

Nina Therese Aune

Dancers with intellectual disabilities - Experiences from participating in mixed-ability dance groups.

Master's thesis in Human Movement and Occupational Science
Supervisor: Annelie Schedin Leiulfsrud
March 2021

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Department of Neuromedicine and Movement Science

FOREWORD

Inclusion through dance was the underlying interest that initiated this study. I was, with my background as a dancer and teacher in mixed ability dance and as a disability nurse, curious to know if and how such groups could function as health promoting and inclusive arenas for persons with intellectual disabilities. Several persons have helped me on the way to complete this thesis, and I want to express my gratitude.

Firstly, I would like to give my sincere gratitude to all the participants in the study, who have shared so generously from their experiences. Without them this project could not have happened. Their experiences did not only affect me and the content of my master thesis, but may now also continue to move and enlighten the readers. It would not have been possible without the dance groups who welcomed me so warmly, and the leaders and administration who took time to organise with me.

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I would also like to thank the person who introduced me to mixed ability dance in 2004, Tone Pernille Østern. Little did I know that this meeting would be decisive for the rest of my career choices and interest in dance, movement, and human interaction.

Thank you, Emma Margrett, for proof reading and giving me your feedback.

Finally, to my partner Erwan who has supported me and cheered me on all the way, thank you.

Nina Therese Aune, February 2021

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- a) Invitation to participate in a research project
- b) Letter of consent
- c) Interview guide
- d) Observation themes
- e) Approval from NSD

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS:

MADG - Mixed ability dance group

QOL - Quality of life

MAD - Mixed ability dance

NSD - Norsk senter for forskningsdata /

DG - Dance group

Norwegian center for research data

ID - Intellectual disability

ABSTRACT

Aim: The aim of this study was to gain knowledge about the benefits and challenges of participation in mixed-ability dance groups (MADGs) for persons with intellectual disabilities (ID).

Research questions: 1) What are the experiences of dancers with intellectual disabilities of participation in mixed-ability dance groups? 2) What are the potential benefits of such dance activity linked to factors around health and social participation?

Research design and methods: Data was collected using qualitative interviews and observations of participants in their dance activities. Eight dancers with intellectual disabilities aged 20-39 years old were included in the study.

Results: The following four themes were identified as important: *Meaning; Creativity; Health and well-being; Social participation and inclusion.* Dancing in the MADGs was perceived as meaningful and associated with strong feelings and social participation. Being creative in dance was described as fun, and as new and challenging ways to express themselves. Enhanced autonomy, freedom, and self-development were important to their well-being. Social inclusion was enhanced as the participants were actively contributing to the development of the MADGs.

Conclusion: The experiences of the persons with ID were that participation in MADGs was positive, enjoyable and meaningful for them. Dancing in MADGs was beneficial on the social and interpersonal level, and it affected their well-being and self-development positively. The study has provided knowledge about factors to consider in facilitating a more inclusive environment for persons with ID.

Keywords: mixed-ability dance, inclusive dance, intellectual disability, occupational science and participation.

SAMMENDRAG

Mål: Målet med denne studien var å få kunnskap om opplevde fordeler og utfordringer for personer med utviklingshemming som deltok i ulikkroppede dansegrupper (mixed-ability dance groups/MADGs) sammen med funksjonsfriske.

Forskningsspørsmål: 1) Hvilke erfaringer har dansere med utviklingshemming som deltar i dansegrupper med blandede evner (mixed-abilities)? 2) Hva er de potensielle fordelene og utfordringene med slik danseaktivitet knyttet til faktorer rundt helse og sosial deltakelse?

Forskningsdesign og metoder: Dette var en kvalitativ internasjonal studie, hvor data ble samlet inn ved hjelp av semi-strukturerte intervjuer og observasjoner av deltakerne i deres danseaktiviteter. Refleksiv tematisk analyse (RTA) ble brukt til å analysere dataene. Åtte dansere med utviklingshemming i alderen 20-39 år inngikk i studien.

Resultater: Følgende fire temaer ble identifisert: *betydning; kreativitet; helse og velvære; sosial deltakelse og inkludering.* Dans i MADGs var både knyttet til sterke følelser og sosial deltakelse. Å være kreativ i dans ble beskrevet som morsomme og utfordrende måter å uttrykke seg på. Deltakerne opplevde økt autonomi, frihet og egenutvikling, og at dette bidro til deres velvære. Sosial inkludering ble fremmet gjennom at deltakerne var aktive og bidro til gruppenes utvikling.

Konklusjon: Erfaringene fra personer med utviklingshemming som deltar i MADGs var positive og meningsfulle for dem. Dans i MADGs var gunstig på det sosiale nivået, og det påvirket deres velvære og egenutvikling positivt. Studien har gitt kunnskap om viktige aspekter å vurdere når man lager et inkluderende miljø for personer med utviklingshemming.

Nøkkelord: inkluderende dans, utviklingshemming, dans, aktivitetsvitenskap og deltakelse.

1 INTRODUCTION

Participation in activity is typically more challenging for persons with disabilities than for the general population (WHO, 2011). The cause is complex and affected by the nature of the disability, environment, culture, economy, landscape and stigma. Many persons with intellectual disabilities (ID) experience challenges expressing themselves and understanding due to different abled communication skills or deprived access to relevant channels (Reynolds, 2002). The question of availability of accessibility seems to be of great importance to why persons with ID are more challenged to participation.

Persons with ID have less access to occupation, jobs and participation in society (NAKU, 2019). Occupation in Occupational Science refers to a broad range of meaningful and valuable purpose-oriented activities that keep us, as people, happy and healthy (Kristensen et al., 2017; Christiansen & Townsend, 2010). Occupational limitations are most often experienced as barriers in the physical, social and cultural environment (Whiteford, 2010). Article 30: 2 of The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006) focuses on enabling persons with disabilities to “*develop and utilize their creative, artistic and intellectual potential*”. Horghagen and La Cour (2017) hypothesize that creative occupations can increase participation in everyday life and in social life. *Creativity* can be described as an ability to express oneself through various activities such as crafts, culture, work, play, and gardening (Wilcock, 1999). Creativity is also about discovery and experience through “doing” (Wilcock, 2006). Following the previous definitions, dance can be understood as a creative occupation, but it is also a physical and artistic activity.

In the arts *disability* is explored in various ways, either as a topic in its own right or as exploration by the disabled artist. Disability in dance is represented by both abnormative physical, sensory and intellectual variety (McGrath, 2013, p.9). Disability in dance evolved from the disability culture that grew out of the disability rights movement in the 70s and 80s, when the medical approach to understanding the phenomenon was challenged by the social approach (Benjamin, 2002). In contemporary disability research most tend to use a biomedical approach; a focus on social and societal factors defining disability; or an official model combining the two, such as the International Classification of Function, Disability and

Health (ICF) or the Nordic Relational Model (GAP-model). The concept of disability in both of these models focuses on relative or comparative disadvantages, associated with potential social labelling, disabling and social exclusion. More recent disability debate has also been explored through the lens of the capability approach, i.e. on enablement or capability as well as people's well-being in terms of functioning and freedom (Dubois & Trani, 2009).

This thesis is theoretically inspired by key ideas in both the capability approach, the ICF and the GAP-model, with a focus on different-abledness i.e. to variations in ableness. The topic of mixed-ability dance (MAD) is explored in the frame of occupational science, looking at meaningfulness of purposeful activities.

1.1 Purpose

The main aim is to study the benefits and challenges of participation in mixed ability dance groups (MADGs) for persons with intellectual disabilities.

By looking into the subjective lived experiences of dance as an occupation, we may potentially gain information on how dance, for these persons, interrelates with different aspects of life, such as social, cultural, mental and physical well-being. The study can also serve a function to promote the voices of persons with ID as advocates for their own occupations.

1.2 Research questions

The research questions are: 1) What are the experiences of dancers with intellectual disabilities of participation in mixed-ability dance groups? 2) What are the potential benefits of such dance activity linked to factors around health and social participation?

The first research question highlights meaning and creative aspects of participation in MADGs among persons with ID. The second research question highlights potential benefits linked to health, social participation and ultimately social inclusion.

Although it may be argued that the meanings and significance of MAD may vary culturally between the four countries and the cases in this study, I am primarily interested in commonalities, common traits and functions of MAD.

1.3 Outline of the thesis

Chapter two gives insight into what mixed ability is and how it is positioned in research. In chapter three the theoretical framework that is used to focus on MAD in this thesis is developed. Firstly, relevant components of occupational theories will be described, then phenomenology of perception will be presented in relation to dance. Chapter four includes an overview of the research design, data material and methodological framework. Chapter five presents the results and some of the main findings of relevance for the aim of the study and research questions addressed. Chapter six discusses the results in lieu of previous research and relevant theory, and the conclusion is presented in chapter seven.

2 MIXED-ABILITY DANCE

2.1 Dance defined

Dance is physical, creative and artistic activity, cognitively challenging and can also be social. “Dance can be defined as the movement of one or more bodies in a choreographed or improvised manner with or without accompanying sound” (Karpati et al., 2015, p.140).

The various existing definitions of dance are relative to the knowledge, research questions and areas associated with dance i.e. physical activity, art form, social phenomena etc. It is difficult to find one comprehensive definition of dance that explains all the constituents of what dance is, but the definition above speaks widely of dance as an activity without restrictive parameters related to rhythm, shape or style and therefore encompasses most of what dance is in MADGs.

2.2 The multidimensions of dance

The fact that multiple forms of dance exist, some vigorous and acrobatic, some focused on complexity of small steps, others more slow and static movement based, makes the generalisation of dance as a physical activity for intervention and research problematic. Even though dance is indeed a physical activity or a form of physical conditioning, it also inhabits other functions; being an art form, a social entertainment, a therapeutic tool, and a contribution to teaching creative citizenship (Fortin, 2018, p.153).

2.3 A historical overview of mixed-ability dance

The understanding of what dance is and what a dancer’s body can be, was challenged by the shift in how we perceive disability from the 1970s onwards. It initiated the movement of *physically integrated dance* and *inclusive dance*. Since then, this dance movement has developed in both amateur and professional dance communities internationally.

The professional movement and some of the first MAD companies, Axis in the USA and CandoCo in the UK, inspired others around the world to challenge the norms by creating dance groups, performances and educational programmes (McGrath 2013, p.15-24). Today, there is a worldwide representation of dance groups that are working in the field, but with different intentions: artistic, social, therapeutic or community focused. Governmental support for such projects varies between countries, from non-existent funding to regular grants. Several educational programs exist, with DanceAbility as the leading one internationally (Dance Ability International, n.a.), and there is a growing focus on inclusive dance practices in education programs (Zitomer, 2013, p.18).

Physically integrated dance is widely accepted as the term to describe dance that includes both non-disabled and disabled dancers, although the term inclusive dance is also often used with the same purpose. It has been debated, especially within the professional community, whether the terms are appropriate in relation to the normalisation principle, and if equality is promoted or restricted. The terms are criticised for being too explanatory, as if warning the audience (Benjamin, 2002, p.15). Yet, the emphasis on a different-abledness can be of importance for gaining social justice, and to make visible that equality or equity is still not standard. In this thesis the more recent term *mixed-ability dance* is used, which points to the diversity of the dancers, whereas one can say that the term inclusive points to something excluded and the term integration as parts coming together to a whole.

2.4 Mixed-ability dance - fundamentals

MAD can encompass physical, sensory and intellectual variety considered ab-normative (McGrath, 2013, p.9). It can include disabled and non-disabled dancers, amateurs and professionals, dance specific styles or not, children or adults, all depending on the context and intention of the dance group. Some dance groups work with social intentions and others professionally in dance art (Zitomer, 2013). What is not exceptional to this dance setting alone, but is still worth mentioning because it can allow for the dancers to be appreciated with their uniqueness, is that dancers are bringing their lived experience into the dance. Neither inclusive, integrated nor mixed-ability dance are dance styles in themselves, and the various work methods and expressions of the groups makes it hard to generalise. Although, what

seems to be widespread in dance groups with different-abled bodies, is the creative and exploratory aspects of dance. Many frequently work with improvisation and contact improvisation, techniques that offer to “*accommodate different bodies and its freedom from preordained steps*” (Benjamin, 2002, p.7).

2.5 Research on mixed-ability dance

There is little research in the field of MAD and ID. Most related studies have been done from a therapeutic perspective, focusing on how health and well-being is affected. There are several studies on the therapeutic values of dance for persons with ID, such as intervention programs for persons with Down Syndrome or Autism (i.e. Albin, 2016; Scharoun et al., 2014). These are mainly qualitative studies under Dance or Movement Therapy. The artistic perspective’s agenda has mostly been to investigate the disabled body as a performative artist and how this contributes to a radicalisation of the human body, raising awareness and communicating important messages (Kuppers, 2003; Østern, 2009). One study was found on dance as a transformative occupation (Graham, 2002), but it was not applicable to this study. No studies have been found specifically relating to MAD and persons with ID from an occupational science perspective. This study can therefore, by focusing on the aspect of meaningfulness, offer to fill in a grey area to extend the knowledge about what dance can provide to persons with ID.

2.6 Effects of dance

Based on previous research (sports, therapeutic, artistic, neuro and social) we may argue that dance can be a complex means for studying the health effects of movement. The health effects most referred to in literature are often physical, mental and social as mentioned below. It is an important notion to repeat that dance is complex also in genre and intensity, and therefore it is difficult to generalise. The results should be regarded in relation to their context. For example, some of the studies undertaken have been with specific patient groups, such as those with Parkinson’s, depressed populations and the elderly. Many suggest that because dancing is through the body, which we all possess, the found effects may be transferable to some extent.

Findings of the effects of dance include increased balance and strength (Guerra-Balic et al., 2015); increased musculoskeletal function, improved body composition and blood markers (Fong Yan et al., 2018); increased cardiovascular fitness and bone health in young populations (Burkhardt & Brennan, 2012); long-term dance training is associated with brain plasticity in both grey- and white matter areas of motor and auditory functions (Karpati et al., 2015; Rehfeld et al., 2018); altered neurological functions such as improved memory, attention, and psychosocial parameters (Teixeira-Machado et al., 2019); improved gait function, balance and quality of life for persons with Parkinson's (Earhart, 2009; Natale et al., 2017; Rocha et al., 2017); reduced stress and depression, and promotion of social well-being (Sivas et al., 2015).

Even though it is difficult to generalise the effects of dance on all populations, most research tends to show positive effects of participation in dance.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this thesis, the empirical focus is on mixed-ability dance. The topic and research are addressed and informed by insights from occupational theory combined with a capability approach and phenomenology. In the first part of the chapter definitions of some of the key concepts are presented: quality of life, intellectual disability and participation. The majority of this chapter, however, is focused on insights from occupational science of particular relevance for this thesis, including the work of Wilcock (2006), and the phenomenology of perception as a perspective to understand movement and different aspects of participation in dance.

3.1 Clarification of key concepts

3.1.1 Quality of life

How does dance affect different dimensions within the construct of *quality of life* (QOL)? This was a question posed at the outset of this thesis, but proved to be thematically too wide to specify a research question around, even if narrowed down to a mixed-ability dance and intellectual disability context.

Yet, this thesis touches on QOL factors and it is relevant to explain the term. Quality of life can be described as perception of the self's position in life in relation to external and personal factors (WHO, 2021c). An essential side of meaningful participation in life's activities is the overall quality it entails in a person's life. This may refer to both intrinsic qualities and qualities that are built into the social relations that a person is taking part in. In this thesis the definition below by WHO is considered comprehensive and coherent with the capability perspective, as it includes both the subjective aspect, and that culture and society affects how a person defines their own QOL. QOL is: "*an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns*" (WHO, 2021c)

3.1.2 Intellectual disability

Persons with *intellectual disabilities* are generally acknowledged as a vulnerable group (DePoy & Gitlin, 2011, p.157), but also as a highly diverse group with various degrees of cognitive, social and practical challenges (WHO, 2021b). In WHO and other recent official documents intellectual disability is often referred to as:

“A condition of arrested or incomplete development of the mind, which is especially characterized by impairment of skills manifested during the developmental period, skills which contribute to the overall level of intelligence, i.e., cognitive, language, motor, and social abilities” (WHO, 2015)

Intellectual disability is also recognized as a medical diagnosis in International Classification of Diseases-10 (ICD-10, currently being replaced by ICD-11). The most prevalent cause being organic brain injury (80%), and in the other 20% no cause has been identified. Four common subcategories under the diagnosis are measured from IQ and current functioning levels and suggest a mental age: mild (9-12 years old), moderate (6-9 years), severe (3-6 years) and profound (under 3 years) (NAKU, 2021). Although IQ and mental age are indications of the functioning level of the person and their ability to acquire skills, it is important to account for both individual differences and for life experience, as a child aged 9-12 years will have very different life experiences than an adult with a mental age of 9-12 years. All the participants in this study have mild ID, but sharing this mutual diagnosis does not define a common understanding of the individuals. They are not necessarily similar. Challenges that persons with ID may experience can affect comprehension and understanding of the world, learning and skills development, memory, communication, motor function, behaviour, and emotion regulation. Persons with ID require assistance in daily activities to various degrees, some until they have acquired the skill and some throughout life (NAKU, 2021).

3.1.3 Participation

The concept of participation is commonly described by literature relating to disability and functioning as leaning heavily on the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF-model) (WHO, 2001), where participation is “involvement in a life situation” and hindrance to participation is “problems an individual may experience in involvement in

life situations”. In a study by Hammel et.al (2008) persons with disabilities identified participation as “*a multifaceted, transactive process involving interaction with and within physical, social, cultural and political environments and communities*” (2008, p.1458). They also stated six core values to participation:

“(i) active and meaningful engagement/being a part of, (ii) choice and control, (iii) access and opportunity/enfranchisement, (iv) personal and societal responsibilities, (v) having an impact and supporting others, and (vi) social connection, societal inclusion, and membership. Respect and dignity were repeatedly identified as a critical feature of participation across all themes”

(Hammel et al. 2008: p.1449-1450).

This understanding of participation is relatively wide, composed of factors that clearly mark an existing interdependence between being active and interactive. The elements of engaging with dignity and being part of social relations by their own choice seems to be what is most essential and is not discriminatory to how one participates. Participation can happen at many levels and in different ways, there are as many individual ways to participate as there are individuals.

3.2 Occupational theories

3.2.1 Occupation defined

Occupation and activity are terms that are used interchangeably but have different meanings. Occupation can be defined as “*chunks of culturally and personally meaningful activity in which humans engage that can be named in the lexicon of our culture*” (Clark et al., 1991, p. 301). This definition shows cultural context and subjectivity as important factors for understanding occupation. Activities can be seen as constructs of society, for example dance, skiing or playing music. Occupations are the chosen activities that have meaning to us. Humans are occupational beings and occupation is in our nature, it is not just something that we do (Wilcock, 1999). Why we choose to engage in the occupation, why it is meaningful to us and how it affects our health is often what interests occupational scientists (Christiansen & Townsend, 2010). Occupational theories are in this thesis used to look at dance as a meaningful activity.

3.2.2 Occupational deprivation

This study draws on the claim that persons with ID have less choice of occupations than the general population. It is especially prominent in relation to work occupations, as most persons with ID do not have regular or customized jobs (NAKU, 2019). Few employers are meeting the needs of an adapted work environment, close follow-up or guidance that many persons with ID require. Limited options of choice also affect leisure activities and other meaningful activities, including creative activities like dance. Many persons with ID experience *occupational deprivation*, meaning not being able to participate in their desired occupation due to external factors (Whiteford, 2000, p.201). Unfortunately, persons with ID are born into a higher risk of experiencing occupational deprivation. By being stigmatized, labelled and restricted in their expression and participation possibilities, they are more prone to exclusion from society (NAKU, 2021). Occupational deprivation happens when a person cannot choose the activities they want or feel a need to engage in (Morville & Larsen, 2017, p.202). It can affect a person's QOL and may therefore be a contributing factor to health. Health is described by WHO as “*a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity*” (WHO, 2021a). Having a disability is not synonymous with having bad health. Disability, including intellectual disability, appears individually, and persons with disabilities are just as various and complex as those without (WHO, 2021b). Choice of occupation for someone with ID is just as different and culturally determined as for any other person. Nonetheless, persons with ID are often more limited in actual participation. Occupational deprivation is a concept that WHO adopted into the CRPD (2006). The convention that came into force in 2008 and has since been ratified by 181 states, emphasizes that countries should provide enablement opportunities for persons with disabilities along the equal lines of non-disabled persons.

3.2.3 Occupational justice and access to creative activities

Persons with ID can have problems accessing both community and mainstream creative activities, and it is often related to social attitudes, economic or assistance resources (Reynolds, 2002). The term *occupational justice* proposes that all beings have a right to use their activity capacity to maintain their health (Wilcock & Townsend, 2010). Persons with ID

may need assistance from others to exercise their rights. Herein lies a power issue that may affect the person's participation, self-determination and expression in their occupations (Reynolds, 2002). Creative occupations can be seen as one of the most refined ways for a person to express themselves. It allows authenticity and autonomy. Two types of creativity are often referred to in occupational therapy and occupational science. The first is product-oriented with instrumental value, and the second is process-oriented and focused around play and spontaneous experiences. In dance, creativity is often both process- and product oriented. Creative occupations can be pleasurable, energizing, give a sense of freedom and increased self-esteem (Blanche, 2007, p.21-28). They can offer a social platform to share experiences and challenges, and to be acknowledged by others (Horghagen & La Cour, 2017). Creative occupations may also facilitate interaction, communication and emotional understanding without the need for mastering speech. Whilst creative occupations can offer value and beneficial content to persons with ID, the issues with availability and accessibility may be challenging actual participation (Reynolds, 2002, p.30).

3.2.4 “Doing, being, becoming and belonging”

Wilcock’s theory of “*doing, being, becoming and belonging*” (1999; 2006) has often been used to describe how participation in creative occupation can affect people's wellbeing and development. Wilcock considers the relation between these dimensions as determinants for health. In this thesis the theory can be used to understand how participation in mixed-ability dance, a creative occupation, interrelates with the health and well-being of persons with ID. “Doing” or engaging in meaningful activities enables us to maintain physical and mental well-being. What people do or do not do determines their life, and the results of these actions compose our health and well-being. Engagement in occupation is affected by the world around us, the possibilities in our environment and our personal capacity (Lindahl-Jacobsen & Jessen-Winge, 2017, p.63). “Being” concerns the now, how we reflect upon our own actions and how we identify ourselves. It is similar to QOL, as what we are or are not determines our self-perceived well-being and health status (Wilcock, 2006). “Becoming” is about using our own abilities for change and meaning-making, a result of “doing and being”, and implies an ongoing process of transformation. In this lies a potential to develop and be creative. Occupations that enable enjoyment and to live our full potential are especially of importance

to health and well-being (Wilcock, 1999). “Belonging” is feeling connected and included socially. Through occupations we make our social relations to the world. The potential of social inclusion in an occupation is therefore important to health and well-being (Wilcock, 2006).

3.2.5 Empowerment through occupation

Choosing their own occupations and participating in occupations can be empowering to persons who have been deprived of doing so. *Empowerment* has been defined as “*personal and social processes that transform visible and invisible relationships so that power is shared more equally*” (Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists [CAOT], 1997, p.180). It refers to something that provides resources to the person in terms of both behaviour and action. Empowerment through occupation is related to participation, choice, and finding meaning (Stadnyk et al., 2010). Hammel (2016) highlights that empowerment seen in relation to the capability approach addresses the actor principle of the term; it is crucial to have the opportunity to choose and the ability to act on this. Article 9 on *accessibility* of CRPD (2006) emphasise participation in programs and activities, the opportunity to reach and navigate a place, to use and enjoy services, and to receive information, in an equal manner (Yalon-Chamovitz, 2009, p.395). Persons with ID have developmental impairments of skills regarding cognitive, language, motor, and social abilities that may affect choice and ability to act (WHO, 2016). For this population, to promote autonomy and empowerment, information and participation may especially require adaptation at an individual level.

3.3 Phenomenology of perception

The dimensions of doing and being mentioned above relates to *phenomenology* and will be elaborated on in the next section. Phenomenology is the philosophical study of the conscious experience of phenomenon (DePoy & Gitlin, 2016, p.129).

3.3.1 Phenomenology of perception and life world

Phenomenology of perception is a theory developed by Merleau-Ponty in 1945 which is based on the concept of the body being a whole dynamic entity, not separating mind from body, and being biological and social at the same time. The relationship between the body and the world is considered existential. The body in Merleau-Ponty's interpretation is both subject and object at the same time, and it is through the body that we experience and we make meaning of the world. The body is described as "lived" and marked by its experiences. Perception concerns what is being sensed and how these sensory impulses are processed and valued. Perception is selective through the lens of phenomenology, as we cannot focus on taking in everything at the same time (Merleau-Ponty, 2012).

The human life-world based on perception experience is the basis for phenomenology. It values the lived engagement and experience of individuals to understand the world in an immediate way. Here the body is not seen as something we have but we are. It is always expressive and in dialogue with the world and other bodies. When we move we do not only move our bodies, but we create embodied experiences of the world which results in meaning-making (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). The human, in phenomenology, is a 'being' who is 'doing' in the world, and through this constructs their own reality. This meaning-making composes the life world. Leder (1990) talks about the ecstatic body, which can be explained as when the body is functioning optimally in a situation, the focus is from the inside-out or "beside ourselves" and not on the body itself. It can also be described as being in flow and the energy can be used elsewhere than to reflect on the bodily movements. The opposite is problematic functioning, where the focus is on the body and its challenges, called the dys-appearing body, "*that which stands in the way, an obstinate force interfering with our projects*" (Leder, 1990, p.84). This state alienates us from the social world. We can see how this is relatable to persons with physical disabilities, knowing that not feeling sufficient in given situations makes the focus on the disability more prominent. In some ways it can be applicable to persons with ID, when one includes that the limitations of the mind can affect how the body moves.

3.3.2 Movement in a phenomenological perspective

The theory of phenomenology of perception is adopted by many in the dance field, where movement and meaning-making through movement is essential to its practice. The theory is appealing to understand both intersubject and intrasubject relations in dance. From the Merleau-Ponty perspective the body is a unit of the subjective and objective, and is seeking meaning through action/movement and reflection. Movement is essential for humans, as the body is always in a dynamic relationship with and through movement and in the process of becoming (Moe, 2009). Through moving we discover and experience our Self and the surroundings. In this sense all action requires movement relative to the activity at hand. Type of movement and how it is executed mirrors the person and their environment, particularly considering the situation and culture, and therefore movement cannot be understood separately from its context (Moe, 2009).

From a Merleau-Ponty perspective movement must be seen in relation to the *intentional body* and the *relational body*. The relationship between sensing and perception as meaning-making based on previous sensory experiences, is explained with the body as intentional in its nature. It is always directed towards something (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Movement happens due to this intentionality of the body, rather than happening because the consciousness tells the body what to do. One can say that the intention of a movement comes from the lived body. The intention can be of inner or outer motivation, based on an inspirational factor or response to an impulse.

Bodies are also relational and experienced both at a subjective and an intersubjective level. We relate to others through experiencing their embodied intention through our own. And we include our life world and other bodies in our body image. It is “*through other’s eyes we are for ourselves fully visible*” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 143). The principle of the relational body is relevant to understanding social interaction in dance, - how dance is coloured by relations or how relations may be creating meanings in themselves. In dance we relate to each other either as fellow dancers or to the audience. We move together, near or apart, we touch each other physically and we connect on different levels; physically, emotionally, creatively and/or spiritually.

3.4 The tacit dimension and pre-reflexive intercorporeality

In phenomenology there is also the understanding of *tacit knowledge* or implicit knowledge as the knowledge that is difficult to express or transfer with words. It is related to experience-based knowledge. When the awareness is directed from something to another, we become aware of the primary matter as known to us. Tacit knowledge creates a meaningful relation between two parts of experience. We know the parts, but cannot describe the whole. We know more than we can describe with words (Polanyi, 2000, p.16). One of the most used examples is facial recognition. We know a face, but we find it hard to explain all the details. We see it as a whole. Also, the words that compose our vocabulary determines what we can say and cannot say. When we do not have words to describe something we cannot talk about it (Polanyi, 2000). It is possible when asking someone about their bodily experiences in dance that it is hard for them to answer in detail and express the sensations of the movement. Most of us have, to various extent, tacit knowledge about the complexity of our bodily movements, and a restricted vocabulary based on our cultural understanding of the body, to describe all of the possible constitutions of movement. Some scholars may be able to express more than others, and even though language about body and movement indeed can be learned, the restricted language can limit our understanding of the body as dynamic. For example, speaking about dance, how it feels to dance, or explaining how the body moves through a sequence, may be very challenging with language. Although, it seems we have the possibility to recognise and even experience someone else's movements in our own bodies, which is described as pre-reflexive (Engelsrud, 2006, p.92). When we dance together we take part in each other's corporal schemas, which provides a kinaesthetic empathy (Purser, 2019, p.258)

This pre-reflexive intercorporeality may be an important factor when looking into the lived experiences of the dancers in this thesis.

3.5 The capability approach as a viewpoint to possibilities and ableism in dance

Being able to do something and having the possibility to do something are two sides of the same coin, when looked at through the perspective of capability. The importance of the relation between potential and actualism of participation and ableism can sum up the theoretical framework for this thesis. The capability approach understands disability as the

result of the - “*capability set that a person has, that is the substantive freedoms he or she enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value*” (Sen, 1999, p.87). It includes both what the person is able to do and be, and what a person has the potential to do and choose from. It incorporates both participation in activity, and the possibilities to participate that is available in the environment. Dubois and Trani (2009) emphasise that both the actual and the possible choices a person has will affect their functioning and well-being. In this way, participation in creative activities, such as dance, may be understood as a possibility to engage in an occupation that promotes ableism. Dubois and Trani (2009) also suggest that interaction between persons with disabilities and those non-disabled may generate a collective agency to improve the conditions for persons with disabilities. The intercorporeality in dance, and the aspect of social participation in MADGs may therefore also be seen as a possible political activity.

The theories referred to have a commonality in that they are concerned with lived life experience and occupation as important parts of being human. All unite in a common interest in promoting activity potentiality. The theoretical perspective coincides well with the empirical questions of the study.

4 METHOD

4.1 Design

The aim of this study was to obtain knowledge about the benefits and challenges that mixed-ability dance groups may offer to persons with intellectual disabilities. The investigation was to discover ways of meaning-making in these dance groups and the functionality of dance as occupation, and it was therefore relevant to use a qualitative exploratory design. There was a need to be ethically conscious when choosing and planning the design as persons with ID are potentially a vulnerable group (DePoy & Gitlin, 2011). The method of semi-structured interviews was deemed especially relevant in my search of the participants' understanding and the meaning attached to dance as an activity. In this study, by looking at the person's lived experience, data could be collected. Following the recommendations of Ellingsen (2010), Kittelsaa (2010), and Sigstad (2014) to create a safe interview situation and to all possible means seek to understand the person's life world, it was essential that the data collection could be conducted physically. Even though there are interesting dance groups all over the world, the research area was narrowed down to Europe. The study was composed of five semi-structured individual interviews and six observations of participants in their respective dance activities.

4.2 Interviews and observations with persons with ID

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as an interview guide of purposeful questions gives a direction, whilst simultaneously leaving room for alterations and customization during the interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.47). This process should allow participants to share more of what is important to them. In this case, participants had cognitive impairments which may affect communication and understanding, hence also interview and interpretation of data (Ellingsen 2010, p.219). This flexible method gave possibilities to follow up on what and how the participants choose to share, therefore offering a gateway into their life worlds.

Preparations for the interviews were made after the recommendations of Mencap (2021). This included explaining how the recording equipment worked before starting the interview to

prevent distractions. The aim was to provide an environment that was comfortable and safe through letting participants decide on location, making sure to directly address the person with ID first when a support person was present, and only asking the support person's help when and if required. If uncertain whether the question was understood, the question was asked in different ways with examples of what was meant by the question. The questions used in this study were devised using clear articulation and everyday words and avoided questions which required yes/no answers and jargon. Finally, interviews were scheduled over a longer period of time, to ensure participants did not feel under pressure to respond.

Taking into consideration the participant's cognitive impairment, interviews alone could potentially provide insufficient data, therefore it was useful to mix two collection methods i.e. interviews and observation (Guneriusen, 2010, p.52). In this study the observations offered additional information on how the dancers participate in dance activities. By observing, the intention was to assess situations that the participants have not already interpreted themselves (Tjora, 2011, p.51). The idea was to obtain a wider picture of the dancer's perception of themselves and how they interact with their environment.

Other possible methods in this study, such as sending out questionnaires, interviewing group leaders or doing only observation, could also have given relevant information. The chosen combination provided a more complete picture of the participants, their personal qualities and promoted advocacy.

4.3 Preconceptions

This project is initiated by myself, the researcher, and the perspectives I have on the world. How I position myself in relation to this is of great importance to how the project is planned and conducted. I am bringing my visions, my aims and my interests into it. This gives me a lot of power - power to take the project in the direction I want. It also may lead me to miss out on, consciously or not, important information. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p.53) addresses that power is present in all human conversation and relations. They speak of asymmetrical power relations in research, where the interviewer has monopoly on interpretation. It is therefore important to also take the objective stance, look at the research from outside, as objectively as one can. This is especially important when working with vulnerable groups.

4.4 Recruitment and participants

4.4.1 Inclusion criteria and geographic scale

Participants were recruited based on the following criteria: adult dancers over the age of 18 years old with intellectual disabilities who were willing and able to share their experiences with dancing in MADGs. The study excluded children or persons who could not express themselves in an interview setting. With regards to the selection location, timing and a limited budget were confining factors. As there is only one such dance group in my resident country Norway, there was a necessity to look abroad to recruit, and the area was narrowed down to Europe.

4.4.2 Recruitment process

Contact was made and maintained with the group leaders, as organisation and timing had to fit with the groups' schedule. First, invitations to participate in the study were sent by e-mail to the group leaders of about ten different European MADGs, located in Norway, Sweden, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, UK, Italy, France and Portugal. The invitation contained information about the project, the aim and data collection method. It asked openly if there were any dancers applicable in the respective group who met the criteria. The invitation also explained that it was possible relevant to bring a support person to the interview for communication and language assistance; and how the collected material would be handled, saved and deleted. The invitation explained how to get involved, that participation was voluntary, and withdrawal is possible at any point. It also, importantly, included participants' rights. It was important to ensure that the persons with ID understood what they were being asked to participate in (Ellingsen, 2015). The information letter was provided in two forms, a fully detailed version and an short easy-to-read version. A consent form was attached (attachment b). Finally, it was asked if the groups would be available for data collection purposes between October - December 2018. Four groups responded positively, and another four were positive to engage in collaboration but did not meet the criteria of dancers and timing.

4.4.3 Selected participants

Personal data and health status was not collected in this project, we only know what was shared in the interview and observation settings. Eight dancers from four different dance groups in four European countries were recruited. The countries are not listed to enable anonymity. Both men and women, aged between 20-39 years old. Six of the dancers work unpaid and on a voluntary basis in their dance groups, and two of the dancers are in paid positions with their dance groups. All participants had prior experience in movement and physical activities, two of whom had very little prior dance experience, and three having both formal training and much experience through leisure activities. It is worth mentioning that none of the participants had explicit physical impairments, and none of them were using technical assistive devices such as wheelchairs or crutches. All participants had joined their respective DGs either through a friend network or were recruited or headhunted by the leaders of the DGs.

The four MADGs consist of dancers with and without disabilities and have both an artistic and social agenda. They all do weekly training sessions, perform and hold workshops.

TABLE I. Information about the participants

Participants background	
Age of participants	20-24: 3 25-29: 2 30-34: 2 34-39: 1
Gender	M: 3 F: 5
Physical impairments	None significant stated by the participants
Use of technical assistive devices	None
Dance experience	1 participant had no prior dance experience 2 participants had some dance experience (dancing when younger) 2 participants were very experienced, started young with dance training at school and college. 3 participants with no information about previous dance experience

Prior PA experience	1 participant for leisure 1 participant active in swimming + leisure 1 participant very active in swimming + football 1 participant very active in dance + gymnastics 1 participant very active in many dance styles 3 participants unknown
Other activities	2 participants active in adapted theatre 1 participant works as a dance teacher 5 participants unknown
Recruitment into the MADG	2 participants via friends' network 3 participants recruited 1 participant headhunted 3 participants unknown

4.5 Data collection

The data collection, interviews and observations of dancers in their natural dance environment, was conducted between November 2018 and February 2019. I travelled to meet in person with each of the participants and their respective dance groups, and spent a day or two with them, including observing their dance activity and interviewing.

4.5.1 Interviews

An interview guide was made beforehand (attachment c). Four themes were chosen as navigators for question categories, and were based on the research questions seen in relation to Wilcocks theory of “doing, being, becoming and belonging” (1999; 2006). The themes were named: 1. Self-concept of body and well-being / “being and doing”, 2. Creativity / “doing and belonging”, 3. Integration and inclusion / “becoming and belonging”, 4. Accessibility (wide term) / “becoming and belonging”. Under each theme some questions were set. Also listed were some keywords that could potentially be used in follow-up questions. The questions were constructed considering possible challenges with communication and the understanding of abstract concepts. The questions were adaptable to suit the individual. In such interviews the questions should be simple and short. When questions are too long or the structure is too complex there is a risk of compliance or quietness (Finlay & Lyons, 2002). Despite careful considerations, it is possible that the

informants may not understand the questions, which requires a flexible attitude from the researcher (Sigstad, 2014).

Before interviewing the participants, they had been given the option to choose the location and whether they wanted a supporting person with them. All of the participants chose to do the interview in either their dance studio or in the studio office. This was a known location for the participants. Providing an appropriate location can be important to the outcome of the interview, particularly regarding safety, trust and limiting distractions (Kittelsaa, 2010).

The interviews were all conducted in a timing suited to the dance group's schedule, either before or after dance activity, so the participant did not only have to travel for the interview. I had prepared water, juice, grapes and chocolate, and in all interviews, I sat opposite the participant to enable eye contact. Before starting the interview, a printed copy of the information letter was offered, which was the same as provided beforehand by email. The contents of this letter were presented verbally, including - information about the project and its purpose, how participation was on a voluntary basis and how participants could withdraw, and how the material would be handled and deleted (data protection). Before any interview commenced, it was made sure that all consent forms had been signed. Two of the participants chose to do the interview alone without a support person, and the rest had either the group leader or a support person with them. The interviews were conducted in Norwegian, English or an attempt in their native languages.

The depth of the interview is reliant on the relation between the two parties (Malterud, 2017, p.133). Since most interviews in this study would also be the first time actually meeting with the participants, it meant that the relationship was new and unpredictable for both parties. At times I found myself being able to adapt the questions, and at other times I ended up being unclear. In these unclear moments I would sometimes look for good sentences out loud, which may have confused the participant. In such incidents, I tried to correct myself directly after, often blaming my language skills, but the "damage" might have already been done.

In retrospect I see that not knowing the participants beforehand could indeed result in not providing enough time for their response, as recommended by Mencap (2021). When these errors lead to an interruption of the flow of the interview, I would excuse myself, emphasizing

that it was not their responsibility, and change the subject to a more simple and clear question. This allowed the interview to continue again. As there is a reciprocal influence between the researcher and the participant in an interview situation, both expression and interpretation may be coloured by it. The relation between the two parties is essential to the results (Malterud 2017, p.133).

How we enter the interview situation, what we bring of expectations, focus and shared life world will affect the interview. For example, one participant had lost their phone on the way to the interview, and entered the situation with anxiety and sadness, unable to focus on the interview. I offered to use my phone to call relatives who could help locate the phone. This helped abate worry to some degree, and we were able to start the interview. Once there arose moments of flow of information from the participant, the worry was replaced by engagement and focus on our dialogue.

A group interview with three dancers was also conducted, but due to a methodological error that resulted in very poor data, it was not included in this study. The respondents are not responsible for the research process (Sigstad, 2014, p.189). However, the observations of these dancers are included in the study. Present in this interview were three dancers, one assistant and one group leader. The challenges experienced with this interview could be related both to the questions asked, the interview settings, or the location and timing. The questions were asked in a different language than the participants' native tongue and therefore translated by the group leader. It seemed to me that the questions were often a bit too complex and that the necessary translation resulted in a late response. This could have affected both concentration, interest and flow. As for timing, the group had planned the interview together with eating lunch before doing their dance activity, which could have been a distracting factor. It is also possible that the power relation between the dancers and administrative persons of the group and myself as an outsider and interviewer, could have compromised the participants sense of security. It is possible that the outcome would have been different had the researcher known the participants beforehand, allowing for a shared feeling of safety and a shared life-world to have happened. My conclusion of the interview was that it is a good example of how not to do an interview with persons with ID.

In total, five individual interviews are included in the study. The interviews were predicted to last around one hour, but ended up varying from 38 minutes to 1.5 hours. The interviews were recorded using an USB voice recorder and supplemented with notes.

4.5.2 Transcription

Transcription should, to the most possible extent preserve loyalty to the original material. There is a possibility that not all that was said was heard or recognised in its natural or intended form, and this could be due to several voices speaking simultaneously, or when there is a missing presupposition to understand the content (Malterud 2017, p.77-78). Transcription of the interviews was made consecutively by listening to the recording in full, and an attempt to write down word for word all that was said by every person. Sometimes this was challenging due to two things: poor sound quality when several persons spoke at the same time, and participants speaking in a different language made it hard to pick up quickly on all the meaning and intention. Therefore, the interviews were listened to several times to ensure as much information was gathered as possible. Personal information such as name, address, names of friends and family, names of performances and other group activities that the participants were involved in were anonymised. For further deidentification of the data all the Scandinavian interviews were translated to Norwegian and the non-Scandinavian interviews to English. Storage of the information was in line with NDS and Datatilsynet's recommendations.

4.5.3 Observation

In observation the focus is on behaviour, expressions and conditions (Malterud 2017, p.155). By observing the participants in their dance activities there was an intention of gaining a wider understanding of how it is for them to participate and engage in such dance groups. An observation guide was made beforehand (attachment d). Identical themes as in the interview guide were used for observation, but with some sub-key areas. Recognising what is available to be observed requires some insight of the topics in question (Malterud 2017, p.151). Having a background in dance and disability work was useful. Following Tjora's recommendations (2011, p. 91) there was a plan of how to register what was observed. Notes on what had

happened, and impressions and interpretations of what I experienced were registered. No recording was made. The observed dance activity ranged from regular training to choreography rehearsal, making dance films and performances. Anonymisation and storage recommendations were followed equally to the interviews.

4.6 Method for analysis

4.6.1 Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)

When analysing the data the interpretive method Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) by Braun and Clark (2006; 2019) was used to identify and report patterns in the data. The method is not bound to one theoretic framework or epistemological perspective. The reflexive aspect is related to the researcher's role - being aware and reflective of how their own background, theoretical approach and analysis skills affects the knowledge production in the handling of the data. Codes are actively generated by the researcher, they do not emerge from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p.593-594). In this study, RTA was used in an inductive but open-ended reflexive way, to investigate the participant's experiences and the meanings they attach to them.

4.6.2 The analysis step by step

The thematic analysis process was applied to the transcribed interviews and the observation data was mainly used to support or layer the findings of the interview data. Themes were identified through the six phase process method of Braun & Clark (2006, p.87), in the hierarchy of labels →sub-themes→themes.

Phase 1 Familiarizing with the data

I read through the transcribed interviews several times, and checked the transcripts back to the original audio recordings. I printed all the data corpus and used coloured marker pens to underline what I could identify as interesting aspects that were relevant to the research

questions. I wrote notes on initial ideas looking for meaning and patterns, both in the text and at the end of each data set.

Phase 2 Generating initial codes

After making the first markings and notes on each data set, I made a list of the first ideas and thoughts about the data corpus. I gave labels to identify interesting statements that were relevant to the research questions. Then I copied the statements in a digital document and categorised them under the labels. Some statements fit under several labels. I ended up with a list of over 100 labels.

Phase 3 Searching for themes

I made another digital document where similar labels were clustered together, and based on this composed a draft of themes. Always with an eye on the statement document I reflected on what the connections between the themes were, and what composed the sub- and main themes, and made a draft for structuring them.

Phase 4 Reviewing themes

A critical review of the themes was undertaken and some of the sub-themes needed to be merged or split. Some of the statements were re-categorised under more appropriate themes. Looking at the whole table of themes and sub-themes I reflected on whether it was a relevant description of the data material. I discovered that the themes had been to some extent influenced by the interview guide themes. I had to go back to phase 2 and 3 to make some changes to ensure the themes were appropriate.

Phase 5 Defining and naming themes

Searching for suitable names for defining the themes required a more objective perspective on the data. I therefore took some days away before finalising the overarching themes. I ended up choosing the main themes that correlated with the content of the research questions, and the sub-themes were more detailed in relation to describing the content of the data material.

Phase 6 Producing the report

Producing the report required an even clearer meta-perspective, and after being so involved with the data in the process of coding this proved challenging. I selected the statements that would illustrate a living and representative data material, at the same time as relating to the research questions. Writing the report took a few iterations of reflecting and changing the analytical descriptions to support the statements.

4.6.3 Reflections on the analysis

In relation to the two research questions four main themes were identified as important parts of dancing in mixed-ability dance groups: *Meaning; Creativity; Health and well-being; Social participation and inclusion*. There are of course overlapping elements of these themes.

The aspect of different nationalities and cultural backgrounds could at times have been coloured or determined the answers given by participants during the interviews, but more often than not the dance culture and practises in the MADGs were described as quite similar. The language barrier and different ways of communication would be of uppermost importance to both how questions and answers were perceived and processed.

The implicit or tacit meaning that came forward in the interviews required more use of interpretation by the researcher, who based the interpretations on their background experience as a dancer, knowing how challenging it can be to put words on embodied experience, and observations.

4.7 Ethical and methodological considerations

Ethical considerations made in this study were mostly linked to the fact that the participants are acknowledged as a vulnerable group. The study was reported to the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) (attachment e). In line with the advice from NSD, Skype was not used as a first contact media, all contact for preparations was kept on email and then physical meetings for data collection. Further, the study was conducted in line with NSD's recommendations.

I was aware of my confidentiality as a researcher, and considerations were taken in all parts of the data handling. Information was handled anonymously and safely secured. No personal data was collected. DePoy and Gitlin (2011, p.157) points out that people with cognitive impairments and reduced judgement may not always know or comprehend that they are participating in a study. Therefore, prospective participants were given an information letter in two parts, one full version and one short easy-to-read version. A consent form was signed prior to the interviews, where it also stated that they could withdraw from the study at any point.

Since I was coming into their worlds, the participants were given the possibility of choosing a location they felt comfortable in and the option of having a support person present. This was to accommodate feeling secure and enabling sharing. In the interview situations where a support person is present, there is a possibility that they could take over the communication for the person with ID. In this study the support persons were very respectful to the participants, always asking questions to check if they agreed when the support person needed to comment. Braun and Clarke (2013, p.89) recommend that when interviewing people of vulnerable groups, the interviewer should have professional experience with the group. In my situation, being a disability nurse and as a dancer in groups with persons with ID, my experience gives me a sense of the complex subjectivity dance can have both in bodily experience and in meaning for different persons. This helped me consider my own subjectivity in this study and to have awareness on ethical aspects.

Guneriussen (2010, p.50) implies that it is crucial that the researcher and the participant have a somewhat “shared life world” when interviewing someone with ID. If the participant has a different view on the world, the researcher should try to take their perspective into consideration when both conducting the interview and also analysing the data. From the beginning there was an unbalanced power relation between me as researcher and the participant. My preconceptions could colour the project and the dialogue, and may even lead it. There was a need to acknowledge this and reflect on it along the process.

Methodological considerations over this study are manifold. Firstly, there are the preconceptions of the researcher that are both helpful and challenging, in the way that there is knowledge about the topic, but on the other hand it may significantly influence the data

collection and interpretation of that data. Being aware of the preconceptions that one brings into the work is important. Preconceptions can affect all the stages of the research, from preparing the interview guide to interpreting the data (Malterud, 2017, p.44).

Having worked with persons with ID for many years provides knowledge about common features, but also awareness of how different individuals with the same diagnosis are. It is therefore with caution that one treats this group as homogenous. The following aspects may affect the outcome of the interview with persons with ID: venue, opening the interview, questions' style and questions' format (Caldwell, 2013). Impaired communication skills may affect the outcome of expressing the self, and the interpretation of what is shared; challenges related to language due to the researcher not being fluent in all languages and therefore using English with the support person providing translation services. This could not only have affected trust and understanding, but through the process of translating the data, the latter would lose its initial raw information.

The flexibility of semi-structured interviews was beneficial as understanding and meaning-making can be unidentical in different languages. I had the option to alter questions or to elaborate to promote understanding. Sometimes digressions would occur, often caused by associations, and sometimes just the wish to share something specific. Such digressions might be easy to understand and follow when you know someone, but not knowing them caused an issue and raised the question of when was the right moment to interrupt and lead the dialogue back to the topic or to let the participant keep talking and see where we end up? How deep the interview goes relies on the research question and the relation between interviewer and participant (Malterud 2017, p.133). Caldwell (2013, p.497-498) suggests that it might be beneficial to have more than one interview, as trust and communication between the two parties (interviewer and participant) would develop over time. It was not possible in this study due to budget and time limitations.

4.8 Strength and limitations in the research design

The cultural differences are both interesting and potentially important, but as this is not the focus of my aim and research questions it has been omitted. Despite this, I would argue that most dance groups in this study had quite similar practices and shared beliefs associated with

dancing. It is not attempted to identify cultural diversity, but focused on the commonalities and functions of dance. The language used, and interpretations in a context of several languages where things may have gotten lost in translation may have affected the outcome.

When talking about persons with disabilities the participants were not talking about themselves, but of persons with visible physical impairments. In retrospect this raised a question whether the participants, who had an intellectual disability, saw themselves as different-abled in dancing or not.

5 RESULTS

In relation to the two research questions four main themes were identified as important parts of dancing in mixed-ability dance groups: *Meaning; Creativity; Health and well-being; Social participation and inclusion*. In the following parts all the information was anonymised, and the participants are signed with “P”, support persons with “SP” and the interviewer with “I” in the quotes.

5.1 The meaning of dance

5.1.1 Explicit meaning

Dancing, as it is expressed among the participants in this study, was both associated with a meaningful activity and social participation. Dance as a meaningful activity was articulated with passion, having fun, love and strong emotions. One participant put it this way: *“Hm, with dance, ehm, I love it over all, because it is my passion”*. Another participant said that what dance means to them is that: *“it feels good with love [...] and power too.”* Dance was also seen as a means to express themselves and to put something of themselves into it: *“For example, when I dance I express my feelings, for example angry, sad, or other. Or happy.”*

Social participation in the MADGs was important to the participants' well-being and was mentioned in various ways throughout the interviews, and supported by observations. Relationships between the participants were identified as real, open and friendly, both by themselves and observations. The social aspect was found to be a highly motivating factor for being in the group. Observations showed that the social moments before and after a session enabled smalltalk and updates about each other's lives. The MADGs enabled social interaction between different people from different age groups and social settings to come together and meet through dancing. Socializing with others was described as fun and one of the best things about being in the DGs. Some mentioned that dancing with the others felt *“super”* and one like feeling at home: *“in this group my colleagues are my second family”*. Several participants highlighted that getting to know each other was important, for example: *“I think it is just really exciting getting to know each other in the dance group”* and another:

“to get to know each other well. And also to know new people”. One participant described what it felt like imagining life without dancing in the group, with this image: *“oh... then I see dark clouds...really...rain, and I look outside, autumn, the leaves are falling.”* Another described participation in the DG as influential in how they see themselves: *“and when I am in the DG I feel whole”*.

5.1.2 Embodied experience and tacit meaning of dance

There was also implied meaning or experiences that were hard to express verbally, often of an embodied kind. One recurring factor was limited vocabulary for describing dance, but the bodily understanding seemed to be profound. One described the dance in the DG quite widely as *“a type of body dance”*, and another described the movements as *“small and big”* on several occasions, using only these words to talk about movement qualities. Some also used sounds and movements when describing, which is not surprising as it is fairly common in the dance environment. It is also likely to think that reliving these embodied experiences through sounds and movement could help put words on or express what the dance was about. Some DGs would talk more about how movements are experienced in the body, and others less: *“I: Do you talk a lot about the body? About warming up and how it feels? P: I do not think it is spoken about much, but a reasonable amount.”*

Some were helped by the support persons to find words, like in the example below where the support person who knows the dancer and the choreography, offered their observations and interpretation to help the participant find why they like these movements:

“P: What movements do I like.... (long break) I like the movements of my dance colleague in “title of performance”
I: Mhm, you like these movements?
P: yes
I: Why?
P: Because it, eh, because... I don't know
SP: hehe
P: hehe
SP: It is true that it is hard to find words, I mean on the theme of the body
P: Movements, I like to do...
SP: Yes, and I think that there are movements that there is a reason to release; to enjoy, to be touched. So. To feel where the movement comes, and not “I have to do...”
P: Yes!”

The participants talked more practically about what they do in the dance groups. A typical dance training content was described as training, work and bodywork. Some groups could include yoga and massage in warm-up or cool-down, and use equipment and props. Moving at different levels, and using the floor was also mentioned. Moving at different levels gave them various movement possibilities, and provided them with different physical challenges. Working in contact with other bodies and taking weight were elements that recurred in the data material. Meaningfulness of intercorporeality and having body contact with others was implied but not explicitly stated. One participant suggested that: *“if someone is curious to know what it is then they can come one day and see what we are really doing”*, for an outsider to have their own embodied knowledge through observing other bodies, or through moving themselves. It is possible that this suggestion is linked to knowledge of what sharing a common embodied experience can mean for a common understanding. It could also be that the person found it easier not having to label it themselves. The process of creating together was also expressed as meaningful. It was seen as exciting to both work on the parts and to plan the whole. When asked to describe a typical dance session this participant replied: *“Is to have a lot of fun! We do, and we talk about what topics to have and such...in performances. And... then I look ahead, wow, this will be exciting!”*

5.2 Creativity

5.2.1 Understanding creativity

Creativity was a difficult concept for the participants to comprehend and discuss, although all related to the process of creating and feeling inspired to create. Many questioned the meaning of the word: *“Creativity hm... I do not know for sure. Mhm...to be creative yes ehm...I do not understand.”*, probably finding it too abstract to comprehend. About half could associate “to make something” with the word, like in this example where the participant quickly linked the word to a specific memory:

“Yes it is maybe different things but eh...creative...I did something, a duet, me and my fellow dancer. So we have our own creative, we are the sea “shhhhh”(making sound of waves), you know like in the summer, like this and then back again (showing movements with the arms)”.

The participants shared an embodied experience, a memory of a creation they had taken part of, although they were not able to say specifically what creativity was to them.

5.2.2 Being creative

Experiences with being creative indicated that it is fun to create their own material through improvisation: *“At least I will get in a good mood when I can have free, when I have free dance. And it is fun when you can make...make a small dance yourself”*. Making material that came from themselves would facilitate natural and self-chosen ways of moving with their bodies, not having form or constraints put on them by others. Creating with others was also described as fun and at times challenging: *“it can be both easy and hard. It takes practice”*.

Creating with different bodies was a big part of the MADGs work. It was also seen as an exciting opportunity to find new ways of moving. When questioned if they felt a difference in dancing with a person with or without disabilities, one participant replied:

“I think it is exciting that I can interact with those who have, are sitting in a wheelchair and those who are healthy or, I mean, in the other situation [...] ehm... Yes like, you find other ways to dance in comparison to those who can stand or walk. And you can, then you find out if they can go down on the floor or stuff like that”.

Dancing with various bodies at different levels would produce different movement material and movement qualities. Another participant expressed that it felt harder to co-create with someone who has a physical disability, not going into detail regarding what was hard about it. This dualism may be due to their different personalities, or one having more or less experience with it. The same participant emphasised their positive perspective on persons with physical disabilities and on being respectful. Even though they found it difficult they still found it good to try, and that the persons with physical disabilities *“are skilled, and they show themselves and they are good”*.

The contribution of everyone as co-creators in the DGs, or sometimes even co-choreographers, was appreciated and seen as a means to equal opportunities among several of the participants. When making a performance they would create both alone and together, and all be part of decision making of what the result will be:

“SP: (translates) So when we are three, who makes the decisions of which movements we use? P: Different ways and methods. [...] From the movements we begin with we put the pieces together. I: Put it together yourself or all together? P: Alone and together”.

A general enthusiasm and excitement was shared for putting parts together and seeing a complete product at the end of a creative process, like this:

“every session I am looking forward to the day that we put it all together. Because we will know that next time we will put it together and it will be like this...yes it is, it is fun to then see how far we have come!”.

Feeling proud and content with their productivity and creation seemed to be a factor that affected motivation and self-confidence in the DGs.

5.2.3 Performing

Experiences of creating performances and performing were shared vividly with both words and body language. It was a much appreciated and indispensable element of participating in the DGs. Being excited, proud and confident about creating and showing performances were important findings. The participants had much experience and competence with being on stage and showing their work in different settings and locations. One explained their non-existent stage fright as: *“No problem for me. I am so used to it, so I do not worry about the audience and just go for it when I have the possibility to.”* Another participant specified that for them the best about being in the DG was the performing aspect: *“P: The best is that, that, that, that and that (pointing on the flyers) I: All the performances? P: All, every performance. Other cities.”*

Observations confirmed that there was much enthusiasm around performing, both when talking about performances and when rehearsing or performing. The enthusiasm was linked to the excitement and enjoyment of both inviting others to their “world”, to show the results of their hard bodily investment, to have pleasure in mastering skills and something they rehearsed, and to be able to express themselves in front of others. It was important to share the messages of the performances and that they had a story or topic the participants could relate to. One participant described what they felt about the stories in their DGs performances as: *“They are beautiful! It has something to do with the flower that grows to unfold, kind of. It is*

not an autumn mood, it is a spring mood.” This poetic description was an expression of the participants’ vivid imagination, used to relate to meaning-making.

5.2.4 Inspiration to create

Regarding inspiration for creativity, the ability to fantasize and having images of the mind seemed to play an important role. One participant used imagery a lot when dancing, and the support person helped to share about this:

“SP: For example, another dancer is very form focused, from the outside.... And I think that for you it has a certain meaning? Every movement. The movements have meaning, the fantasy? P: Yes, yes. I have...that I can say for sure. I have many fantasies in my head. Not from the outside, but within myself”.

The participant's imagination would help both finding material and movement qualities but also with meaning-making.

Using imagery in dance is fairly common, i.e. to give notions to movement qualities or sequencing or the relation between dancers. It can also connect different parts together, and sometimes produce a story that makes the choreography easier to remember. Another participant spoke of using imagery to find their character in a piece. Texts, words or google were also used as inspiration, like this one participant shared:

“Well, you write on a piece of paper or some words on a board, and then...music and force, different things, it depends on the material we are working on. I: So you, do you note some words to yourself, when you do this? P: Yes exactly. Some images of the mind... You write down words and images of the mind, and eh...you can also use google”.

Music was also declared as a main source of inspiration, but again often linked with movement quality and fantasy: *“When I dance, ehm, I hear the music and then I find myself in my fantasy”.* That music was inspirational seemed very natural to the participants to experience and to talk about, as it was not given much emphasis. Maybe it is due to the fact that dance often, but not necessarily, is accompanied by music. Being inspired to dance was linked to feelings of enjoyment and excitement, and was helpful to express themselves.

5.3 Health and well-being

5.3.1 Experience of the self through dancing

Being in MADGs contributed to a sense of well-being. Dancing was reported to trigger positive feelings: *“I: What is the feeling in your body when you dance? P: Ehm, a good feeling”*. Other participants shared that: *“I just think it feels awesome”* and *“it is fun to dance, fun to do what you want to do!”* Observations supported this positivity with smiles when dancing, contentment when reaching a goal, being in flow in a task. With dance they associated feelings of autonomy and freedom: *“to be free and dance what I want to dance. No one can see me and say and I am doing it wrong”*. This speaks of improvisation, and that basing the material on what the body creates in the specific moment as something that feels natural. When speaking of dance technique one expressed being motivated to improve, stating: *“I just want to train and practice, feel and continue, to be better in dance”*. Seeing opportunities for expressing the self and exploring their movement vocabulary required feeling safe and comfortable in the space. Having space to move was essential to them feeling focused, comfortable and safe. One shared their experience with crashing into other dancers:

“if you are standing too close, and “pow”(shows an arm hitting in the air), or that something hits me then my body is disturbed and I get sad too. I: Is it hard to continue then? P: Yes. I try to have more air and space.”

Another participant spoke of wanting to do big movements like cartwheels and handstands, but feeling too scared to hit the ones around them. The reason to at times be cautious with movement and moving less in space, was linked to a need to have space around them to both feel confident and safe to try.

All participants reported feeling challenged in the DGs in one way or another, some with regards to task content or given information, others in keeping up with physical work or memory of sequences. Too much information on tasks would make it hard to keep up, to coordinate processing the information and moving at the same time. One participant linked this to contemporary dance, saying that when it was too hard to keep up they felt disharmonized: *“if too much information on it then I will have to say stop. [...] I do not think I am stressed, but when it is suddenly too much then “stop”, and then one can raise their hand*

too.” Two participants also specified that it is ok to be challenged, and that the leaders should offer difficult tasks, as long as help is provided within the DG for those in need.

Difficulties with keeping up was also identified as caused by temporal factors and memory, and was linked to feeling stressed:

“When I dance in dance formats I am always a bit after, that is my challenge. [...] If I come after, if it is unclear... If there is energy and power and it is stress-free for example, then I am able to follow. But when it is stressful I will come after.”

Stressful factors mentioned were not being relaxed or comfortable when rehearsing, not having sufficient time to rehearse the sequence before a showing, or having experienced a stressful event like missing a train just before dancing. Remembering sequences of movements was identified as a challenge because of cognitive abilities. One said: *“It is because I do not always remember the way it goes”*. Having someone to watch was seen as helpful to boost or aid memory and independence when dancing. Another challenge that stood out is that one participant accepted and even liked contact with other bodies in dance, but not privately:

“I do not always like body contact though. [...] I like to do some body contact when dancing, but privately not. [...] On the train, when there are too many people, then I don't like it. [...] But when I dance, then it is ok.”

This could be interpreted as that since dancing is a physical activity, with its own world and its own rules so to speak, they were habituated or even accepting the structure, and managed to be comfortable with touch and contact when dancing.

5.3.2 Self-development

Participating in the MADGs enhanced self-development by offering new sensations, trying new things and recognition of mastering skills. One participant was also headhunted by other dance companies for their mastering of dancing skills and artistry. Observations of the participants in their dance activities showed impressive bodily awareness and competence, that allowed for taking instructions easily and making quick adjustments. They took responsibility for their own dance experience. Even though they were habituated to the situation, structure and habits, new discoveries were appreciated. One participant shared an

experience of feeling empowered when having a new sensation doing a task that included catwalk and pushing an empty wheelchair:

“haha it is actually insane! But ehm, it is actually fun to roll...that you can feel the rolling “swish swish” (making sound and demonstrating with the hands as if conducting a wheelchair).[...] It was just a push and then pull back”.

This one-time experience was evidently powerful for the participant. Trying out movement showing their best self on a catwalk, and at the same time conducting a wheelchair produced opportunities for discovering new perceptions and movements. Having support from the leaders and other participants in the DGs was important for motivation and confidence to try new things, to be themselves and express themselves in front of others. One support person shared their memory of the participant’s self-development when first starting in the DG. Working with a new choreographer the participant had started off standing mostly still and watching, and feeling a bit behind with movement. The choreographer had then been saying: *“Believe in yourself and do it!”*. In the interview the participant replied: *“Yes, yes, and then I grew up. [...] I was supported and then...”*

Another participant shared having low self-confidence about dancing solo in a performative setting, having never tried it, only in training which had felt good. Just the idea of dancing solo on stage made the participant change to a more nervous disposition. Following up on this it was asked if they could think of anything that could help motivate them to try a solo, to which they replied: *“I do not actually know how you could do it. Or maybe someone could just say that today you will have a small, try out doing a solo, and then you do it.”* A fairly straightforward method to help motivate was suggested by themselves. Another participant shared having low self-confidence with trying a wheelchair, and it was clearly linked to not having experience with it:

“I: Did you ever try dancing in the wheelchair? That you change it up? P: No, I never tried. I would not try in a wheelchair, that would not be good, I do not dare to test the wheelchair, to sit in the wheelchair”.

One said that being supported helped overcome challenges, and that they had learned how to cope with criticism, a notion witnessing a great deal of self-consciousness, that could also impact well-being quite considerably. They put it like this: *“The best and the greatest with the DG is that I can handle criticism, and so ehm, I am sensitive to my colleagues, and my*

feelings effortlessly deal with criticism, and I have respect.” Self-development could be promoted in multiple ways in the DGs, and the largest contributing factor was feeling supported.

5.4 Social inclusion

5.4.1 Experiences of social inclusion in the DG

Several participants mentioned that their first experience of participation in the MADG was being nervous or feeling uncertain but quickly felt supported to find their place and enjoy getting to know each other. One said they remember the transition to the DG from their old occupation as something new and different, but that it soon felt more comfortable and homely in the DG than what they came from. To be directly followed up with supportive comments seemed to take the edge off being new and nervous. One said it was a nice group to come into: *“very nice, I got to know the others and I got that gut feeling.”* The DGs included the newcomers in the dance activities from day one. The way newcomers were welcomed was of importance to both the participants' first impression and to how they settled in the group. All DGs had a stable core of participants, and some welcomed newcomers more often than others, depending on their capacity.

Social inclusion was enabled through everyone being active and contributing to the development of the DG. One participant said: *“I just think it is really awesome to be in the group and dance. To be a part of developing something that you would not normally develop.”* And another helped by the support person said:

“P: This group is different because, because... I .. the group is different because I am in it.

SP: If I understand, it is that they can put something in. It is not,

P: It is positive

SP: Yes, so it is, what is positive is that they are part of the development. This is also the history, because there was no structure or company, these fixed things, before they came. Because they came in and then something different developed”

The mixed abilities of the participants of the DG was appreciated and welcomed: *“It IS nice to be mixed, it is! It is very fortunate that we have this DG that helps people. That is respect.”*

Some mentioned that focus on showing the mixed abilities is what makes the DG special:

“What we are saying, the way I see it, we are saying that we are a dance group with both persons free from function impairments and disabled together in a mixed group, that we are showing what we are really doing here. And I think it is good when you mix people together and then it becomes a great group.”

Having different-abled bodies was important to the identity of the group and allowed for new ideas, ways of moving and new experiences for the participants. Some had experience in trying aid gear, for example trying the wheelchair: *“we can also try the wheelchair ourselves, and it is a lot of fun trying it, how it works”*, and describing sitting in the wheelchair, learning how it functions and moves and also just touching it and dancing with it as a prop, was exciting.

5.4.2 Inclusive practices

Three important factors to successful inclusion in the MADGs were identified; social participation; respect and inclusive practises. Respecting each other and respecting rules was given as important to how the DG works. Everyone had a place in the group, and everyone should be respected. This talks about the inclusion aspect being perceptible to the participants. Respect was identified as effective to their sense of a safe and inclusive environment. One spoke of their experience when a person did not respect the rules causing frustration and worry for the whole DG: *“well, in the DG we have many rules, but this one person broke all the rules.[...] I want to have the rules in this group. And I would never break the rules. Some respect.”* Dealing with each other on different levels and at different cost was a part of being in the DGs. The tolerance level for versatility in social interaction was quite high.

The MADGs had various inclusive practices. Some started their sessions with a round of check-in, where the participants could share how they felt or if something particular had happened to them, if they had injuries or if there were some considerations to take. It was useful for both leader and fellow dancers to beware of the well-being of the participants of the group and to make adaptations for each one in each session. Small common breaks during the training would enable feedback and asking questions to the leaders or the assistants to clarify

tasks or information given, also allowed for social interaction. The breaks had a useful function in that they would give more time to help or support the participants individually if needed. The DGs encouraged the discovery of other bodies. Figuring out how to move with new bodies was experienced as enriching, teaching about anatomy and motor skills, social interaction and communication. One participant said:

“I think it is exciting to dance with others, and to move and be around each other and meet each other. We need to know the body of the others. And in the beginning it can be a bit difficult if you are new and you touch them and you do not know what they are ok with or can handle. I sense that strongly. What can and can they not handle? To touch each other or not?”

Including each one with their ability and capacity was crucial for inclusive practises. One participant shared a memory of feeling excluded when they for practical reasons could not join in the full schedule rehearsing a performance with an outside choreographer:

“I felt a bit lonely, to sit alone and not being allowed to join in on everything I had already practised.[...] So I was not included and it made me feel bad. And one should think that if you could not join so often that one can find a place for you and something to do. I: Yes, instead of sitting and waiting? P: Yes, because I was just sitting there, waiting for the one thing I was set to do.”

To consider everyone's capability and include them from their individual stand point was suggested by this participant. It was a given notion that everyone can participate, and different-abledness was not emphasised as “different” but as variety. At times “different” was also underlined as something positive, like this one participant suggested as a message in performances: *“if we have a dance performance, I think it would be a good idea to do a topic around something with having function impairments and not”*. There was a wish to show and tell the world that different people go together in MADGs, and also that different-abled persons can dance: *“it is good to have a variety [...] disabled persons can also dance! And non-disabled are also dancers and can be good at dancing, but disabled persons might just need a bit of help.”* It was reported that finding support in the DGs was easily accessible, and that asking for help was by most not experienced as difficult, and if it were it was due to their self-confidence not the others. The willingness of all participants to help each other out was evident in observations, it was not only the leaders or the assistants that offered help. As one participant pointed out: *“If it is difficult, just go to the person and help.”* The MADGs also

offered from time-to-time workshops in their community or in schools, and the dancers were included as co-hosts or assistants to the group's leader.

5.4.3 Availability

Availability was found as an elemental factor for participation in MADGs. Access to the spaces and the information about the DGs were crucial for joining, and the availability of the dance material and tasks given were crucial for feeling included and comfortable in the group. For several participants it was easy to access the dance spaces by themselves, going by public transport, bikes or walking, but some needed help to navigate if it was a new and unknown location for performances or workshops. Some mentioned using an app that functioned like a planner and that gave them information about what was happening on the specific day, what to remember, also their travel plan, which means of transport to take, where to change and the address they were going to. This app helped one participant feel more confident and independent. A participant that did not personally have difficulties finding the locations, but saw that others might and suggested better universal design: *“more signage from the road down to here where you can walk”*.

One participant shared that written information and sending texts could be confusing and lead to misunderstanding, but regarding written information from the DGs to the participants they said they did not misunderstand: *“because it is well explained what to do”*. This indicated that the information given from the group's leader was adapted and clear. At times the dance tasks in a session could be complex and difficult to understand, and along with suggestions of asking others for help another strategy of looking at what others are doing and learning by example was suggested:

“Sometimes I think it is a bit hard to say “what did you mean again?”, and I try to see what happens, and if it is not right what I am doing I will have to ask. [...] I just figured out I can see what happens, because I will see what the others are doing, and then I can understand what we are doing. [...] I also like if the person shows what to do, because I will better understand how to do it.”

In one DG the use of drawing was a methodological choice when giving more difficult tasks, or to help participants express themselves and communicate in creative processes. The

MADGs seemed to invite alternative ways to express themselves but it was also clear that there was more room for development.

5.5 Summary of results

Four main themes were identified among the results: Meaning; Creativity; Health and well-being; Social participation and inclusion.

Dancing was identified as meaningful, in relation to both strong feelings and social participation. The participants found themselves with positive emotions during and after dancing, they felt passionate about dancing, and that dancing enabled them to express themselves. Embodied experiences were found to be more prominently weighted than theoretical concepts and words. Being in the MADGs was identified as both fun and important to social interaction and friendship. Participation was also influential in how they saw themselves.

The concept of creativity was not easily comprehensible, but for all relatable. Creativity was described as fun and challenging ways to express themselves when making dance alone or together, all in a respectful manner. Feeling proud and content with productivity and performing was a factor that affected motivation and self-confidence. Creative tools, particularly fantasy and images of the mind, were inspirational but also witnessing ways of seeing in their world.

Well-being was reported as being of importance for participation. Dance triggered positive feelings, increased autonomy and freedom, and affected self-development. Feeling safe in the environment regarding having space to move and being themselves were essential to their focus and investment in the activity. Supportive staff and colleagues were of importance to confront challenges and to cope with criticism. Participation exposed them to new experiences and recognition of mastering skills, and feeling empowered with new sensations.

Social inclusion was enabled through everyone being active and contributing to the development of the MADG. Respect was important to feel safe and included, and the tolerance level for versatility in social interaction was high. The variety of bodies were of

importance to acknowledging the inclusion factor, and was experienced as enriching with regards to learning about anatomy and motor skills, social interaction and communication.

Availability was found as an elemental factor for participation in MADGs, and information given from the group's leader must be adapted and clear.

6 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this thesis was to gain insight of the benefits and challenges of participation in MADGs for persons with intellectual disabilities. Two research questions were raised:

1) What are the experiences of dancers with intellectual disabilities of participation in mixed-ability dance groups? 2) What are the potential benefits of such dance activity linked to factors around health and social participation?

Results indicated that three areas were of importance to their experience with participating in the MADGs, and that these resulted in affecting health and well-being. *Dancing as meaningful activity; Creativity and potential of transformation; Empowerment through social participation and inclusion; Health and well-being effects of MADGs.* The findings will be discussed in relation to the theoretical framework and relevant research and literature.

6.1 Dancing as meaningful activity

In what ways was participation in mixed-ability dance meaningful for persons with ID? Dance had significant personal meaning to the participants, and they enjoyed the enablement of expressing their feelings and putting something of themselves into the occupation. Dancing in the MADGs promoted autonomy and affected mood positively. Moving with other bodies and social interaction within the group were raised as being particularly meaningful. Putting words on their bodily experiences proved to be difficult at times. Embodied experiences were found to be more weighted than theoretical concepts and words.

6.1.1 The body's role in meaning-making

Dancing with the body as a medium for expressing, sensing and interacting was the common finding for all participants. The experiences they had were in some ways similar, and in other ways highly subjective. In the MADGs all bodies are welcome. Type of body is not finite, and the foundational idea is that everyone has the same exit point just by having a body. It is through our bodies that we are able to sense and discover tactile, sensory or movement

actions. When we think of the body as a “doer” in the world, like the theory of phenomenology of perception offers, we see an actor who through his interaction with other beings and the surroundings, creates and understands his own life-world simultaneously. “Doing” is not defined in any particular or limiting way, which opens up for different bodies with different capabilities to “do” as they do. In this process we are, from our individual preconceptions and abilities, trying to make meaning of our experiences, which will compose our knowledge and understanding of how the world works. (Merleau-Ponty, 2012) Seen in relation to Wilcock’s occupational theoretical aspect of “doing and being” (1999) the two theories speak of similar convictions. “Doing” is about the things we do and it affects our health and well-being. To dance, which is a multidimensional activity, involves the body interacting on a physical and social level. Through the aspect of “Being” one reflects upon the actions and seeks to be true to oneself, identifying what is comfortable and what is not, and why. In this aspect we understand and define ourselves. The person can thus be seen as a dynamic and interactive bodily being that makes meaning of its experiences, and how these are processed and valued affects the person's well-being.

6.1.2 Embodied knowledge

In the MADGs the participants are all joined together by the common notion of dance, which both requires and promotes embodied experience. *“When we move we don’t just move our bodies, but we create embodied experiences of the world which results in meaning-making”* (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Not surprisingly, being a bodily activity, embodied experiences were weighted in the results, but the participants' abilities to express these experiences in the interviews were of varying levels. They spoke more easily about their experiences in a practical manner, for example what they do in the dance groups and the various choreographies, which may be due to that it is easier to relate to than abstract thinking and reflective meaning-making, considering the intellectual impairments of participants. More prevalent was having difficulties going into detail about how it felt in the body, or recreating through memory what the body had done.

In the results there was a prominence of shared experiences of the dimension of tacit knowledge. The tacit cognition and knowledge is by Polanyi (2000, p.16) explained as

composed of something meaningful that we have experienced, and we know the parts but cannot describe the whole. It is an implicit knowledge, we know more than we can express. Even though the language about dance experiences was limited, the bodily understandings seemed to be more developed. Observations confirmed this for all the participants. It was as if experiences of the body are more easily relived than formulated with words. This suggests a different knowledge than just reasoning within the brain, and it is probable that the embodied experience could produce knowledge and meaning-making that resonates for persons with difficulties understanding complexity or abstractness.

In dance lies a potentiality of creating an environment to learn, express and understand the self and the world around through motion. We do this meaning-making in a dynamic relationship with our surroundings. From a phenomenological point of view the body is intentional and directs itself towards something, and the body is not conducted by rationality or the instructions of the mind alone, but follows its own intention and drive. (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). The participants described being in a state of flow when dancing, as being focused on and motivated to investigate the potential of the activity in the moment. Leder (1990) calls this the ecstatic body, a state of being in flow where the focus is not necessarily on cognition of the bodily functions themselves, but letting them happen and observing what is happening. The body is still important, there is just a shift of the focus from within to outside. What we perceive is also selective, we cannot take it all in at once, so we continuously filtrate and direct our perception to what is useful or interesting to us (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). On these notes seen in relation to tacit knowledge, it is relevant to think that dancers with ID have similar challenges to dancers without ID in processing information and making meaning out of it, but knowing the features of the condition it is also probable that persons with ID could be more challenged, of which also the results in this study indicate.

6.1.3 The relational body and meaningfulness of intercorporeality

Meaningfulness of dancing with others was one of the major findings of this study. The social aspect of dancing in MADGs was mentioned all across the data in relation to various topics. The principal of the relational body is of relevance to understanding both social interaction in

dance, but also how dance is coloured by relations and how relations may be creating meaning in themselves. We experience the intention of others through our own bodies.

“In perceiving the other, my body and his are coupled, resulting in a sort of action which pairs them. This conduct which I am able only to see, I live somehow from a distance. I make it mine; I recover it or comprehend it. Reciprocally I know that the gestures I make myself can be the objects of another’s intention”.
(Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p.118).

We can talk about the relational body from a theoretical standpoint, but in dance it seems to manifest naturally as embodied experience. The results showed that sharing experiences together with others in dance allows for a meeting that enables a common understanding or a common life world. When one participant suggested for others to come see what the MADG does, it was a suggestion of sharing a common life world, and to make meaning together.

This intercorporeality, where there is a social relationship and a social cognition between bodies, could be relevant for explaining what happens in the MADGs that results in such a weighting of the social aspect in the results. The body is both subject and object, we see and are seen, and we act and react at the same time. The dancers in MADGs move in relation to each other in space, or together in space, and there is always a form of interaction happening. These actions of intercorporeality when dancing together or in contact with other bodies results in embodied cognition made together with others. A shared life world becomes existent, a shared understanding of “what we are doing”. Simultaneously one reflects upon the actions and the self, in the dimension of “being”, and this affects how we see ourselves (Wilcock, 1999). Not only does this interaction and reflection upon it promote knowledge, but it also contributes to the sense of belonging (Wilcock, 2006).

6.2 Creativity and potential of transformation

What does the creative aspect of dance offer to persons with ID? Creativity was a multifaceted aspect to the MADGs, that enabled various creative practices and methods, inspiration sources and stimuli, and constituted a potentiality of growth.

6.2.1 Creative practices and their effect

Article 30: 2 of CRPD (2006) focuses on enabling persons with disabilities to “develop and utilize their creative, artistic and intellectual potential, not only for their own benefit, but also for the enrichment of society.” Dancing in MADGs was found to enable persons with ID to use their creative abilities to dance, particularly in improvisations and to co-create performances. Many such groups work in improvisation and contact improvisation, techniques that offer to “accommodate different bodies and its freedom from preordained steps” (Benjamin, 2002, p.7). This can enable all bodies to dance. Improvisation is a learning space to experience and transform in individual and uncategorised ways (Østern, 2006).

Placing an emphasis on curiosity and individual explorations and achievements may be of great value to persons with ID, as following standardised requirements for achievements can often be challenging. There is no prerequisite to dance improvisation, but there is a potential for development of skills in the sense that one gets habituated in exploring the unknown and finds ways to take care of the self when going into unknown situations and relations, and in this way one can each time enter with more knowledge. Other creative dance practices were also used in the MADG, and the participants' contributions in creating material was pointed out as important.

Participants in this study reported it was fun to create their own material. When dancers produce material that comes from their own movement vocabulary based on their lived experience and their lived body, it gives the benefit of feeling comfortable with the material, choosing movements that are natural to them. Inspired by Merlau-Ponty, Østern says that “we create through who we are and what we bring with us” (2010, p.54). It gives the possibility to understand and make-meaning out of the movements from their origin. Creating with others was described as both fun and challenging in this study. The merging of two or more different worlds could be challenging for someone who has impaired cognitive skills and communication abilities (NAKU, 2021), but through common stories and meaning-making all were included. The creative opportunity made by diverse bodies also promoted understanding of body and function, and opened up for new movement possibilities. Moving at different levels and being creative with wheelchairs gave new ideas to choreography.

Being co-creators and having a say and playing a role in decision-making, could enhance empowerment, self-concept and self-confidence. Performing was talked about with much enthusiasm. Being on stage, performing and sharing the product of their creative processes stimulated feelings of proudness and confidence. When performing one invites others to observe and see the life world that has been created, and one shares and expresses something of the self in front of others, even if fictional. The social platform that such a creative activity offers also enables acknowledgement by others (Horghagen & La Cour, 2017). Being part of a community that has something to share, a message, was motivating. What the DGs were saying to the world with their performances were seen as having political and artistic value.

6.2.2 Mixed-ability dance as potentially transforming

We could say that engaging in creative activity, as a “doer” in the world, is about “being and becoming” something. “Becoming” is a result of doing and being in both the present and past of cultural context, and is in itself also an ongoing process that is transformational. In “becoming” lies the potential of growth, development and self-actualisation (Wilcock, 1999).

“The transformative potential in occupation refers to the opportunities for humans to choose and engage in occupations for the purposes of directing and changing either personal or social aspects of life, with the aim of realizing dreams and goals”.
(Townsend, 1997, p.20)

Mixed-ability dance is an occupation where the participants experience the transformative potential in both self-development and self-actualisation. Everyone can act and contribute using their own abilities. Being true to their nature and enjoying themselves was reported for the dimension of “being”. “Becoming” or the transformative potential was reported through the participants' experiences of their own development and change. Some expressed this as clear intended goals and desires of what they wanted from dancing, whereas others not being so future-oriented could still talk about their historical development and achievements. At times these findings were backed up by the support persons or by observations. The transformations were evident in the way the participants' self-confidence had been affected, and how developing skills in expressing the self, enhanced their self-awareness, their communication and social skills.

Inspiration to be creative seemed to play a big role in how persons with ID processed information and created meaning of what they did. Various sources of inspiration were mentioned and besides music, the most essential and influential was fantasy and images of the mind. Inspiration affected their actions and how they dealt with movement tasks and creating dance. They described that fantasy helped to give the movements meaning, which could be interpreted as helpful to find and distinguish different movement qualities. Finding a storyline was helpful for some to remember choreography. Fantasy and images of the mind affected how they could express themselves through movement. Kuppers (2003) says that having a disability allows for other artistic expressions, because one has alternative experiences in the world. Using fantasy and creating stories, can be seen as ways of meaning-making in and of their life world. In a world that can be difficult to comprehend at times, there existed this specific activity dance, where “everything is possible” with regards to fantasy over the bodily movement vocabulary. Dancing in improvisation was also called play and it is possible that dancing more freely and in creative ways allowed for expressing their potential in a manner not available in other areas in life. “Becoming” what they wanted or could imagine was possible, and enabled a transformation within them. Maybe dancing could make the potential of “becoming” more accessible to persons with ID. It is thinkable that persons with ID could benefit from having available such creative occupations where they can use their potential, and experience contentment in contributing to creation and productivity in ways they comprehend and that makes meaning to them.

6.3 Empowerment through social participation and inclusion

What do these groups offer in terms of availability and inclusion to persons with ID? Social participation in the MADGs was key to choosing the occupation, and availability, both of the occupation itself and the practises within the groups, were of importance to participation. Social interaction and including varieties of bodies in a tolerating environment were benefits of participation in the DGs. Everyone was enabled to be active and contribute from day one, and the possibility to adapt practices individually was appreciated.

6.3.1 Participation and “Belonging” as means to inclusion

The last dimension of Wilcock’s theory is “belonging”, where the sense of being a part of a community or a whole can offer feelings of connectedness and inclusion in a group or society (Wilcock, 2006). In the MADGs the participants were engaged in the activities from day one, and received supportive comments to help them feel comfortable. Mixed abilities and differently abled bodies were part of the identity of the groups, which may have contributed to everyone feeling accepted as they are. Koppers (2003) states that inclusive dance practises can promote communality in such a manner that disabled dancers are “able to go beyond freakishness”. Inclusive practices allow for participation on an individualistic basis (Benjamin, 2002). Focusing on what the person is capable of and able to do instead of not is of importance to an inclusive environment. Hammel et al.’s (2008, p.1449-1450) six point list of core values to participation are relatable to the findings in this thesis. Both listed being active and part of something, social inclusion, freedom of choice, access and availability, as meaningful and important. In addition, both identified respect as an important factor.

In retrospect analysis and interpretation of the data raised a substantial question. The persons with ID were mainly focused on physical disabilities, especially those persons who were using aid tools, when speaking of different-abledness, so why is that? Did the persons with ID actually recognise or identify themselves as different-abled in dancing or not? Could it be that the inclusive environment allowed for them to not stress the factor of “being different”?

Maybe the visibility of the aid material, particularly wheelchairs, resulted in more awareness of this aspect. The use of gear, wheelchairs in particular, functioned not only as to inspire movement but also to advocate that it is a tool, not a limitation. It was a fellow understanding of this within the groups that had members sitting in a wheelchair. Interaction with wheelchairs was something they got used to. Even though it was an inclusive environment for bodies using gear, the gear itself was interesting on its own, because it created new possibilities for movement and interaction for all.

Enhanced participation from their own level and capacity was important in this study. In the example where one participant felt excluded from being part of the performance in the way they wanted, it was suggested that the leaders should have been more accommodating by

finding alternative ways for them to participate from their capacity. Participation on their own premises and abilities is promoted by Zitomer (2013). Persons with ID may sometimes have a need or a wish to participate, but find it difficult or uncomfortable due to external or internal factors to participate in the suggested way. In such cases alternative participation forms could be: to play the rhythm for the activity on a drum, to control the music, or to observe and give feedback to fellow dancers (Zitomer, 2013, p.21).

Another inclusive practise promoting a sense of “belonging” was “Check-in”, a method which several of the MADGs used as an opening ritual to a dance session. It was useful for all to be seen and heard, to share important information that could enable adaptation for all on the specific day, taking into consideration how they feel, their capacity and their wishes. Also common breaks during the dance session were useful to enable feedback and clarification of information. It allowed for individual adaptations. Clear supportive comments and helpful behaviour, to know that someone believes in you, and that you are not facing the challenges alone, were relevant to a sense of connection and belonging.

6.3.2 Availability is crucial for occupational justice

In this study availability of the dance material and tasks given were crucial for feeling included and comfortable in the DGs. The participants shared that processing complex information could challenge their comprehension of a dance task or coordination of movement, and they could feel that it was hard to keep-up and to physically engage when this occurred. Information processing is crucial to accessing and understanding information, and yet further to coordinate this information with actions. Studies have shown that persons with ID have issues processing information and interpreting it as rapidly and easily as their peers. Persons with ID respond slower in processing information when given various tasks that require rapid handling (Kail, 1992, p. 57); complex verbal information affects working memory capacity (Schuchardt et al., 2010, p.346); and social information processing relies on cognitive skill levels (van Nieuwenhuijzen & Vriens (2012, p.432). This implies that adapting the task and the information given in the MADGs to include all and not be too abstract is of importance. Also, the participants in this study mentioned that feeling stressed affected their

abilities to continue in the task or to feel motivation to continue. They experienced being restricted by their own challenges to continue or to participate in the dance activity.

Yalon-Chamovitz (2009, p.395) identified four factors; pace, complexity, literacy and stigma, as dominant barriers to accessibility and availability for persons with ID. Only the three first will be addressed in this chapter, as the matter of stigma was not really brought up in the data. The example above of the participant unable to keep-up is relatable to the first factor “pace”. Experiencing stress related to tempo and continuous adaptation in high speed situations that society exposes us to, can be a limiting factor to participation for persons with ID. Adapting speed of information could make a more inclusive environment for persons with ID. The participant unable to physically engage if they experienced a saturation of information relates to the second factor “complexity”, which speaks of understanding or problem-solving as challenging for persons with ID. This is similar to the findings of Kail (1992) and Schuchardt et al. (2010). As an example Yalon-Chamovitz (2009) points to accommodations used badly and even wrongly for persons with ID, such as speaking very loudly and with childish intonation, and reinforces that accommodations should be made age appropriate. The factor of “literacy” is related to complexity and here the suggested accommodations are easy-language, signs and pictograms, and alternative styles of information communication. In one of the MADGs the use of drawings as an aid to communication and self-expression was helpful to interact and gain understanding amongst the group. Drawing the bodily experiences can also be used as a tool to measure the dance’s effect on body knowledge and emotional well-being (Barnet-Lopez et al., 2015). Although the MADGs in this study seemed to invite alternative ways of information communication it was also clear that there was more room for development in that area.

Zitomer (2013, p.20) addresses the need of a more inclusive dance vocabulary to accommodate all diverse participants in dance settings. The teacher is then required to see the intentionality of the movement tasks in new ways. An example could be "travel across space" instead of "walk or run". It would also be of importance to take feedback from the students regarding what they are comfortable with and what works for them. Yalon-Chamovitz shares a compilation of examples of recommendations for easy-language: *“keep sentences short (no more than 15-20 words); if you have to use a difficult word explain what it means; use full words and avoid abbreviations; use active rather than passive verbs”* (Yalon-Chamovitz,

2009, p.397). Using imagery seems to be highly relevant to persons with ID on the note that they report using fantasy often when dancing. Imagery in dance could be visualising with descriptive language or using metaphors, such as “imagine your hands as leaves in the wind” or “your head is a balloon rising up to the sky”. Imagery to propose movement qualities can be helpful to all dancers at all ages (Franklin, 1996).

When making these accommodations it is important that it results in a positive learning environment for all participants (Hills, 2003). Benjamin (2002, p.16) emphasises that a mixed ability class should function just as well without persons with disabilities. A wholesome inclusive teaching practice is preferred, as it will allow for further individual adaptations. Østern (2010) calls this to “teach dance spaciouly”. She developed space as a theoretical device for studying mixed-ability dance, and identified that the spaces were: lived, fictive, aesthetic, narrative, cultural and political. Dance happens in and when interacting with these spaces, and such spaces need to be created for diverse bodies both in dance classes and in performative settings. Through her doctoral thesis on a self-initiated MADG project Østern (2009) constructed a twenty point list of aesthetic-pedagogical principles that her MADG worked by, which includes points like “4. *Difference is used as a generative force. The aesthetics and the pedagogy develop from using everybody’s possibilities*” and “18. *I don’t try to be anybody else than the one I am. As a body-subject, I am constantly in becoming.*” Clear practices such as this may help the leaders and the participants in MADGs have a common understanding of what they are doing. Methodology is crucial to inclusive practices in MADG. It is important that leaders and teachers of such groups reflect on their own interaction with the persons with ID, to evaluate if their methods are working as inclusive or excluding (Zitomer, 2013, p.19). Dinold and Zitomer (2015, p.49) also gives a list of suggested inclusive practices that are useful to MADGs. These include making adaptations in dialogue with the participants themselves that will ensure safe, enjoyable and challenging participation for all; encouraging participation but accepting varied participation behaviour; using a language that includes all manifolds of bodies; and facilitating social interaction and collaboration.

The accessibility to MADGs and the availability of the activities within the MADGs are key to occupational justice. These dance groups have the potential to offer persons with ID an opportunity to occupational engagement in a setting that accommodates adaptations in an all-

inclusive and non-discriminatory way. When looking at the history of occupational deprivation, having the opportunity to choose an occupation that is both useful and meaningful in such ways, allude to empowerment to persons with ID.

6.4 Health and well-being effects of MADGs

The dance activity that these groups provide is inclusive and opens up for creative contributions from the participants' own lived bodies. This means that the movement material can be adapted by the participants themselves or even produced by themselves, and therefore accustomed to their bodies. Measuring effect of dance may be difficult, especially because there are such a vast array of dance styles, that vary from rhythmic and cardio, to flexibility-demanding precision, to play in spontaneous contact improvisation etc. But on that notion, it is also fair to say that it is not impossible to measure effect, but this is outside of the scope of this study.

6.4.1 Well-being benefits of participation in MADGs to persons with ID

So, what does the dancing in MADGs offer to persons with ID? Other studies have found that creative dance activities could lead to: an increased sense of physical competence in students with disabilities (Engelsrud & Bjorbækmo, 2011); improved connection between perception and movement in persons with ID; increased self-confidence, autonomy and spatial awareness (Dinold, 2000); and a positive effect on self-concept, mental health, self-awareness and emotion identification for persons with ID (Barnet-Lopez et.al, 2016). The findings in this thesis coincide with the other studies mentioned above to some extent explicitly and some findings could also point in the same direction. What was evident in this study was that dancing in MADGs affects people's self-image, self-confidence, and psychosocial health. These findings relate to Benjamin's saying that dancing makes us feel more alive because *"we dance to feel better, and we dance to better feel the world around us"* (2002, p.62-63). The effect of self-confidence in particular was mentioned several times and in various ways across the data corpus. Having space to move freely and in an inclusive environment was important to develop relational and spatial awareness. Being offered the chance to try new things, facing fears, overcoming challenges and mastering skills in a safe environment with

supportive people around, helped promote self-confidence and self-development. Creative activities allowed for exploration of expressing the self and emotional recognition. Socializing within the group was important for feeling connected, networking and having friends.

6.4.2 Challenges in MADGs affecting well-being for persons with ID

Challenges reported by the participants in this study were mainly related to availability and accommodations. There were also a couple of other individual challenges mentioned related to self-confidence and believing in themselves. Sometimes a crowded dance floor would instill fear of crashing into someone and made them more cautious with movement and they moved less in space. Social interaction could be challenging if not a common understanding or agreement of the interaction policy, which could result in a deprived mood. As for the primary, they were related to availability and accommodations. Not being included to participate from their premises, gave a feeling of exclusion, affecting mood and motivation. If information was too complex or was given too quickly, they felt stressed and unable to process the information and to coordinate movement. This affected self-confidence and could induce experiencing a dys-functioning body. Experiencing dys-function can also give the person a sense of being disconnected to the world (Leder, 1990). To make adaptations and to accommodate for versatility in learning, processing and expressing the self might for these DGs mean taking more time with each movement task, each talk and each challenge. It could mean letting the participants' voices be heard, and letting them contribute to the planning of what they want to be challenged by, including suggestions for which ways. Who knows a person better than the person themselves?

6.4.3 Overall effect on QOL of dancing in MADGs for persons with ID

Dancing is a natural, inherent potential that lies in us all. Not only do humans have a unique ability to coordinate movement with sound, so-called *entrainment*, our ability to synchronize movement to musical patterns (Miura et al., 2015). We also have a predisposition for dancing, to engage in rhythmic movement coordination as a form of arousal or enjoyment from when we are babies (Zentner & Eerola, 2010, p.5771). From this we can say that dance is not only

for certain types of persons or bodies, but is an inherent potential in us all. We move in dance as a reaction to stimuli or arousal, and because it affects our well-being.

Both internal and external factors affects the capability to dance, and bodily functions, societal structures and cultural possibilities affects availability of dance. The existence of dance groups like MADGs may offer opportunities to marginalised groups in society to participate in dance activities. MADGs promotes interaction between disabled and non-disabled and also holds a standpoint in the political way putting focus on equality at the same time as ableism, by performing artistically or holding workshops, reaching out to people in the society, challenging and possibly also changing attitudes.

Occupation that enables enjoyment and to live their full potential are especially of importance to health and well-being. Dancing is not just something we do, it also affects what we are and how we see ourselves. It enables us to become something through creative activities and practices. Participation in a MADG and being included in a community affects our sense of belonging. We can have knowledge of the meaningfulness of dancing in MADGs through Wilcock's theory of "doing, being, becoming and belonging", which focuses on connecting the different dimensions to understand a person's well-being and health (1999; 2006). But how we perceive our quality of life is reliant on the culture and societal structures in which we live. (WHO, 2021c). Accessing the occupations of our choice is crucial for occupational justice, and the way we are able to participate in them is crucial to our well-being (Reynolds, 2020).

6.5 Method critique and further research

The results in the study must be read with caution as it is based on few participants and with no claim of representativeness. The participants in the study all had milder forms of intellectual disabilities, and it should be emphasised that the findings are therefore not representative to all with ID. This is not to say that it is without merit as qualitative material may also allow for analytical generalisations of strategic relevance in a study of meanings and functions of dance from an activity and participation perspective. In this respect it is primarily whether the observations made can be found in previous literature, research and cases that are of primary interest.

My preconception of the theme, being a dance teacher in a MADG and a disability nurse, has likely influenced this thesis. At times I found myself in a position where it was hard to hold the meta-perspective, being biased in the interpretations and discovering that there is a fine line between what is allowed as an interpreter in such a study and what is not constructive behaviour.

With mixed-ability dance new possibilities have been created to include bodies that do not conform to an idealized physicality. This produces new concepts of dancing bodies and movement, and promotes diversity. Including persons with cognitive disabilities, such as ID, opens the debate about 'who is a dancer' to not only be about the body, but also diversity of cognitive abilities. Focusing on meaningfulness and dance as an occupation, this study can offer to fill in a grey area, where little to no previous research has been done. Increased knowledge about the experiences of persons with ID in MADGs can give insight to dance as an occupation for persons with ID, in particular looking at participation in MADGs. It can inform the MADGs and other inclusive dance practices and even other inclusive creative practices as to what the important considerations are when working with these persons. It can promote inclusion at an even further level. Pedagogical practices need to include understanding of diverse student learning needs. Why is inclusive practice in dance not standard?

It would have been interesting to know if use of alternative data collection methods such as drawing, or more observation over time could have shown a progression in development.

The study is not focused on the possible cultural differences within and between the different nationalities, and this could have been an interesting theme for further research. Different recognition of the medical diagnosis and the terms included in this study could have offered another discussion and a broader insight into the field of mixed-ability dance.

7 CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to answer the research questions: 1) What are the experiences of dancers with intellectual disabilities of participation in mixed-ability dance groups? 2) What are the potential benefits of such dance activity linked to factors around health and social participation?

Mixed-ability dance groups have the potential to offer persons with intellectual disabilities an opportunity for occupational engagement in a socially inclusive manner. Wilcock's theoretical framework of "doing, being, becoming and belonging", was especially useful in this study to illustrate how dance may both illuminate and strengthen personal and social identity as well as creativity and personal growth. The experiences of mixed-ability dance were predominantly positive and pointed to several beneficial outcomes of participation. Experiences derived primarily from bodily actions and interactions, and broadened their repertoire of self-expression and personal capability. Dancing together with others was a door opener to knowledge and contributed to a sense of belonging.

Dancing in the MADGs was also linked to increased capability in terms of their well-being, concept-of-self and social participation. Participation in dance was associated with feelings of enjoyment, increased autonomy, freedom, self-confidence and contributed to positive effects in terms of self-development. Support from staff and colleagues was reported to be of importance to confront challenges and to enhance their motivation. Successful inclusion was related to more diversified participation possibilities, respect between the members, and inclusive methods of dance practice. Challenges persons with ID may have are perceiving, understanding, and processing information. In order to tackle this barrier, there is a need to adapt information to be easy-to-read, to use a clear simple language, and to allow more time for intellectual processing. When activity and participation are perceived as difficult, help must be available, and there must be helpers to ask and show. Adaptations should ideally be individually accommodated. Availability is the largest hindrance to participation of MADGs and to social inclusion.

The study has provided knowledge about important factors to consider to enhance an inclusive environment for persons with ID in dance activities. We need to have more mixed-ability dance groups, and make them more accessible for persons with ID. There is a need to develop more inclusive practices in dance in general. This is especially important as participation in MADGs for persons with ID could lead to enhanced quality of life and development of the Self . Both dance education programs, leisure dance activities and the professional field could incorporate more inclusive practices.

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