused on progression and development. It seeks to give disabled children and young people the same level of structure, balance and rigour of dance education as their non-disabled peers and provide the opportunity to accumulate the skills and experience necessary for the professional industry. To achieve this aim, IRIS is structured into four levels of increasing complexity:

- **Include:** builds foundation dance competencies such as technical skills and contact dance
- **Respond:** a smaller, specialised class working specifically on adaptation or translation of technique material
- **Integrate:** skills learned enable students to attend mainstream classes in addition to Include and Respond sessions
- **Specialise:** individualised support tailored to the students' ambitions such as performing, teaching, or choreographing

The curriculum includes set exercises although there is flexibility within these exercises to enable teachers to respond to each student's individual needs. Assessments are included within the syllabus to make sure understanding of movement principles by the students and a high quality of teaching is maintained.

Researchers from the University of Bedfordshire were commissioned to evaluate IRIS in its first two years while the curriculum was piloted with five groups in the UK. The evaluation comprised gathering the subjective experiences of those involved in the programme, measuring the dancers' wellbeing, and assessing the students' abilities and progress over time. Capturing a holistic, comprehensive view of IRIS may evidence the validity of talent development programmes for young disabled dancers, with a view to opening pathways to training, the profession, and the multiple benefits dance has to offer.

Research Context

Traditionally, dance for disabled people has been therapeutic in nature, based on the medical model of disability which uses intervention to manage or treat impairment.¹ Beyond the therapeutic model, community dance classes and projects offer a variety of creative and expressive opportunities for disabled people. However, young disabled dancers have limited options if they wish to develop their talents. While there is much first access recreational provision there is a notable lack of progressive training for those that want to improve their competencies in dance.^{2,3} As a result, most professional disabled dancers have reported 'learning on the job' rather than gaining the requisite skills and experience through systematic training routes that are typical for non-disabled dancers.⁴ Situated in the social model of disability,

the creation of IRIS represents an important milestone in the growth of dance provision for young disabled people to ensure equal access to development opportunities.

High quality, rigorous training is essential for disabled dancers to be recognised in the industry as artists and for them to work equally alongside, and compete against, their non-disabled peers. Disabled young dancers need talent development opportunities that challenge them, enhance their skills and broaden their horizons. Doing so requires a systematic

approach that includes multiple classes a week in order to fully optimise potential. IRIS is structured in a way that dancers are expected to attend an increasing number of weekly classes over time, to expose them to the same levels of challenge, rigour and opportunity that are available to non-disabled young dancers. This approach of increasing frequency and intensity of training mirrors the relationship between quality practice and the development of expertise established in research.⁵ The research project sought to explore participants' experiences of the programme as well as create means to measure their abilities in dance.

Experiences of the programme and dancer wellbeing

A key objective of the research was to gain insight into the unique aspects of the programme, and evaluate their efficacy, to build on previous research into talent identification and development among young disabled dancers.^{2,6,7} Furthermore, previous research suggests that young disabled people can benefit from dance in terms of physical, social and psychological health. These benefits include enjoyment, identity development, increased confidence, competence, and social interaction.⁸⁻¹¹ There are also several publications detailing practical strategies and ideas for teaching inclusive groups.¹²⁻¹⁵ However, this previous research tends to have focused on recreational dance and does not always include the opinions of the young people involved to gain understanding from several perspectives. Therefore, characteristics of the programme were explored by gathering the experiences of the students, their parents, and one of the teachers. Data on the students' wellbeing was also collected by questionnaires at two time points to provide further information on their perceptions of quality of life.

Measuring talent or ability in dance

Quantifying dance performance is notoriously difficult but was an important consideration for the research in order to assess the dancers' technical ability and development. Assessments and qualifications can provide evidence of disabled dancers' competence and consequently their readiness for further training,^{2,4} and may provide some parity with other syllabi or progression routes. Ability or talent in dance is difficult to define, but is likely comprised of physical, psychological, and artistic factors.¹⁶ As an aesthetic art form, dance generally relies on subjective judgements for a range of assessment contexts including examinations, auditions, competitions, and critical reviews of performances. This is the first time research of this nature has been conducted with disabled dancers and required a multi-faceted approach that included objective and subjective indicators of dancer performance. Firstly, surveys were conducted with teachers and the students themselves as to their abilities and development over time. These were corroborated with data from an assessment tool which was developed specifically for this project as the dancers progressed through IRIS.



Methods

The research project was approved by the Research Institute for Media, Art and Performance Ethics Committee of the University of Bedfordshire. All participants provided informed consent before taking part, and parental consent was also provided for participants under the age of 16 years.

Experiences of the Programme

Focus groups

Focus groups and interviews were conducted with one of the IRIS teachers, four dancers, and four parents, to ascertain their views on the programme. This included how IRIS was structured and taught, ways in which the dancers responded to it, any benefits and challenges of the programme, as well as broader discussions around barriers to dance. The teacher had been working with Stopgap for 5 years, first as a volunteer, then working her way up to teaching assistant then lead teacher. The dancers (mean age 16.75 ± 1.26 years) were recruited from the group that the teacher worked with, and had been attending for two years, since the programme began. The parents were also from the same IRIS group; some of their children had taken part in the dancer focus group. The focus groups and interview followed a semi-structured format, meaning that participants were asked set questions determined by the researcher, but that flexibility was permitted to follow up on interesting and relevant information. The teacher interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, the dancer focus group approximately 30 minutes and the parent focus group 45 minutes. Interviews and focus groups were conducted before or after a class at the group's studios and were digitally recorded. The transcripts content were analysed by coding relevant information into themes and organising these themes into a logical, research-informed hierarchy (see Figure 1). Researchers were informal and friendly to encourage honest responses and to minimise acquiescent responding. Data from the teacher, dancers and parents was triangulated, so that findings were combined and cross-verified.

Wellbeing questionnaire

A total of 22 young dancers (16 female, 6 male, aged 18.14 ± 7.52 years) from four groups at the Include level completed a validated wellbeing questionnaire in September, at the start of the academic year. Thirteen dancers from two of the groups (11 female, 2 male, aged 19.77 ± 5.42 years) completed the questionnaire at the end of the academic year in June. The Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI)¹⁷ was chosen for this study because it has been established as reliable and valid for disabled people, and data can be compared to different populations. It is a 7-item questionnaire investigating quality of life across the following domains: health, standard of living, life achievement, personal relationships, personal safety, community-connectedness, and future security. A Personal Wellbeing variable is also calculated which is a composite of the seven subscales.

The pre-test protocol for the PWI was followed,¹⁷ which involves asking questions of increasing complexity in order to ensure that participants have sufficient understanding to complete the questionnaire, and to identify an appropriate scale to use (i.e. using faces or reduced format scales). The response format for each participant matched the highest level of performance in the pre-testing questions. Once this was determined, the PWI questions were read verbally, and the response recorded, by the researcher. The pre-testing and questionnaire administration took approximately 20 minutes per dancer. Data collection took place at each group's dance studio so that dancers were in a familiar environment.

Measuring Talent

Surveys

Two surveys were created by Stopgap that enabled teachers and dancers to report ratings of the students' performance and engagement on a range of indicators. Three groups completed the surveys although one group only returned the dancer surveys. Questions pertained to the dancers' technical skills, creative ability, concentration, confidence, happiness, enthusiasm and comfort during sessions. The questions were rated on a scale from 1-5, with the dancer questionnaire including pictures of faces displaying a range of emotions to correspond with the 1-5 scale. The dancers were also asked if they participated in any other weekly dance or physical activity. Most students responded that they partook in some other form of physical activity each week, including swimming, yoga, horse riding, Pilates, football and Zumba. For many dancers, IRIS was the only form of dance they were engaged in, although two were taking GCSE Dance.

Creating and validating an assessment tool

A small number of measures for scoring or judging the performance ability of dancers have been developed which typically assess aspects such as technique, space, time and control.¹⁸⁻²⁰ Particular reference to the Aesthetic Competence Tool was made during development of the specific performance evaluation tool used in this project, due to its established reliability,¹⁸ ease of use, specificity to contemporary dance, and sensitivity to differences in levels of dancers.^{21,22} A comparison between this tool, previous literature on talent identification of young disabled dancers,⁶ and the key principles upon which the IRIS syllabus is built was drawn and used to identify key criteria for evaluation and write relevant criterion descriptors. Consultation with the Stopgap practitioners involved in creating the IRIS syllabus allowed refinement of the tool before the final version was presented for testing.

The tool allows scoring on three to four criteria for three exercises and a separate 'throughout' score during the dancers' usual IRIS class, giving a total of eleven criteria for scoring (see Table 1). Each exercise had a specific focus (articulation; travelling; surface and partner work) to ensure that all dancers had the opportunity to demonstrate at least some of the criteria. The criteria refer to control of movement, coordination, spatial awareness, timing and rhythm, and surface or partner work; three to four of these criteria were assessed for each exercise according to the demands of that exercise. For each individual criterion, detailed descriptions and elements of performance to observe are provided to guide scoring (see Table 2).

Six dancers (4 female, 2 male, average age 19.33 ± 5.01 years) were filmed during regular IRIS classes to allow retrospective evaluation of their performance of the three specific exercises. Films were edited to include the three exercises that demonstrated articulation, travel, and surface and partner work. The dancers were filmed performing each exercise on two consecutive weeks, to account for variability in performance,² and the clips were randomised before being assessed by the judges.

Table 1. Exercises and scoring criteria.

Exercise 1 – Articulation	
Control of movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Precise and controlled placement of hands or feet • Controlled long limbs • Effective transference of weight in lunges
Coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fluid control of chair throughout exercise • Awareness of centre when shifting in space • Coordinating different elements of movement simultaneously
Timing & Rhythm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dancing in time with the music • Achieving movement on musical cues
Exercise 2 – Travelling	
Control of Movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Efficient and controlled stopping • Controlled movement when moving slowly • Efficient use of energy when moving quickly
Coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of centre when shifting through space • Fluid sequencing of movement across the space • Multiple parts of body moving simultaneously
Spatial Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Travelling through space without colliding into other dancers • Can maintain required trajectory • Awareness of own body in space • Able to wait and take turns
Timing & Rhythm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to change tempo of travelling • Synchronising starting with other dancers
Exercise 3 – Surface and partner work	
Control of Movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Precise placement of hands and feet into a surface or onto a partner • Controlled weight transference and softening into a surface or partner
Spatial Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of where own body is in relation to partner's • Able to keep engaged while waiting for own turn to move • Able to work with a partner
Surface or Partner Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensing and responding to partner's movement • Sharing weight in a lean • Softening weight into the surface or partner • Providing strong stable base • Sharing focus when dancing with a partner
Throughout	
Focus & Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shows determination, focus, concentration and perseverance • Interacts well with others • Able to use feedback

Each of the above criteria was rated as follows:

1-3 = little or no ability to perform elements as required;

4-6 = some elements performed appropriately;

7-9 = elements performed appropriately for about 80% of the time;

10 = elements performed appropriately during the whole exercise.

Table 2. Scoring guidelines.

Scoring guidelines: General descriptions
Control of Movement – The ability to purposefully and accurately place the body in the desired positioning and orientation. Movement is precise and controlled. Effective weight transference through hands or feet is achieved.
Coordination – Movement is executed in fluid sequences. There is an awareness of centre and effective use of core muscles. Able to coordinate different elements of movement at the same time.
Spatial Awareness – Ability to shift through space in a controlled manner and can maintain required pathway. Awareness of own body and other dancers in the space.
Surface or Partner Work – The ability to sense and respond to a partner, working together and sharing focus. Able to share weight and soften into a surface. Able to remain engaged whilst waiting for own turn to move.
Timing & Rhythm – Dancing and responding to musical cues and rhythms. Able to change tempo of movement and synchronise timing with other members of the group.
Focus & Approach – Shows determination, focus, concentration, and perseverance in the session. Interacts well with others. Is able to use feedback.

Four judges (2 female, 2 male, all with at least four years' experience of working in inclusive dance) undertook evaluation of the clips on four separate occasions (trials) to allow assessment of the reliability of the developed tool. The first occasion was treated as a familiarisation session. Judges sat together in one room watching the clips at the same time and independently scored each dancer in each clip. Judges were given the following instructions as per previous research: 1. to mark all dancers from the video on the same day, 2. not to rewind the video clips at any time once the scoring procedure had begun, 3. to perform the assessment on a pre-arranged specific day, and 4. to follow the scoring guidelines.¹⁸ Analysis revealed that both inter-rater (the degree to which different judges scored the dancers in a similar way)ⁱ and test-retest (the extent to which each judge scored the same dancer consistently in different trials)ⁱⁱ reliability was good. This meant that the tool was consistent across judges and across trials, and therefore represented a reliable means of assessing performance.

Assessing change over time

Once the reliability of the tool was established, three new judges who were experts in inclusive dance were recruited. They watched clips of the 6 dancers at three different time points over the second academic year of the pilot (September 2017, January 2018, and June 2018). The dancers were again filmed on two consecutive weeks at each time point. The clips were randomised and judges were given the same instructions as above when watching the clips and assessing the dancers.

ⁱ Inter-rater reliability intra-class coefficients (ICCs) were classed as good for raters 1, 3, and 4 across all four trials. With trial one removed from analysis, rater 1, 3, and 4 remained good and rater 2 remained moderate, although with an increase from a coefficient of 0.682 to 0.708, which was marginally short of the good cut-point. All inter-rater ICCs were highly significant ($p < 0.01$).

ⁱⁱ Test-retest reliability ICCs were classed as good for six of the 11 individual criteria across all four trials. With trial one removed from analysis this improved to nine out of the 11 individual criteria reaching the good agreement cut-point. Across trials two to four, 'exercise 1 coordination' and 'exercise 1 timing' criteria displayed ICCs of 0.742 and 0.738 respectively, which are only marginally short of the 0.75 good agreement cut-point. All inter-rater ICCs were highly significant ($p < 0.01$).

Findings

Experiences of the Programme

The interviews with the teacher, student dancers and parents revealed a number of themes that highlighted difficulties in accessing dance encountered in the past, the characteristics of IRIS and how these served to address such barriers, and the impact taking part in IRIS had on the dancers (see Figure 1). Quotes are included to illustrate the themes, and are coded and numbered to identify each participant.

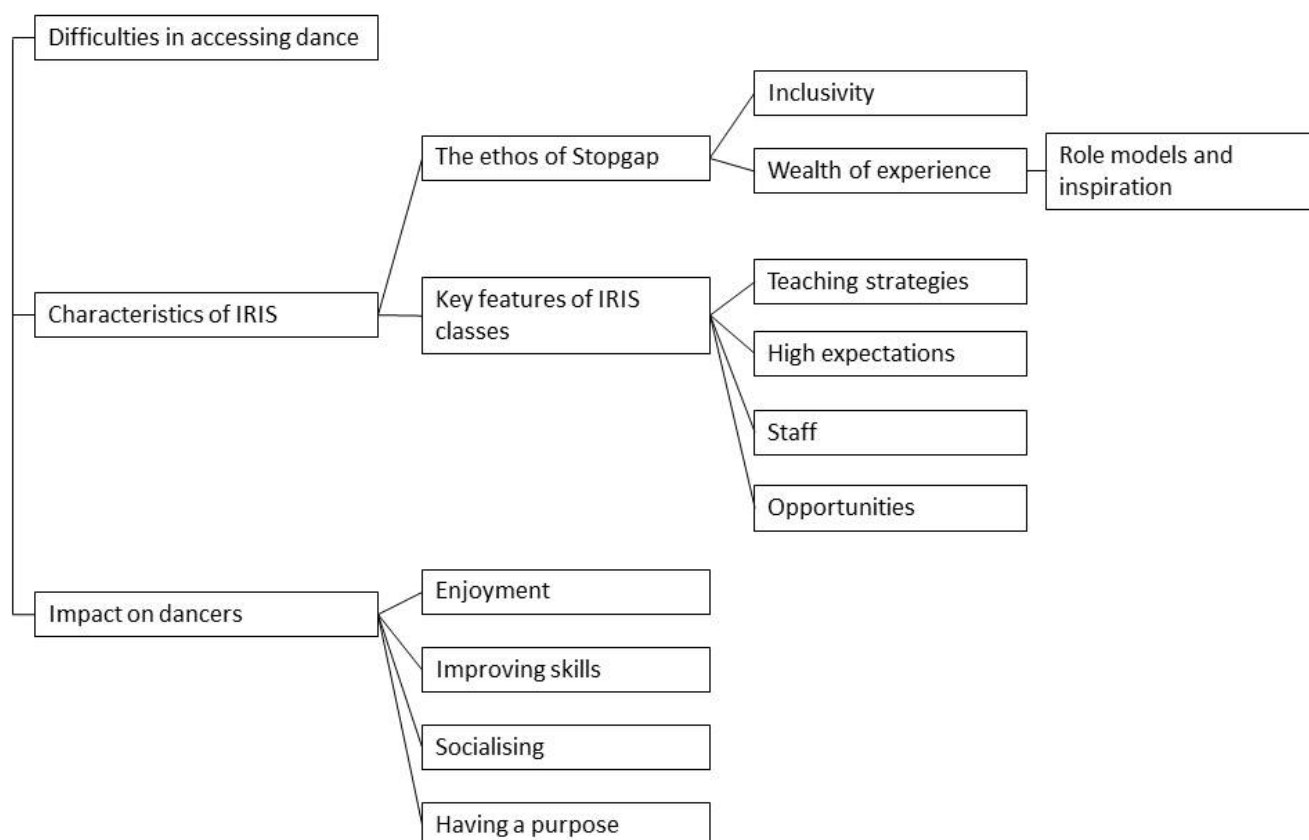


Figure 1. Hierarchy of findings from the interview and focus groups.

Difficulties in accessing dance

The dancers' parents reported numerous barriers to participating in dance that their children had experienced since they were young. Often, a lack of knowledge and understanding prevented opportunities from being available to disabled children, borne out of fear, ignorance, and a lack of aspiration, "even thinking our kids could do anything like that" (P1). Some dance schools and programmes had refused to accept their children, and those that did often did not provide sufficient differentiation and progression strategies. One parent noted that, "if she's in the show she's always at the back, and that really breaks my heart" (P3). The parents explained that their children were often treated differently to their non-disabled peers, feeling that "they're like an add-on. They tolerate you" (P1). Moreover, all of the parents explained that they had to stay and sit in other classes while the parents of non-disabled children were not required to do so. They noted that "Stopgap is one of the few things – places – where we can drop off and go" (P2). The dancers reinforced that Stopgap

dance classes were a more positive experience than other classes they had tried. One dancer explained that at Stopgap classes, "...everyone's nice and kind, but at ballet...sometimes they're mean" (D2).

The characteristics of IRIS

Stopgap and the IRIS programme addressed these and other barriers to dance in numerous ways. Firstly, it is important to consider the general ethos of Stopgap and how this is reflected in the teacher's approach. Secondly, the key features of IRIS classes are discussed.

The ethos of Stopgap

The parents spoke very highly of Stopgap, frequently making comments such as, "In case we didn't say, they're amazing!" The ethos of the company was apparent in the interviews in terms of inclusivity, respect and care, which was based on the company's wealth of experience.

Inclusivity

Inclusivity is a key component of Stopgap's mission and overall aims, and this was clear in the teacher's and parents' understanding of the general ethos of the classes, the respect and equality afforded to all, how well the teachers knew individual students, and the level of care given to the dancers. Throughout the teacher interview it became clear how deeply she cared for her students and wanted them to achieve their best. Knowing the dancer as an individual was critical to ensure that communication and translations of material were appropriate: "we always take that time to know the individual and work out how we can best support them". The dancers commented on the support, saying: "there's always someone around to ask" (D1). The parents had also observed this, for example: "The staff all get the individual kids, they really do understand them, you know, so it really fills you with confidence" (P3). They noted how each dancer was respected and celebrated; the teacher explained how each dancer has "their time to shine" and be in the spotlight. This positive, respectful approach was also apparent in how the dancers were spoken to: "I was really impressed with Stopgap because they talk to them as adults as well, which is so important, there's no baby-fying or you know, patronising, and that's really key I think for me" (P2).

The support offered by the teacher was holistic in nature, not just focused on dance: she described having a 'girlie bag' with items such as hair bobbles and menstrual products, as she appreciated that her students were young women with often complex lives and needs. Furthermore, inclusivity was reflected in the level of care offered not only to the dancers but also to the parents. Assistance was given with practical matters such as sourcing costumes, and emotional and social factors, such as disagreements between the dancers. The parents noted that staff were "very accommodating" and that they "just make things easy" (P1). This led one parent to describe what an important place the programme had in her family's life, saying, "I feel like they're almost a part of the family...I'd be lost without it" (P2).

Mirroring these comments, the teacher highlighted the importance of her relationship with the parents. Parental involvement and support was seen as crucial to optimising the students' attendance, engagement and development, and she felt that getting to know the parents well meant that they could inform her of any issues that had occurred during the day which may affect their children's behaviour. It also meant that she could discuss what had happened during classes with parents where appropriate: "if anything did happen in the session I can feel confident to go to whoever's parent and go like this happened today, we really need to work on this". As such, the reciprocal relationship between teacher and parents supported the inclusive, caring ethos that underpinned IRIS.

Wealth of experience

Stopgap's established history of work in inclusive settings ranges from recreational classes to the professional performance company. This wealth of experience meant that the teacher received in-depth training from members of Stopgap in preparation for her work on IRIS. Practical studio-based training was accompanied by comprehensive packs detailing each exercise in terms of "the kind of movement and feeling and exploration that the exercise is about", a glossary of terms, how support assistants could help, and multiple versions of each exercise for lying, sitting or standing dancers. Videos of exercise variations were also available which she could cross-reference with the written guides. Specific translations were a critical part of this in order to foster inclusivity and ensure that all dancers could achieve the same outcomes in terms of the overall aims or principles of the exercises. As a result the teacher felt there was "definitely a lot of tools and support" in her work teaching IRIS. She had worked her way up through the company from volunteer to teaching assistant to lead teacher, participating in mentoring and in-house training. She was highly motivated and driven by a desire to do her best so that her students could achieve their potential: "I want to make sure that I'm in a good place and I know what I'm doing so I can deliver it to them and they can do the best that they can do."



Role models and inspiration

Stopgap's wealth of experience was also apparent in the presence of role models for the students. In this particular IRIS group, one of the teaching assistants, a dancer with Down syndrome, had performed professionally with Stopgap for almost 20 years and more recently was choreographing work for the company. Having worked his way from apprentice to Senior Dance Artist, parents could see how he had been nurtured through a clear pathway to the profession, that "gives you hope, which is important" (P3).

Key features of IRIS classes

The key features of IRIS that both helped to address barriers to dance for young disabled people and enabled them to progress were particular teaching strategies, having high expectations, the number of staff in the space, and the availability of enrichment opportunities that complemented the regular programme.

Teaching strategies

The teacher employed a number of strategies in her classes that helped the students to learn material, stay motivated, and adhere to appropriate studio behaviour. Classes were structured so that creative warm-up explorations led into technique-based exercises and phrases. Exercises were taught by breaking down sections and using ample repetition. Imagery was used to help the dancers understand the principles and key points of an exercise, to find the correct movement quality, to use their breath, and work together as a group. The consistency of the class structure, repetition, and clarity of instructions were appreciated by the dancers, one of whom noted: “I always understand what they’re saying and I follow the rules and I learn from the teachers as well” (D2).

At the end of the class, the dancers sat in a circle and were asked to give a ‘word of the week’ which exemplified their experience that day. The teacher explained this was an opportunity to “reflect on how we’ve been during the session, so I feel that shows the development as well... getting their judgement on what they enjoyed and what they struggled with”. After this, the teacher and teaching assistants would choose a dancer of the week, to recognise a student who had worked particularly hard, been particularly focused, or had supported their peers well. Dancer of the week was seen as “a big motivator, to try and get to be chosen” (P3). At the end of the summer term, the teacher would count up which dancer had received dancer of the week the most over the academic year, and they would be awarded dancer of the year. The teacher explained that these forms of recognition helped to motivate the students because “they know it’s good and it’s something to be proud of”.

The structure of the class and strategies used within it were supported by the rules which the group had created in collaboration with the teacher. These included not using mobile phones in class, being kind and respectful towards others, and not talking over the teacher. The students had taken ownership of the rules and often reminded their peers about them where appropriate.

High expectations

The teacher believed that all of the students had the potential to progress to the next level of IRIS, and had high expectations for them: “we are inclusive but we need to be rigorous as well”. She was confident that they were all capable of achieving and improving: “we do work them really hard I think because we like to push them, we know that eventually we will get there.” High expectations were in relation to both their technical development and their behaviour: improving technically would be difficult without staying focused and being willing to work hard. The dancers themselves understood that in order to improve their skills they needed to be focused and engaged in the sessions, which was reinforced by the rules that the dancers and teachers had created together. One dancer explained:

“if you work hard in the session it can help you get better and it can help your dancing skills, to help you to learn...it means stay focused only on your dancing not your friends” (D1).

Staff

In the group’s IRIS session there was typically one lead teacher, two experienced teaching assistants, and at least one volunteer. Sometimes there were also interns and work placement students in classes. These provided invaluable support during classes and the teacher was particularly positive about the two experienced teaching assistants, saying, “[we] have worked quite closely together for quite a while now so we kind of bounce off each other in what we need.”

Opportunities

Dancers not only learned new skills as part of IRIS, they were also given other opportunities and experiences, including learning different dance styles, being part of teacher training

schemes for IRIS, classes in the school holidays, and performing, which the students particularly enjoyed:

*“I love dancing and being onstage, it’s my dream come true”
(D1).*

Impact on the dancers

The participants reported a number of ways in which IRIS had an impact on the dancers. Benefits included enjoyment, improving skills, socialising, and having a purpose. It was noteworthy that the social aspects of the programme, while a key motivating factor, also came with particular issues and challenges.

Enjoyment

First and foremost, enjoyment was a key theme reported by dancers and their parents. Positive affective responses were given when dancers were asked how they felt when they were at an IRIS class. One dancer said: “I feel happy. I feel excited here actually and I like dancing here, it’s really good...it’s amazing” (D2). These positive statements were reinforced by the parents, who described how much their children enjoyed dancing and the IRIS classes, for example: “this is just her thing, and she just loves it. Absolutely loves it” (P3). The dancers also enjoyed the routine of a regular class, which they looked forward to every week.

Improving skills

The dancers recognised that attending classes regularly was an opportunity to enhance their technical skills. The thorough IRIS approach is reflected in this quote from a dancer who said: “I come here to, like, improve my dance skills...I feel happy but it’s overwhelming sometimes...lots to remember” (D4). Two of the parents also commented that the intensity of the activity was quite tiring for their children, although this was not perceived in a negative way. These findings provide indirect evidence of the rigour of IRIS and the high expectations staff had of students.

The teacher also reported on the students’ improving skills. She was positive about the technical and creative development of the dancers, feeling that progress was being made. The teacher had also observed improvements in the students’ memory of exercises and their associated terminology: “they’re starting to pick up the vocabulary as well as remembering the dance moves.” Another indicator of progress was that the students had passed their first assessment and while some had already been invited to the next level of IRIS (Respond), the teacher felt that all of the dancers in her group “definitely” had the potential to progress to Respond. Finally, the teacher commented on a number of additional improvements:

“I’ve definitely seen a change in a lot of them actually also to do with their concentration, stamina, their willing to want to be involved in the lesson, and working independently or with the group.”

This suggests that classes focused on talent development have a number of benefits in addition to technical improvement. The parents highlighted further positive outcomes, particularly greater independence and confidence. Because they were able to drop their children off at IRIS rather than needing to stay with them, the children had become more independent in their classes and performances as a result. This promoted greater confidence in the dancers, who coped well with various challenges such as multiple costume changes for performances. Confidence also came from the way that the dancers were treated: “I think

because she's been shown a kind of belief here, I do think it would give her confidence to kind of keep on going" (P3). There was a sense that this confidence may encourage the dancers to try other forms of dance or physical activity. One parent explained, "If I'm trying to get [her] to experience something – you can use the positiveness of Stopgap to encourage her to give something else a go" (P1).

Socialising

It became clear from interviews and focus groups with teachers, the dancers and their parents that social factors played a critical role in the success of a session. The opportunity to socialise with like-minded peers of the same age was an important part of IRIS. The dancers explained how they enjoyed dancing with their friends and working together as a group. The parents also highlighted this: "I think [she] loves it for the combination of the dancing and the socialising as well, and it's a routine thing as well" (P2). Indeed, the parents observed that their children often talked more about their peers in class than the dancing or exercises: "it's who said this, who said what" (P4). The parents described how their children enjoyed helping others in the class when they could. Dancing and working together with peers of the same age provided transferable skills around forming relationships, communication, and behaviour. One parent explained, "they're not just learning things for dance, I think they're learning a broader, you know, like social skills, how to interact with others" (P2).



Although social relationships were a key source of enjoyment and motivation for the dancers, the intensity of these relationships meant that they could also be problematic if the dancers had a disagreement. Many instances of the students falling out with one another were mentioned, the consequences of which were both emotional ("I feel shocking, I feel angry...all my friends upsetting me"; D1), and motivational ("If all my friends hate me, I just give up"; D1). At times other dancers' behaviour could be disruptive to the lesson, although some dancers were able to cope with such disruption: "Some people here talk a lot so I focus on my own work" (D2). The teacher noted that issues and disagreements that had occurred outside of IRIS could make classes challenging, noting: "where one person you know kind of walks off, storms off, or is in a bad place, it sometimes creates this domino effect, and it's kind of like fighting a losing battle [laughs]."

Having a purpose

Some of the parents explained how coming to a regular class, which provided opportunities to build both skills and relationships, gave their children a sense of purpose. The following quote illustrates this well:

“that makes a big difference...to have a purpose...our kids generally don’t go out on their own, generally aren’t necessarily that able to organise themselves and need an adult to do it for them, and so to have something to look forward to that they know they’ve got to go to, I think that makes a difference” (P1).

This parent reflected that such purpose could have a positive impact on the children’s mental health, going on to explain:

“they’re being active whereas otherwise what would they do, be sat at home on their phones, there’s little else out there, and then there’s, they’re being part of something aren’t they, and you know getting out and doing stuff is positive for your mental health isn’t it. Not being isolated” (P1).

Notions of mental health and wellbeing were corroborated by the quantitative findings from the wellbeing questionnaire, which are reported below.

Wellbeing Questionnaire

According to the authors of the Personal Wellbeing Index, the normative range for wellbeing, which was derived from large-scale data sets from over 50 countries, is 70-80 points.²³ For the IRIS dancers, at the first time point in September, the average score for overall wellbeing was 82.06 (\pm 13.77), and in the following June it was 71.02 (\pm 19.86; see Table 3). This finding suggests that the dancers had high levels of wellbeing at both time points and contributes to a growing body of literature indicating that disabled people report average or above average levels of subjective wellbeing.²³⁻²⁵ Although it appears that scores had decreased over time, this was most likely due to the smaller number of students completing the questionnaire at the second time point; analysis indicated that the difference in scores was not statistically significant.ⁱⁱⁱ Furthermore, previous research suggests that global measures of wellbeing tend to stay stable over time,^{6,26} meaning these findings are in line with existing literature.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations of the Personal Wellbeing Index.

Item	September Mean (Standard Deviation)	June M (SD)
Standard of living	84.66 (30.36)	84.62 (24.02)
Health	84.09 (26.22)	75.00 (32.27)
Achievement	82.39 (31.96)	67.31 (34.44)
Personal relationships	87.50 (20.04)	67.31 (37.34)
Personal safety	78.41 (29.17)	71.15 (32.03)
Feeling part of the community	82.95 (27.15)	84.62 (24.02)
Future security	74.43 (23.30)	47.12 (38.24)
Personal wellbeing index (composite)	82.06 (13.77)	71.02 (19.86)

ⁱⁱⁱ According to a Wilcoxon Signed Rank test, $Z = -1.60$, $p > 0.05$.

In addition to overall wellbeing, the questionnaire is comprised of 7 subscales. It is important to bear in mind that this aspect of the research cannot ascertain the extent to which IRIS contributed to wellbeing scores, as it is focused on overall quality of life rather than feelings about dance or the programme. Therefore, factors such as ‘standard of living’ and ‘future security’ may not be directly related to IRIS. However, some of the domains addressed in the subscales may at least in part be attributable to the dancers’ involvement in IRIS. At both time points, social factors (‘personal relationships’ in September and ‘feeling part of the community’ in June) were among the highest scores. This supports previous literature, which contends that positive relationships and connection with, or contribution to a community, are critical components of wellbeing.²⁷⁻³⁰ These scores help to validate the focus group findings whereby peers, staff and role models were critical to the students’ experience in IRIS. ‘Achievement’ and ‘health’ were also scored as being moderate to high, both of which may be fulfilled in IRIS. Learning and improving skills in a talent development programme with like-minded peers and members of the dance industry may contribute to overall wellbeing. Therefore, based on some of these scores and the focus groups it would be logical to assume that, for these young people with a passion for a self-defining activity, dance may make a significant contribution to their wellbeing.

Measuring Talent

According to the surveys that were returned, the dancers tended to rate themselves more highly in each category than their teachers. However, in the dancer surveys a good spread of results was evident, suggesting that the dancers were at least somewhat realistic about their skills. The students reported high scores on affective components of the survey; for example, in one group 90% of the dancers reported feeling very happy and very safe in the IRIS sessions. In terms of technical skills, the dancers reported the full range of scores with regards to themselves. However the teachers did not rate any students in either the highest or lowest skill category; 70% of dancers were rated as having ‘good’ technical skills by teachers. According to teacher ratings there was evidence of increases in student creativity over time; for example in one group at the beginning of the academic year none of the students were rated as ‘very good’, but by the end of the academic year 43% of the students in that group were scored as being ‘very good’ creatively. While the surveys provide some indication as to the students’ skills and progress over time, the small sample size and use of a specially-created survey instrument means that these findings should be interpreted with caution.

The trial of the assessment tool revealed that it was reliable, so it was next applied to measure the dancers’ skills. At the first time point in September, the dancers were rated 6 or above for most exercises, meaning they were scored between the upper end of the 4-6 bracket (some elements performed appropriately) and the 7-9 bracket (elements performed appropriately for about 80% of the time). This indicates that the dancers were able to perform most of the exercises accurately, meeting many of the assessment criteria, and supports the survey findings whereby teachers rated the majority of their students as having ‘good’ levels of technical skills. As the filming was conducted in the second year of the pilot it could be suggested that the training the dancers had received in the first year of IRIS built the foundation for their current abilities.

Table 4. Mean ratings for dancers' performance on the three exercises.

		September	February	June
		M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
Exercise 1	Control	6.58 (± 1.13)	6.50 (± 0.85)	6.42 (± 1.39)
	Coordination	6.13 (± 1.21)	5.75 (± 1.04)	5.79 (± 1.23)
	Timing	6.63 (± 1.37)	6.08 (± 0.86)	6.00 (± 1.48)
Exercise 2	Control	6.25 (± 0.82)	6.13 (± 1.05)	5.54 (± 1.05)
	Spatial Awareness	7.08 (± 1.02)	6.71 (± 0.93)	5.67 (± 1.13)
	Surface Work	6.58 (± 0.86)	6.21 (± 0.93)	5.42 (± 1.16)
Exercise 3	Control	6.42 (± 0.61)	6.92 (± 0.72)	6.75 (± 1.21)
	Coordination	6.38 (± 0.65)	6.71 (± 0.71)	6.46 (± 0.98)
	Spatial Awareness	7.04 (± 0.83)	7.29 (± 0.87)	6.92 (± 1.46)
	Timing	6.83 (± 0.79)	6.71 (± 0.71)	6.75 (± 1.21)
Throughout		7.71 (± 0.77)	7.63 (± 0.95)	7.42 (± 1.16)

Interestingly, no statistically significant changes were apparent between the start, middle, and end of the academic year across the 11 criteria^{iv}. The dancers generally remained within the upper end of the 4-6 scoring bracket or the 7-9 scoring bracket. There are a number of potential reasons for this. Firstly, only 6 dancers participated in this part of the project, and they were perceived to be of similar abilities according to the judges' scores. A larger number of dancers with a greater spread of scores in September may have yielded more substantial changes over time. In addition, motor learning and talent development research indicates that when individuals begin learning a new skill or domain, improvements in performance are relatively large; however, as skill levels increase, performance improvements tend to be smaller and more incremental in nature.³¹ Given that the dancers were already scoring 6 or above for most criteria, it may be unreasonable to expect significant changes over time, particularly as they currently attend one IRIS class per week during term time. It may take longer to record observable change using this method, with a larger sample size. Finally it is important to note that this is the first tool of its kind to be created for inclusive settings: further research and development is warranted to refine the tool and document progress with a greater number of students, who display a greater range or spread of skills, over a longer time period.

^{iv}According to a 3(time)x11(criteria) MANOVA test with Bonferroni post hoc analysis, and Kruskal Wallis test with Tamhane post hoc, all $p > 0.05$.

Implications and Applications

The research project has yielded a range of findings over the two-year pilot period of IRIS. These can be summarised into three main themes: experiences of IRIS; dance talent and development; and the importance of dancer wellbeing. The themes are discussed below in relation to existing literature and what the findings might mean for the wider dance sector.

Experiences of IRIS

IRIS is a talent development programme, designed to equip students with the skills, knowledge and confidence to pursue additional and further training, and eventually the profession. Interviews and focus groups revealed how this was done, through the ethos of Stopgap, the structure and content of classes, and the care that the students receive.

Firstly, the teacher explained the comprehensive training in the IRIS curriculum she had received. Practical workshops to learn the movement material were supplemented by detailed packs including a glossary of terms, the key elements of each exercise, translations and teaching notes, and videos of upright, seated or lying versions of exercises. Such detailed information meant that there was parity in the syllabus across the different pilot groups, while the pressure was removed from teachers to create translations in the moment. The rigour of the teacher training and accompanying materials, based on years of experience, is an essential aspect of the programme.

Underpinning the training was the ethos of Stopgap which was built on a culture of inclusivity and care. Parents of the dancers involved noted that the emphasis on inclusion and translation was apparent at every level of the company, and were therefore confident that their children were looked after and respected. Dancers were treated as individuals while the parents' needs were also taken into consideration. These findings support recent research highlighting the altruistic and compassionate nature of dance artists who work in inclusive settings, valuing and celebrating diversity and individual differences.⁷ As such, Stopgap's approach helps to overcome the barriers associated with dance reported by the parents and documented in previous literature.²



Importantly, this caring and inclusive approach did not prevent the teacher from challenging the students. She had high expectations of the dancers in terms of their technical progress, behaviour, and growing independence. The teacher was confident in the dancers' ability to improve and expected a level of rigour in how they approached their work in order to fulfil their potential. These high expectations were reinforced by particular strategies such as rules, dancer and word of the week, and the use of specific movement terminology. Each of these aspects was understood by the dancers as requisites to improving their skills. Furthermore, the structure of IRIS is designed to build foundation skills and becomes more focused on technique over time. Specific translations of exercises and assessments help to scaffold the curriculum. Finally, the role of teaching assistants in the space should not be underestimated as they can provide one-to-one attention, offer solutions to problems, and may also act as role models. Indeed, having disabled teaching assistants was inspiring to students and evidenced how the company had nurtured disabled dancers who are now practising professionals.

Dance Talent and Development

The findings indicate that, given appropriate movement material, time and support, young disabled dancers can achieve moderate to high levels of technical skill, and that their creative ability in particular can improve over an academic year. According to the survey and assessment tool, the dancers were rated as having 'good' levels of technical ability (or 6-7 out of a possible 10 marks), reflective of the fact that they were in their second year of IRIS training. This supports the contention that expectations of disabled dancers can and should be high, in line with the teacher's approach.^{6,11} Alongside the systematic training they receive, such high expectations may also provide dancers with the skills and confidence required to access other opportunities and further training.

The abilities of the dancers documented in the assessment tool, and the improvements in the dancers' creative ability reported in the surveys, was supported by feedback during the teacher interview. She noted how far the dancers had come in terms of their technique, as well as their concentration, focus, stamina and memory for both movement material and terminology. Furthermore, both the teacher and parents reported additional improvements in the dancers' confidence, independence and social skills. Taken together these multiple improvements will stand the dancers in good stead as they progress through IRIS, access mainstream dance classes, and enter the profession.

This is the first study of its kind to provide multiple forms of evidence of young disabled dancers' abilities, and gives credence to the value of talent development programmes for disabled dancers. Further research is warranted to continue to develop and refine the assessment tool for use both within and outside of IRIS. The inflexibility of current assessment criteria in mainstream examining bodies and talent development routes can prevent young disabled dancers from progressing; the tool developed for this project is sensitive to the needs of disabled dancers. For example, it places more emphasis on movement and performance quality than achieving specific positions which may be unattainable for some dancers. Therefore, having a reliable assessment tool may represent an important move forward in removing barriers to dance training and the profession. It would be interesting to consider whether future iterations of the tool incorporate other forms of achievement and progress such as improved confidence and social skills, which may be particularly important for disabled dancers. Future research aside, the findings of this project indicate there is no reason to prevent young disabled dancers from accessing different types of training provided that teachers at all levels can be advised and supported in doing so.

The Importance of Dancer Wellbeing

It has been widely reported that engagement in dance can yield both physical and psychological benefits for a diverse range of participants.³²⁻³⁶

This study provides further evidence that dance is a beneficial activity for young disabled people.

The dancers reported high levels of wellbeing according to the Personal Wellbeing Index particularly in relation to social factors, which supports focus group data as to the importance of friendships and membership of a like-minded community. The qualitative data also evidenced how participating in IRIS supported the development of concentration, enjoyment, transferable social skills, confidence, independence, and a sense of purpose. Survey data attested to the high levels of enjoyment and personal safety or comfort the dancers experienced in their classes. Purpose and meaning, achievement and accomplishment are also important contributors to wellbeing, which can be fulfilled in talent development programmes. Taken together these findings align with definitions of wellbeing in previous literature which emphasise the importance of positive social relationships, personal growth, engagement, and accomplishment.²⁷⁻²⁹ Therefore, it is logical to assume that the benefits and outcomes reported by teachers, dancers and parents contributed to the overall scores in the Personal Wellbeing Index.

Having a high level of wellbeing is important in and of itself but is also an important element of adherence to training and subsequent achievement. When dancers train in an environment that is conducive to their wellbeing, they are likely to be motivated to continue training.³⁷ In a positive cycle, continued training will yield further physical, psychological, and social benefits. In turn these benefits may encourage dancers to engage in other forms of training and physical activity, and help them to optimise their dancing. In the future, it would be interesting to monitor the dancers' development over time both within and outside of dance to consider how participating in a talent development programme may have a broad range of outcomes and benefits.



Conclusion

IRIS aims to remove environmental, societal and attitudinal barriers to bridge the gap between recreational dance participation and the profession for young disabled people. The results of this research project suggest that IRIS is an effective talent development programme for young disabled dancers. Notable benefits to taking part were documented, including achieving moderate to high levels of technical skill, greater confidence and independence, and social skills. Being part of a systematic talent development programme may promote feelings of achievement, satisfaction and belonging among dancers, which contributes to their high levels of wellbeing. IRIS is training a new generation of dancers, who may play a role in the further diversification of the dance industry. It is an exciting time for inclusive dance in the UK, and IRIS and other initiatives like it are providing a rallying call to other organisations to ensure equal access not only to dance but equal access to progression and excellence.



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