

Queensland **Ballet**

Limitless Leaps: An inclusive school-based dance program for students of all abilities

Developed by
AllPlay Dance, Deakin University Child Study Centre

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Queensland Ballet acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which we work and perform. Long before we performed on this land, it played host to the dance expression of our First Peoples. We pay our respects to their Elders – past, present and emerging – and acknowledge the valuable contribution they have made and continue to make to the cultural landscape of this country.

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Background

Deakin University's AllPlay Dance team in partnership with Queensland Ballet (QB) presents *Limitless Leaps: an inclusive school-based buddy dance program for students of all abilities*.

Dance is a unique form of physical activity that involves complex movement, emotional and creative expression, and social opportunities (e.g. imitative learning, peer interaction, action/gesture interpretation). While many avenues of research have suggested that dance offers a wide range of physical, psychological, cognitive, and social benefits to its participants (Burkhardt & Brennan, 2012; Murcia, Kreutz, Clift, & Bongard, 2010; Predovan, Julien, Esmail, & Bherer, 2018; Zajenkowski, Jankowski, & Kołata, 2015). While there is evidence that dance may offer a wide range of physical, psychological, cognitive, and social benefits to its participants (Burkhardt & Brennan, 2012; Murcia, Kreutz, Clift, & Bongard, 2010; Predovan, Julien, Esmail, & Bherer, 2018; Zajenkowski, Jankowski, & Kołata, 2015), students with disabilities face barriers to participating in this activity and accessing its potential benefits. These barriers include a lack of dance teachers trained in disability and inclusive dance programs which are adapted for their student's needs.

AllPlay is a world-first initiative to create new pathways for inclusion of students with disabilities so they can play, learn, dance and connect into the community. The AllPlay Dance team consists of researchers at the Deakin Child Study Centre, Deakin University who are dedicated to creating dance participation opportunities for students with developmental challenges/disabilities and

understanding the benefits that inclusive dance brings to the students, families and the community. AllPlay Dance has made significant strides in developing evidence-based resources and strategies for students, parents, dance teachers and dance studios to support the inclusion of students with developmental challenges and disabilities (available as an online toolkit at allplaydance.org.au).

QB and AllPlay Dance partnered in 2018 to deliver a buddy dance program for children with Cerebral Palsy (CP) at the Deakin University Dance Studios in Burwood, Melbourne. The program had a classical focus and involved older elite dancers who supported students with CP as they progressed through the program. The program culminated in a performance for friends and family, with the Artistic Director of QB, Li Cunxin AO, leading the elite students in a ballet class. Preliminary results suggested possible improvements in psychosocial functioning and perceived benefits to physical, mental and social wellbeing for students with CP. Furthermore, parents and dancers of all abilities reported an increased sense of inclusion and described the relationship with their buddy as being a highlight of the program. This early work suggests that buddy dance programs were well received by participants and have the potential to promote inclusion and offer important benefits to students with disabilities.

Limitless Leaps extends upon the early work of the partnership between AllPlay Dance and QB, building QB's capacity to deliver inclusive dance programs. This project is at the forefront of accessible dance in the school environment.



Research Aims

The Limitless Leaps research study aimed to understand the feasibility and acceptability of an inclusive buddy dance program and evaluated its delivery in a primary school setting. It further aimed to explore whether students experienced any benefits after participating in the program, and evaluated AllPlay Dance inclusivity training delivered to QB Teaching Artists.

The project had six key research questions:

1. How did QB Teaching Artists experience and appraise the AllPlay Dance training and resources?
2. Is the inclusive dance program acceptable to students with disabilities/neurodevelopmental disorders, buddies and their parents?
3. How did the parents, students and buddies experience and appraise the program?
4. Are there any perceived benefits (e.g. social, emotional, cognitive, behavioural and/or physical functioning) for students following participation in the dance program?
5. Do the students who participate as buddies report any change in their views/attitudes towards the inclusion and participation of students with disabilities in dance?

This research study has ethical approval from the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee (DUHREC) (Reference no: 2019-099) and the Department of Education in Queensland and Churchill State School.





Inclusion Training

As part of the Limitless Leaps program, the AllPlay Dance team delivered a day of inclusion training for QB Teaching Artists. This training included an overview of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and intellectual disability, and how challenges may present in a dance setting.

Evidence-based strategies for including students with developmental disabilities in dance were covered, such as how to adapt different movements, and practical teaching tools for each disability or specific area. Strategies for supporting students with attention difficulties or sensory needs were also covered. These strategies are particularly helpful when teaching students who may not have been diagnosed with a specific disability or developmental challenge. The training finished with a dance workshop, where the AllPlay Dance teacher worked through some dance class exercises including improvisation techniques, examples for adapting movements, tasks to assist dancers to explore movements within their own bodies and in-situ feedback. Teaching Artists were also directed to look at the Allplay Dance online toolkit (www.allplaydance.org.au) for further resources, including dance stories, videos, and top tips for any behavioural challenges they need to address during dance class.

After completion of the AllPlay Dance training, QB Teaching Artists were asked to complete an online survey providing feedback and evaluation of the training. Feedback provided by QB Teaching Artists indicate that they all had a positive experience of the training, and found it very useful. The tools, strategies and new teaching techniques provided were well received and were noted to be useful when teaching students with disabilities. They were given tools,

models and ideas to approach common barriers, to understand that “the needs of every child will be different and the importance of inclusion, through the training and available AllPlay resources” (anonymous QB Teaching Artist). The QB Teaching Artists noted that the workshop and practical element of the training was especially useful and innovative, opening up a whole other aspect to improvisation and developing movements. A second day of training, and more practical and interactive learning tasks could have been helpful in consolidating the learning. It was also noted that it would have been beneficial for the AllPlay team to observe a dance session during the Limitless Leaps program to further enrich the program by implementing any additional strategies or changes needed to optimise inclusion and delivery of the dance program.

Although feedback provided by the QB Teaching Artists must be interpreted with caution due to the partnership between AllPlay Dance and QB, the inclusion training overall was found to be very useful and assist with the delivery of the dance program. Training for future programs can be extended to include further practical elements, and where funding is available, provide additional support and collaboration during program delivery to maximise inclusion and benefits for all students and dancers involved.

The Dance Program

QB Teaching Artists developed and delivered the Limitless Leaps dance program to students in a Queensland State School. Students with developmental disabilities in Prep to Grade 6 were invited by the school to take part in the program. Students in Grades 4 – 6 who were in a leadership role in the school were also invited to be involved as a buddy dancer and mentor for the students with a disability.

The program involved ten weekly sessions on a Wednesday afternoon during school hours in Term 3 and Term 4 2019, concluding with a presentation for family and friends. The dance sessions took place in the school's gymnasium with assistance from the school's special needs educators. Each week students learnt a simple sequence of dance movements using inclusive practices. At the conclusion of the lesson, students completed the accompanying page in their My Dance Story resource book, which was designed to document achievements, revise content, reflect upon their class experience and provide structure and familiarity to lessons.

Six girls and seven boys with a developmental disability from Prep to Grade Six took part in the dance program. Thirteen students (six girls and seven boys) in Grade Four to Grade Six participated in the dance program as a buddy. The dance sessions had good student attendance throughout the course of the program, and the presentation at the end of the program was well-received by school staff and family in attendance. Unfortunately not many family members were able to attend the performance, and feedback from parents suggests that a time outside of school hours may be preferable in the future. The success of the dance program indicates that an inclusive buddy dance program conducted in a school setting is both feasible and acceptable to students of all abilities and their parents.

Program Evaluation

All students who participated in Limitless Leaps and their parents/guardians, were invited to take part in the research study and program evaluation at the conclusion of the program. Parents/guardians were contacted by email and/or phone by the AllPlay Dance research team to introduce the study and answer any questions.

They were then sent participant information sheets and consent forms online. Students and parents/guardians who consented to be involved in the research were asked to complete a survey of approximately ten to fifteen minutes, either online or over the phone. Parent/guardian surveys included program evaluation questions as well as socio-emotional, cognitive and behaviour measures about their child who participated in the dance program. Students answered questions about their experience of dance previously and the dance program. Buddy dancers were also asked to provide information about their attitudes towards students with disabilities. Students and parents/guardians were both given the opportunity to provide qualitative feedback about their experiences of the program.

With provision of parental/guardian consent, Churchill State School teachers of participating students were also invited to complete a survey about their student's classroom behaviour throughout the program.

Key Findings

Participants

Three parents of students with disabilities, and three parents of students who participated as buddy dancers enrolled in the research study and completed surveys.

The three buddy dancers also completed surveys, and one child with a developmental disability. Three teachers of students with disabilities, and three teachers of buddy dancers also consented to the research and completed surveys. The number of participants who elected to participate in the research component of Limitless Leaps was low (approximately 23% of those enrolled); as such, future programs should consider improving recruitment methods and boosting the total number of participants invited to the program.



Program Evaluation

Four parents reported that their students definitely enjoyed participating in the dance classes, whilst two parents reported that their child somewhat enjoyed the dance classes. Following the Limitless Leaps program, all three parents of **students with disabilities said that their child would “definitely” be more likely to participate in another dance program**. A teacher also commented that **the their student had been excited to attend each week**.

A parent of a buddy dancer suggested that their child may have found it a little boring, and may have been embarrassed about performing. Whilst all parents of buddy dancers would recommend the program to others, they were not sure if their child was more likely to participate in another dance program. The buddy dancers gave mixed reports on their experience of the program. Whilst one buddy was very positive about many different aspects of the program, the two other buddies enjoyed some but not other aspects of the dance program. All buddy dancers had fun, found it interesting, and liked having a buddy. However, two buddies agreed that they were bored at times. All three buddy dancers highlighted that they enjoyed the social aspects of the program, and indicated that making friends and team work helped their engagement in the dance program. This suggests that the motivation driving the buddy dancers may be different from the students with disabilities and should be accounted for in programs. More communication with parents/guardians was suggested to improve the program, especially regarding the performance. Although preliminary, these findings suggest that overall parents and teachers appraised the program positively, whilst buddy dancers had a more variable view. Future programs could increase engagement with parents, both regarding dance sessions and the performance, as well as research aspects of the program to improve uptake in study enrolment. Limiting future programs to smaller groups of students could also be advantageous, allowing more individualised tailoring of the dance sessions to the students and buddy dancers involved.

Benefits

Parents/guardians of the children with disabilities and buddy dancers gave mixed reports on the benefits of the program for their children. Two parents of children with disabilities noted that they were not sure if the program was helpful or beneficial for their child, and one said it was somewhat beneficial.

However, more specific questions suggested that there may have been some improvements in behaviour, emotion regulation and social functioning. For example, parents of children with disabilities noted that their students had less anxiety and decreased number of meltdowns, and that and it was easier getting to school. This was consistent with teacher reports, which included observation of decreased behaviour incidents and less meltdowns, more focused concentration in the classroom, and increased confidence. One teacher reported that since participating in the program, their student had learnt to better regulate their behaviour and emotions in difficult situations, and had started to apologise to peers after an incident. A teacher also noted that their student was now excited to participate in physical activity which was a positive shift in behaviour as a result of the dance program.

Parents/guardians of buddy dancers reported that their children really enjoyed helping the other students in the dance sessions. One parent reported that their child had a lot more time for the younger kids since participating in the program, and noted that the dance program was also beneficial as they liked their child to get involved in physical activities. Other reported benefits for buddy dancers were primarily limited to enjoyment of the dancing, physical activity and social aspects of the dance sessions.

Although these findings are limited due to a small sample size, they provide an insight into the potential benefits of an inclusive dance program in a school setting, and may have contributed to improvements in social, emotional and behavioural functioning in the classroom and at home. Furthermore, the nature of a school-based inclusive dance program provided all students involved with the benefits of physical activity and social interaction with a diverse group of peers.



Conclusion

Dance is a unique form of physical activity that provides the opportunity for a range of physical, social, creative and emotional benefits. Limitless Leaps was well received by the school community, and found to be acceptable both to parents and participating students of all abilities. Social, emotional and behavioural improvements were reported in students with disabilities who took part in the program. Benefits were demonstrated both at home and in classroom settings. Buddy dancers enjoyed the social aspects of the program, and helping their dance buddy participate in the classes. Inclusive school based programs are important in allowing all students to access the benefits of dance in a safe and supportive environment, and to nurture inclusion in the community.



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