



Experiences of individuals with Down syndrome who participate in dance

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INTRODUCTION

Individuals with Down syndrome often experience low levels of physical activity, which can contribute to both cardiovascular disease and obesity.

It is also common for individuals with Down syndrome to experience decreased levels of social participation, which can sometimes lead to a lower quality of life.

Individuals with Down syndrome benefit greatly from opportunities to increase physical activity as well as social participation.

Dance is an activity that can achieve both of these goals. Dance has been explained as a fun and enjoyable physical activity that promotes social interaction and a sense of community.

Therefore, an adapted dance program specifically designed for individuals with Down syndrome may have many positive effects for participants.

OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived-experience of participation in an adapted dance program for individuals with Down syndrome.

Using Heideggerian interpretive phenomenology, this study explored the lived-experience of participating in an adapted dance program, as perceived by both individuals with Down syndrome and their parents.

The two specific aims of this study were to:

1. Illuminate the experience of an adapted dance program as perceived by dance participants.
2. Illuminate the experience of an adapted dance program as perceived by family members of participants.

Knowing this information will be helpful for dance educators, physical educators, and rehabilitation specialists who develop interventions for individuals with Down syndrome.



METHODS

Twenty dance participants, age 12-30, participated in a 6-week adapted dance program. Dance classes met twice per week for 1 ½ hours. There was 1 lead dance instructor, 4 assistant dance instructors, and 12 additional volunteers that assisted during each class.

Each week had a different theme and the dance classes corresponded to the weekly theme. The themes included Hip Hop, Fiesta, Country, Jungle, and Hawaiian. Dancers received props to be used for each theme.

Each dance class followed the same format to help dancers develop a familiar routine. The format was 1) review of dance class rules, 2) warm-up, 3) skill building across the floor, 4) break, 5) choreography, 6) break, 7) choreography review and/or dance activity stations, and 8) cool-down.

Each dancer had a personal folder where they recorded their mood state before and after class, and checked off each of the activities during the two breaks and at the end of each class.

The dancers learned a total of 8 dances, which they performed in a recital for family and friends. At the conclusion of the recital all dance participants received a certificate of completion.

Following the dance program the dancers participated in a one-on-one unstructured interview, and family members participated in an interview or a small focus group, to share the story of their experience throughout the dance program.

All interviews and focus groups were transcribed and de-identified. Each transcript was read to identify themes. The qualitative data analysis software, MAXQDA, aided in the identification of themes across all transcripts.



RESULTS

There were a total of 20 dance participants and 22 family members enrolled in this study.

Nineteen of the 20 dancers participated in the one-on-one interviews.

A total of seven small focus groups and two one-on-one interviews were held with family members.

Interpretive phenomenological analysis of interviews and focus groups revealed several positive outcomes related to participation in the dance program.

The following are examples of responses by dancers when asked how dancing makes them feel or what being able to dance means to them: *good, happy, exciting, have fun, joyful, feel better, I loved it, awesome, cool & fun, tired, interesting, great, I feel soul in me, I feel amazing, I can be myself.*

Five specific themes related to physical activity and social participation emerged:

- *Development of New Relationships*
- *Increased Physical Activity*
- *Increased Confidence, Independence, and Ownership*
- *High Motivation to attend Dance compared to other Physical Activities*
- *Increased Coordination/Rhythmic Acuity*

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY & SOCIAL PARTICIPATION THEMES

Theme	Corresponding Quotes
Development of New Relationships	<i>"Because it is fun...to meet new people." (dancer)</i> <i>"It was wonderful for her to be with other kids with Down syndrome. 'Cause she doesn't know that many kids with Down syndrome. And, I was excited for her to be able to start relationships..." (family member)</i>
Increased Physical Activity	<i>"I had a good time working out." (dancer)</i> <i>"...she was on the treadmill last night at 11:30 at night. On her own. So, I think she has confidence that she can be physically active." (family member)</i>
Increased Confidence, Independence, and Ownership	<i>"I think it gave me a chance to build my confidence back." (dancer)</i> <i>"It's probably one of the few times that I've actually seen Stephanie in front of a crowd and smiling." (family member)</i>
High Motivation to attend Dance compared to other Physical Activities	<i>"Yes, I practiced every day." (dancer)</i> <i>"But, this was the first physical activity that I didn't have to make her go to, toward the end. Even Special Olympics. She was always ready and always knew it was scheduled." (family member)</i>
Increased Coordination/Rhythmic Acuity	<i>"It is good eye coordination." (dancer)</i> <i>"Which I notice she's better in that. Some of the clapping...there are things that she could not do before." (family member)</i>



CONCLUSIONS

This finding of this research illuminate the experience of an adapted dance program for young people with Down syndrome.

The results of this study describe what it means to be involved in an adapted dance program.

These findings can influence future dance opportunities for individuals with Down syndrome. Specifically, dance instructors, physical educators, and rehabilitation specialists who develop adapted physical activity programs for young people with Down syndrome will benefit.

Further research is needed on similar programs being held in various locations in order to validate these results.

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