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# The Link Between American Deaf Culture and Dance: Assessing nonverbal communication and recognizing the value of deaf dancers.

Chloe Edelstein

Butler University, [cedelste@butler.edu](mailto:cedelste@butler.edu)

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Date

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**The Link Between American Deaf Culture and Dance:**

Assessing nonverbal communication and recognizing the value of deaf dancers.

A Thesis

Presented to the Department of Dance

Jordan College of Arts

and

The Honors Program

of

Butler University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Graduation Honors

Chloe Jessica Edelstein

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Introduction:

As a dancer, it is of the utmost importance to know the history behind the origins of movement with intent. In a collegiate setting, we are immersed in the history that has refined and adapted dance into the genres that it exists today. But, I have recognized a lack of study in one extraordinary group; dance performed by those who are deaf. The deaf population can be viewed as a minority group within our society. It is one that usually can be forgotten about, pushed aside or completely ruled out due to recent advancements in hearing technology. Although these advancements within the audiology field have been extensive, there are those who are still unable to hear fully or at all. Some even decline the possibility of experiencing sound because they have been nurtured and ingrained within their subcultural linguistic community, bound by their common language of American Sign Language (ASL). Near the end of the twentieth century, deaf artists sought to share the generations of history and aspects of their culture with the general public. “Deaf people explained themselves in terms of a complete wellness, whole bodies whole lives”...“Being Deaf was not a consequence of not hearing. Being Deaf was an existential experience, complete in itself and not a consequence of broken bodies but the outcome of biological destiny”<sup>1</sup>. The use of the arts, specifically dance, within Deaf culture is enticing as the dancers lack one critical necessity that most believe is imperative to dance, hearing. A deaf person’s ability to communicate nonverbally through the use of their body bears a connection to the art of dancing. “Dance is a

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<sup>1</sup> Padden, Carol, and Humphries Tom. *Deaf in America : Voices from a Culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1988. Print. 156

physical instrument or symbol for feeling and/or thought and is sometimes a more effective medium than verbal language in revealing needs and desires or masking true intent”<sup>2</sup>. Although ASL is accomplished with the hands and arms, while dancing utilizes the entire body, the ability to express emotion and meaning through movement links the two together. “Nonverbal behavior, including dance, is a part of the calculus of meaning. Communication is the mechanism providing the interface between the individual and group”<sup>3</sup>. The mutual use of nonverbal communication links Deaf culture with dance, but it is the implementation of dance within the deaf community that is so vital. The ability to experience organized movement with a group bonds those dancers together and creates a united community that is sought after by every individual. Dancing also provides an opportunity for the deaf dancer to prove that those who are wrongly considered to be disabled can still connect with audiences through emotionally established movement. Furthermore, it reveals the importance of dance as a means of bridging the gap between those who can hear and those who cannot as well as the overarching view that those who are disabled are not limited in other creative or intellectual fields.

*Nonverbal Communication:*

Nonverbal communication is used as a tool for humans to allow gesture to combine with certain verbal cues for the continuation of our species. This tool increased our ability to obtain knowledge from one another and adapted to evolve and thrive

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<sup>2</sup> Hanna, Judith Lynne. *To Dance Is Human : A Theory of Nonverbal Communication*. Austin: University of Texas, 1979. Print. 4

<sup>3</sup> Hanna. *To Dance Is Human: A Theory of Nonverbal Communication*. 5

throughout time. Yet, nonverbal communication is not simply gesture alone. It is the culmination of visual cues including body language, facial expressions, proximity and eye contact, one's actions while looking and listening, as well as nonverbal paralanguage that includes voice quality, pitch, rhythm and stress. Even the environment where the communication takes place comes into play as it determines any outside stressors that may affect the speakers. Two-thirds of all communication is nonverbal, therefore stressing the importance of what we do and how we speak to each other rather than what is actually said. When we communicate, our brains go through the process of encoding, or collecting, all of the information that is presented to us during a conversation or interaction and then decodes, or interprets what was seen and heard as the emotions or intentions behind that information.<sup>4</sup>

As we have evolved, our brains have transformed to become masters of communication. Specific regions of the brain are key to both verbal and nonverbal communication yet, it is important to note that these areas work together in relaying information to fully execute or interpret the idea or movement desired. The primary motor cortex is one of the principal brain areas involved in motor function. This region carries out goal directed movements received from other areas of the brain. These regions include the basal ganglia which assists in initiating the movement that was planned, and the cerebellum which receives information from both the sensory and motor cortexes about the required direction, duration and force of the movement based on the environment and positioning in space. These areas work in a loop relaying the

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<sup>4</sup> "How Does Our Brain Process Nonverbal Communication? | Autism Reading Room." How Does Our Brain Process Nonverbal Communication? | Autism Reading Room. Autism Reading Room <[http://readingroom.mindspec.org/?page\\_id=8901](http://readingroom.mindspec.org/?page_id=8901)>

information in order to perform both large actions such as a handshake or even a minute adjustment to the direction of one's gaze. Certain regions such as Broca's Area in the frontal lobe and Wernicke's Area in the temporal lobe process language and decode what is said or written into the meaning behind it.<sup>5</sup>

The limbic system of the brain contains the key elements of decoding nonverbal communication. Cues from the limbic system control instinct and mood which enables us to express with varying emotional depth and intention. Located deep within the limbic system, the amygdala presents the greatest importance in emotional interpretation and reaction, decision-making, and processing memories. The amygdala is the center of emotional intelligence, allowing us to be socially integrated with one another and make judgements based on facial expressions and spatial proximity. Working in tandem with the amygdala is the fusiform gyrus, located in the lower region of the temporal and occipital lobes. This gyrus plays a role in facial recognition as well as judgements in facial expression. These anatomical structures of the brain can differ in size and in the possibility of adaptation of their usage due to the individual. Any damage to one area may affect another's productivity or ability to send or receive needed information. When one lacks sensory information from the auditory system or verbal cues to distinguish or dictate, visual reception becomes much more vital to the process of communicating.<sup>6</sup>

Anatomical disorders are not the sole contributors to differences within communication. It is easy to recognize differences in verbal communication around the world due to differing languages, but there are also cross-cultural differences in

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<sup>5</sup> "Brain Anatomy, Anatomy of the Human Brain." Brain Anatomy, Anatomy of the Human Brain. Ed. Tonya Hines. Mayfield Brain and Spine, Feb. 2015. Web.

<sup>6</sup> Seikel, John A., Douglas W. King, and David G. Drumright. *Anatomy & Physiology for Speech, Language, and Hearing*. Australia: Thomson Delmar Learning, 2005. N. pag. Print.

nonverbal communication as well. Facial expressions are seen to be the most universal as happiness, sadness, fear, anger, and disgust are all expressed in similar ways in varying cultures. Yet, there are instances where expressions can have differing meanings. For example, in some Asian cultures it is common to smile when one is feeling sad because it is unacceptable to show distraught emotions even when the setting may be appropriate. In our society, direct eye contact is a sign of attention and interest while in other cultures, direct eye contact may be deemed aggressive or even sexual in intention if between a man and a woman. If a person avoids direct eye contact in our society, they can seem anxious, untrustworthy or disinterested but, in other cultures, it can be a sign of respect. Nonverbal communication is a language of it's own, consisting of cues made from grand gestures or small intricate movements. This language varies based on region and can adapt due to physical differences. Who we are speaking to determines how we speak to them and what we do while speaking, as it carries more weight than what is actually said. It is with this in mind that it is easy to see how ASL and dance have evolved to become their own distinct and complex forms of communication that are able to maintain emotional depth and intellectual content.<sup>7</sup>

*Nonverbal Communication Within the Deaf Community:*

Deafness can be perceived as a physical, neurological and psychological variance, which influences the behavior of deaf persons in a way that their life experiences differ

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<sup>7</sup> Ikeda, Joanne. "Cross-Cultural Differences in the Assessment and Communication of Uncertainty." *Current Anthropology* 20.4 (1979): 845-46. Cultural Differences In Nonverbal Communication. Vermont Department of Health. Web. <<https://cariera.uvt.ro/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Cultural-Differences-in-Nonverbal-Communication.pdf>>.

from those of the non-deaf population. It is easier to think of deafness as a common factor within a societal sect. Those who are deaf can choose to become enculturated into the deaf community and find themselves surrounded and supported by others who received an education, found employment and created their own identity through embracing their deafness. Identification with the deaf community can unite people who are otherwise complete strangers, creating group solidarity despite any other economic, societal, or religious division. “Most notably, deaf community members share frustrating experiences trying to communicate in the hearing world” (Vernon 8). American Sign Language is the sole identifying and bonding linguistic characteristic of the deaf community. Through signs and fingerspelling, one can gain information regarding a deaf person’s education in terms of the amount of words they know how to sign or the movement used to express it. These slight differences are similar to how hearing people rely on accents and syntax to determine where one is from and an estimate of their level of education. Deaf people begin using ASL when they enter the deaf community, whether that is at infancy, childhood, or young adulthood. It is very rare for a deaf child to be born into a deaf family, therefore the number of deaf children born into the deaf community is very small. Those who are not born into the deaf community gain acceptance as they are educated through the use of ASL interpreters and especially as they gain deaf peers to support and even further their knowledge and practice of sign language. <sup>8</sup>

“There are over 150 different types of genetic deafness, with heredity accounting for 40 to 60 percent of childhood deafness. In about half of these hereditary syndromes,

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<sup>8</sup> Vernon, McCay, and Jean F. Andrews. “Section 1: The Deaf Community- A Modern Day Picture.” *The Psychology of Deafness: Understanding Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing People*. New York: Longman, 1990. N. pag. Print.

there are other defects as well. Some involve the central nervous system and thus have direct psychological correlates”<sup>9</sup>. Genetic deafness can be a dominant, recessive, or sex-linked trait and can also occur from mutant genes or chromosomal defects. Many of these cases can be diagnosed before the birth of the child, in which case the family to go through counseling and other preparations beforehand. Deafness can also be medicine-induced, noise-induced, or can be caused by prenatal diseases such as Rubella and Meningitis. Each of these etiologies have psychological consequences in intelligence, educational achievement, communication skills, and psychological adjustment of the child and their family depending on any other physical or mental deficiencies that may be present in addition to being deaf.<sup>10</sup>

Sign language has developed over centuries and is used by both deaf and hearing people all across the globe. It is used for speech or language therapy in both classrooms and speech clinics. ASL is taught to all age groups during preschool, elementary and high school, as well as in university classrooms for teacher training programs concentrating in rehabilitation counseling. “Historical documents on the education of deaf children show that ASL is a hybrid of French Sign Language, which Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc brought to the United States from Paris in 1816”.<sup>11</sup> Being a linguistic system, sign language should not be depreciated to simply mime based gestures as it contains vocabulary and syntax, rather it is set up by the hands, arms, face and the upper body with a single sign representing a single word, or an entire phrase. “ASL makes use

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<sup>9</sup> Shaver, K., & Vernon, M. Genetics and Hearing Loss: An Overview for Professionals. *American Rehabilitation*, 1978. 4(2), pg. 6-10.

<sup>10</sup> Vernon. “Section 2: Genetics and Genetic Counseling and Section 3: Other Causes of Deafness” *The Psychology of Deafness: Understanding Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing People*.

<sup>11</sup> Scouten, E.L. *Turning Points in the Education of Deaf People* 1984. Danville, IL: The Interstate Printers & Publishers.

of space and movement of gestures. ASL uses non-manual cues such as facial expressions, head-tilts, body movement, and eye gazes to express grammatical relations”<sup>12</sup>. Just as any other language, signing is habitual movement that can increase in speed as one gains fluency. Varieties have arisen between different deaf universities as well as between households that alter signs for commonly used words. To those who are new to ASL, some signs may seem blurred or unable to interpret due to the speed of the signer. But, with continued practice it becomes easier to differentiate between signs. Since it is a body language, feelings and meanings behind words are expressed clearly and vividly, with greater facial expressivity than that of the spoken word.

Although the advantages of ASL are extensive and recognized by today’s education system, this belief was not always the case. At the start of the Twentieth Century, linguists and psychologists began to stress the importance of exclusively using speech in a deaf person’s education. This movement believed that children should focus on the “articulation” or “oral” method. It was believed that “manual communication was harmful to the speech, lipreading, language, and thinking of deaf people”.<sup>13</sup> Deaf teachers were forbidden from working in deaf schools and children were punished if caught signing during this speech-only era. Studies now show that students perform exceptionally well when immersed in a signing education system as it facilitates language acquisition and development better than the oral-only method. As more information is gathered about the validity and significance in the success of a deaf person’s language

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<sup>12</sup> Vernon. *The Psychology of Deafness: Understanding Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing People*. pg. 75.

<sup>13</sup> Vernon. *The Psychology of Deafness: Understanding Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing People*. pg. 77.

processing tools when using ASL, linguists and academics alike will work together to make ASL more accessible to teachers working with deaf students.<sup>14</sup>

The deaf community faces many barriers every day, from physical obstacles, to systematic barriers and even institutionalized prejudices. To those who have disabilities, the most difficult barrier to overcome is often the stigma held against them by those without disabilities. Society places limitations on those with disabilities without the full knowledge of what they can or cannot do. Deaf people for the most part have always lived within the world of others. Their world without sound is not comprehensible to those who can hear, as sound is so often taken for granted or highly valued as a societal norm.<sup>15</sup> Individual characteristics and capabilities are often ignored while negative characteristics are associated. Yet, “the deaf see little difference between themselves and those who control the larger social world, the hearing”.<sup>16</sup> They are constantly fighting to reconcile two distinct ideologies in their lives; that signed language is the essence of how they live and how they are able to create their own identity yet, it is rejected by the majority of society.<sup>17</sup> Through stylized superficial interactions, these negative stereotypes will continue. It is only through the acceptance of others in and outside our own societal sects that we will be able to move past the stigmatism and institutionalized prejudices that surround us.

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<sup>14</sup> Tabak, John. Section One: Methodical Signs and the Roots of American Sign Language. *Significant Gestures : A History of American Sign Language*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2006. Print.

<sup>15</sup> Jaeger, Paul T., and Cynthia Ann Bowman. "Introduction." *Understanding Disability: Inclusion, Access, Diversity, and Civil Rights*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005. N. pag. Print.

<sup>16</sup> Higgins, Paul C. *Outsiders in a Hearing World: A Sociology of Deafness*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1980. pg. 133. Print.

<sup>17</sup> Padden. *Deaf in America : Voices from a Culture*.

*Nonverbal Communication Within Dance:*

Dance can be described as movement with physical or emotional intent that signifies something other than the movement itself. It is unique to specific cultures and is acknowledged as dance by those observing the movement. It can be presentational or intimate within nature, with the desire to be produced on stage or for one's own satisfaction. The art of dance is among the oldest of the arts, taking inspiration from the forces of nature; before events such as a hunt or a battle; or as a spiritual aide to please deities in order to bring prosperity to a group of people and future. Since dance originated with ritualistic intent, every aspect was important and meaningful to achieve a specific result. Participating or watching a dance also provides a means of social interaction or entertainment that bonds the group together and serves a common goal.<sup>18</sup>

In its earliest forms, dance was only used during ceremonies, with the movement being the direct communication line between a tribe and their gods. As nomadic tribal societies began to settle due to the formation of agricultural practices, forms and purposes of dance were able to expand. In Egypt, the flooding of the Nile River impacted the entirety of their society. The flooding and receding of the waters brought the fertile soil that supplied their expansive empire. The Egyptian's varying dance forms were based off their duty to honor a vast amount of deities. Celebrations of prosperity, fertility, mourning, battle and even mummification were causes for dance as an ethereal way to communicate with the gods.<sup>19</sup> Dance provided a means for civilizations to be bonded by

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<sup>18</sup> Homans, Jennifer. *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet*. New York: Random House, 2010. Print.

<sup>19</sup> Anderson, Jack. *Ballet & Modern Dance: A Concise History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Book, 1986. Print.

more than a common belief in a certain god; worshipping in unison through the active use of the body and spirit strengthened the community and connected the people.

As it continued to evolve, dance was used to support entire festivals worshipping different deities. These festivals were mainly for entertainment and promoted the emergence of improvisation, the improvement of certain movements, and the diaspora of dances between different people. These festivals also ultimately created the original tragic format by expressing a story about a single god. With the creation of this tragic plot came about a new intention for dance: catharsis. The dancer was now able to purge the audience of any imbalance by relieving negative influences or shedding light onto the core of human nature.<sup>20</sup>

Organized movement continued to gain popularity as folk dances evolved to focus on the importance of technical execution. Dancers worked to perfect their technique to perform their best, and ultimately the possibility of dancing as a profession arose. Dancers travelled across Europe in search of work and acceptance from different religious institutions. These traveling performers, sometimes noted as troubadours, became responsible for transforming simple peasant dances into those worthy of the royal courts. In addition, these “dancing masters” would educate their students on other proper behaviors including body language in social settings, courting etiquette, and relationship manners. These practices of nonverbal communication were required by high court society and were imperative to maintaining or gaining social status. The court dances themselves eventually developed into ballet technique, with a focus on line, turnout, gesture, and monarchical power. As the Renaissance Era began, audiences and performers

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<sup>20</sup> Nadel, Myron Howard., and Marc Strauss. *The Dance Experience: Insights into History, Culture, and Creativity*. Hightstown, NJ: Princeton Book, 2003. Print.

alike desired a more humanistic approach to visual art; man replaced religion as the focal point of art. This shift in ideology, paired with political and financial backing progressed dance through the creation of schools and performing facilities. Ballet continued to evolve across Europe as different techniques emerged and were codified.<sup>21</sup>

Each great classical ballet tells a unique story filled with humanistic ideals, providing audience members a means to exchange their daily lives for an ethereal experience. Death, betrayal, ecstasy, and unobtainable love were some of the few subjects touched upon. The success of these ballets was dependent upon strong character development that required extensive rehearsal and training in nonverbal expression to make that character come to life.

Eventually, these romantic stories of love and loss grew old, as choreographers began finding inspiration in relatable material that could have a more meaningful impact than simply escapism. Artists such as Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman looked for new reasons to dance. By focusing on the past ritualistic necessities of movement, their dances became more grounded and connected to nature and a spiritual mind. The complexes of human frailty, morality, mortality, myth and religion were all uncovered as the choreographers realized that the expression of true emotion generated a greater impact. In particular, Charles Weidman focused his efforts on kinetic pantomime, or gesture based choreography. He worked at finding what energies were needed to portray a wide range of people.<sup>22</sup> This ability to reconnect with the past reverted dance back to its original purpose as a necessary human action that frees

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<sup>21</sup> Cass, Joan. "Chapter 5: Folk Dance Development in Medieval Europe and Today." *Dancing through History*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993. N. pag. Print.

<sup>22</sup> Homans. *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet*.

the mind and spirit. Inspiration for these dances were found in nature or through discovering one's own emotions. This connection to our inner emotions provides an insight to why dance has always been a basic human need and impulse. The impulse to move as a community and share a uniquely human connection with one another for a greater reason proves dance's ability to go beyond the rational and into the subconscious level of spiritual interaction and enlivenment.

*The Benefits of Implementing Dance in the Deaf Community:*

The endeavor to improve the education of deaf children began centuries ago as the first public school designed for deaf students, the Abbé de l'Épée, was established in Paris. Since then, deaf schools and deaf post-graduate programs exist worldwide. These programs continue to expand as a congregation of organizations and conferences meet annually to discuss and demand further improvements that will allow more deaf students to become successful in their academic endeavors. Within recent years, the scope of deaf education has broadened to not only include processing written and spoken language to interact with the world around them, but to improve a deaf person's quality of life and empower them to expand their goals. By increasing educational opportunities, students can be exposed to new fields of employment and become active participants within their communities. This ultimately leads to the greater acceptance of deaf and hard of hearing people within the larger outer community. This acceptance is also generated through the

media as sign language gains greater visibility and promotes deaf awareness and support.<sup>23</sup>

When looking at education, it is important to note that it includes all of the implicit and explicit teaching and learning that goes on throughout a child's life. "Total development is the fundamental purpose of the education of children. All attempts at such education should take into account a combination of physical, social, emotional, and intellectual aspects of human behavior".<sup>24</sup> Implementing dance within a child's education has been known to further their intellectual development, social skills, and creative abilities. Promoting dance at a young age can encourage children to see its importance and relevance to our individual cultures and continues its growth across generations. Deaf culture generated visibility as artists from their community began to produce work and teach younger generations the importance of self-expression and the preservation of their community through creative art. The work produced by deaf artists not only inspires and entertains others, but it passes the values and traditions of the deaf community along to the next generation of deaf children. It is a preservation effort which emphasizes the positive aspects of the deaf community including group solidarity, the importance of sign language, and the continued need for human acceptance and respect.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Power, Desmond J., and Greg Leigh. *Educating Deaf Students: Global Perspectives*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet UP, 2004. Print.

<sup>24</sup> Humphrey, James H. *Child Development and Learning through Dance*. New York: AMS, 1987. pg. 14. Print.

<sup>25</sup> Vernon. *The Psychology of Deafness: Understanding Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing People*.

“The deaf community has shown repeated effort in the last fifteen to twenty years in establishing national, regional, and local programs to develop the skills of deaf artists and provide them with a forum to display their work. These programs disseminate information about the deaf culture or heritage and demonstrate artistic uses of sign language, especially in theatre, dance, and poetry” ...“While some of these organizations have ceased because of decreased federal funding, they have laid the groundwork for the future and undoubtedly fostered the appreciation of cultural events within the deaf community”.<sup>26</sup>

Despite this pushback caused by a lack of funding, the deaf community continues to produce work for television and movies, stage productions, and art exhibits; ultimately increasing the visibility of the community itself. The benefits to a younger generation are incomparable as cooperation and social stimulation for the benefit of the group extends the goals and values stressed in the deaf community into another, the arts community. The blending of these two cultures, which require interpersonal development and social support, provides a rewarding bond between people and the creation of a wholly accepting system. “A child, in and as a result of belonging to a group, develops differently than he or she can as an individual alone. Many dance activities provide an outstanding opportunity for children to engage actively in a variety of group experiences”.<sup>27</sup>

Children of all abilities can be given an equal opportunity in dance participation as it builds awareness of their specific abilities through opportunities to express themselves and break out of their shells. Through dancing, an individual can be considered as a whole body rather than a sum of their parts. Each student will grow at their own pace and over time, their ability to appreciate varying strengths between their

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<sup>26</sup> Vernon. *The Psychology of Deafness: Understanding Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing People*. pg. 16

<sup>27</sup> Humphrey. *Child Development and Learning through Dance*. pg. 23.

classmates will increase. “The teacher should set the example for children to learn to be respectful of physical differences by helping them make use of their particular body type in the most advantageous way”.<sup>28</sup> Through dance, a child can find personal success and develop to be socially accepting as they learn that each individual has physical and artistic differences that require responsibility and trust to support.

Dance also aids students in achieving self-confidence and a satisfactory self-concept. “The opportunity for creative experience inherent in dance affords the child an excellent opportunity for self-realization through physical expression”.<sup>29</sup> They are taught the intricacies of body language and are able to achieve both body awareness and physical control through this art form. Dancing also releases aggression and pent up emotions in a socially acceptable manner. The Indianapolis School for the Deaf has implemented a creative movement class called Vibrations, which allows the students to express themselves through dance and performance. In an assignment they were given, students had to change the lyrics of a song to tell their own story of overcoming deaf oppression to find self worth. They then performed this to the class and were provided feedback on their movement and word choice. Through the use of dance, these students were able to both develop and express their aspirations, fears and sense of personal values.

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<sup>28</sup> Humphrey. *Child Development and Learning through Dance*. pg. 19.

<sup>29</sup> Humphrey. *Child Development and Learning through Dance*. pg. 26.

*The Emergence of Deaf Dancers:*

The dance instruction at the Indianapolis School for the Deaf is based on the needs of the students in the class. The teenagers in the class are at the cusp of adulthood and in search of their own personal identity. Therefore, their activities emphasized self-confidence in personal technique and choreography, and an awareness in the individual's personal strengths despite the hardships they had to overcome. Although these middle school and high school aged children were focused on their studies, Vibrations allowed them to perform at different locations around the country and come into contact with other deaf dancers who inspired them further. Deaf dancers require many hours of practice in order to develop an inner sense of timing for a specific dance. Although some dancers may pick up residual cues from the music playing, most do not, especially when first learning a piece. Counting visually can help establish a basic rhythm pattern that can be made more complex over time. Visual cues can also assist in keeping time with a large group by watching a fellow dancer who can hear and follow the movement. As training continues, some dancers find that they wish to further pursue movement exploration. This can be achieved at certain deaf universities as well as within professional dance companies.

Located in Washington D.C., Gallaudet University is the most well known institution for higher education of deaf and hard of hearing students. Here, they have a wide range of undergraduate and graduate programs including Biology, Education, Pre-Law, Pre-Medicine, Deaf Studies, and Theatre Arts. Their Theatre Arts students master acting, directing, interpretation, design and construction skills, preparing them for

employment in any professional theatre around the world. Gallaudet also sponsors the Gallaudet Dance Company where students are able to obtain a Minor in Dance by becoming company members. "Each dancer's background is different-both in terms of hearing level preferred communication mode, secondary school education, and current major field of study as a University student".<sup>30</sup> The company has performed around the globe and presents work that utilize both ASL and fingerspelling within their movement choices as well as pieces that do not.

Within the Rochester Institute of Technology is the National Technical Institute for the Deaf. Founded in 1968, the school was able to rise to meet the standards set before them by Gallaudet. "More than 400 deaf students who are enrolled in the other six colleges of RIT receive support services through NTID. Thus, RIT/NTID and its faculty have a wealth of experience and expertise in teaching and providing tutoring, mentoring, and interpreting for students who are deaf".<sup>31</sup> In the addition to providing a deaf workforce within the economic and technological sectors, NTID provides a Performance Art Certificate Program in which students take a range of dance technique classes including Jazz, Modern and Ballet as well as classes in Costume and Lighting Design, Acting and Deaf Theatre History. NTID is equipped with two performance halls and a mixed ability dance company, but their best asset is the support provided by RIT. The larger university recognizes that the creative prospects developed within these classes aid in the furthering of technology that is focused on in the other colleges.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Gallaudet Dance Company." *Gallaudet University*. Gallaudet University, 2016. Web. 07 Mar. 2016. <<http://www.gallaudet.edu/act/gallaudet-dance-company.html>>

<sup>31</sup> Power. *Educating Deaf Students: Global Perspectives*. pg. 185

<sup>32</sup> "Classes." *NTID Performing Arts*. N.p., 30 Jan. 2012. Web. <<https://www.ntid.rit.edu/theatre/classes>>

Out of the hundreds of deaf dance companies located world wide, The Wild Zappers based in Prince George's County Maryland, is the most well known. Founded in 1989 by Irvine Stewart and Fred Beam, the company was sponsored by the organization Invisible Hands Inc., to promote deaf culture awareness. Other organizations such as the National Deaf Dance Theatre were promoted by Invisible Hands to support deaf culture through the performance art and provide the proper training to employ deaf people in the arts field. These dancers fuse ASL with jazz, funk, and hip hop to expose their audience members to the visual aspect of deaf culture through entertainment in a professional performance setting. The group has performed internationally and often hires dancers from either Gallaudet or NTID to perform or assist with the technical aspects of their performances.<sup>33</sup>

Professional dance companies that are comprised of mixed ability dancers have continued to increase in number over the past few decades. The dancers may have different physical or mental disabilities and illnesses that restrict their movement in certain ways. Yet, through the dancer's exploration of movement options, their audiences are able to see movement that otherwise would have never been created. The opportunity for people with and without disabilities to dance together creates a stronger inclusive community that provides an opportunity for those with different backgrounds to integrate and dance with one another. Mixed ability companies strive to decrease prejudice and misconceptions about disability and diversity in the field of dance and ultimately, within the greater society. Companies such as AXIS Dance Company, Dancing Wheels, and the Heidi Latsky Company bring in new choreographers to create virtuosic dances that

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<sup>33</sup> "Wild Zappers." *Invisible Hands International Wild Zappers Comments*. Invisible Hands International, n.d. Web. <<http://invisiblehands.com/groups/wild-zappers>>.

express pure human emotion and muscular power. Dance Ability International, based in Eugene Oregon, sponsors hundreds of mixed ability companies such as these; they also sponsor educational programs around the globe. In addition, they have presented mixed ability dance festivals and created a Dance Ability Teacher Certification program that will further develop inclusive dance education. It is their hope that this inclusive work will be able to change preconceived prejudices toward disabilities by increasing the visibility of the disabled community and implementing physically integrated dance to focus on the abilities of the individual rather than the disabilities of the few.<sup>34</sup>

*Butler University's Senior Production Showcase:*

In an attempt to shed light on the prejudices disabled people face everyday, I choreographed a piece that was presented as part of the Butler University Senior Production Showcase on the third and fourth of March 2016. The piece, entitled *disABILITY*, tells the story of a disabled child. The three separate sections displayed how she was viewed and treated in different settings of society. The first section, *Our Unaccepting World*, depicted society as it is presently. The child and her family were secluded; the general population seeing them as 'the other' whose differences were not valued. Her mother and father protected the young girl as she struggled to lead a normal life despite deaf oppression and forced isolation. The second section, *A Family Affair*, looks into the relationship of the family unit supporting the child. Here, her future is open and full of opportunities as the love and reassurance provided to her sparked her belief

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<sup>34</sup> "History." *DanceAbility International*. DanceAbility International, n.d. <<http://www.danceability.com/history.php>>.

that she could overcome the prejudices and struggles from deaf oppression and become a vital member of the society that chastised her. The final section, *Finding Morality*, looked ahead into the future of the deaf community and what our society could evolve into if we changed our perceptions of disability. This newfound moral obligation begins with one person and eventually catches on to include all of society as clarity is found and an accepting mentality becomes the norm.

I began this choreographic process by educating the group of eight dancers on the different aspects of deaf culture and the prominent struggles of being deaf in America. My rehearsal process mimicked that of deaf dancers as I rehearsed in silence and counted out the distinct rhythm pattern by clapping. At first, the dancers had a difficult time keeping rhythm with one another while breaking out of an even tempo. This approach created a monotonous timing as there was no musical beat pushing them to find dynamics within their movement. Yet, with rehearsal and a focus on picking up visual cues from the other dancers, they were able to push themselves to create dynamic movement, which made the piece more physically satisfying to them as well.

It was not until the piece was fully choreographed that I added a musical soundscape. The soundscape included a range of white noise found in commonplace areas. These are sounds that we normally tune out as they are not providing sufficient information and contribute to what some may call “noise pollution”. Yet, these are sounds that those who are deaf will never hear, and although they are a disturbance to some, they must be recognized as an asset rather than a hindrance. Another section of my soundscape included the frequency range of human hearing played at a very high volume. The range of hearing shortens as we grow older, therefore as it began playing, my hopes

were that different people in the audience would be able to hear the tone for different lengths of time depending upon their age. The frequency was so loud that it vibrated the seats and made people uncomfortable as it reached the highest tones. After the performance, I spoke with audience members and found that this effect was positive as it made people aware that although the sounds they hear can be unpleasant, they wondered if it would be better to not have the ability to hear them at all. Finally, my soundscape included a section of whale songs that began in *A Family Affair* as the parents danced with their disabled child. Although whale songs are obscure and foreign to our ears, the whales that sing them have a community filled with complex social relations and a language unique to their species that provides them with a direct form of communication. These songs are relatable to ASL as they are incomprehensible to most, but are beautiful to listen to and have meaning to those who understand them.

The process of choreographing this piece was quite difficult, as I had never created a work in silence before. Normally, part of the inspiration and impetus for my movement comes from melodic music, and without that, I felt at a loss. Yet, as I continued to work, I was able to find inspiration for rhythm through different drumming patterns and pieces created for deaf dancers by Axis Dance Company and the Heidi Latsky Dance Group. The movement I created was simple and pedestrian while also rich with emotion as I felt this would carry the most weight and meaning for my dancers and the audience. The lack of virtuosity made the dancers seem more relatable to some of the audience members as they told me they could picture themselves becoming a part of the observing society who in the end, could choose to become a part of the higher moral standard.

My hope with this piece is that audiences would be exposed to some of the prejudices that surround the deaf community and even realize some of their own discomforts toward the population as well. By being exposed to uncomfortable sounds while observing a piece that discusses the power of stereotypes and the influence one person can have, the audience can take away a new belief that acceptance and support for others is necessary in our global community.

Conclusion:

Nonverbal communication is seen to be a link between the deaf community and the dance community. Both communicate through the movement of the body in space and time and that movement can be saturated with emotional intent and specific intellectual information. However, the difference between dance and ASL are plain to see. American Sign Language is just that, a language. It serves its purpose to directly communicate human emotions and ideas, yet does nothing to add to the out of body bonding experience found in the possibilities of dance. Dancing enlivens the soul and creates personal relations of body communication and connection that otherwise could not be reached. Although the deaf community is inclusive to deaf persons of all backgrounds, it is still secluded from the rest of society. This isolation can be staggering, but through the use of dance, the minority and majority communities can be intertwined and provide support for one another; ultimately furthering the bonding desires of the deaf community. Implementing dance can provide a way for those with mixed abilities to learn about the history and difficulties surrounding those who are deaf. It is my hope that our segregated society filled with predetermined prejudices can end with the continued support for dance

within a disabled child's education. By including the arts at a young age, the deaf culture can continue to expand into the outer community and intertwine with other art forms as well. The inclusivity of dance can create new bridges between those who are disabled and those who are not and provides a future for an accepting society that sees individuals as entire whole, healthy beings that can connect with others through the use of emotionally established movement.

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