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Dancing to a Different Beat: Supporting Neuroinclusivity in Irish Dance Education

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ABSTRACT

Despite widespread advocacy for dance inclusivity, research on teacher perspectives in formalized dance settings is limited. This study explored Irish dancing (ID) teachers' knowledge, experiences, and attitudes regarding neuroinclusivity in mainstream classes.

A convergent mixed-methods design utilized an online questionnaire (n=111) and focus groups/interviews (n=14) with international ID teachers. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, and qualitative data via reflexive thematic analysis.

Findings indicate that teachers strongly favor inclusive environments, noting benefits for all dancers. However, they identified significant environmental and personal barriers in class and competition ("*feis*") settings. Teachers intuitively employ strategies which embody principles of Universal Design for Learning, and value parental communication. Peers are key facilitators in creating inclusive ID environments. However, many teachers feel overwhelmed and underprepared to confidently support all neurodivergent students.

Findings highlight a gap between positive attitudes and practical readiness, suggesting a need for formal training and resources to support neurodivergent dancers in ID. ID governing bodies must lead on the development of appropriate and accessible resources, informed by teacher, dancer and parent perspectives, particularly those of the neurodivergent community.

INTRODUCTION

Dancing is amongst the most popular leisure activities for young people and adults globally (Hulteen et al. 2017). It can bestow a host of biopsychosocial health benefits, building and supporting holistic wellness across the lifespan (Tao et al. 2022; Clifford et al. 2023). Dance has frequently been recognized as a space for inclusion, expression and creativity, inviting engagement from diverse communities (Reinders, Bryden, and Fletcher 2019; Yi and Bi 2023). This may include individuals with physical limitations (Berthiaume et al. 2024), socioeconomically underserved and culturally marginalized groups (Pritchard, Darko, and Stevenson 2024) and various patient cohorts such as people with Parkinson's Disease (Rooprai et al. 2025) and Alzheimer's (Wu et al. 2022). Another marginalized group who can benefit from dance practice is the neurodivergent community (DeJesus et al. 2020).

Neurodivergent people are individuals "whose selective neurocognitive functions/ neurodevelopmental differences fall outside prevalent societal norms" (Shah et al. 2022). The term neurodivergent is not a diagnostic category, and there is no formal taxonomy that defines it. People who are commonly recognized as neurodivergent include those with diagnoses of autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia and dyspraxia (also known as developmental coordination disorder (DCD). The impact of neurodivergence varies greatly, and may include a host of sensory, motor and social differences (Apperly et al. 2024).

Inclusivity in various dance settings has long been advocated (Purcell Cone 2015). "Dance for All" is the motto of the American National Dance Society, who espouse quality and inclusive dance performance, dance education, physical literacy, and engagement via a host of educational and cultural platforms (Kane 2022). There is an emerging body of research that has explored the benefits of dance for neurodivergent individuals. A 2020 systematic review by Dejesus and colleagues reported positive effects of dance on social reciprocity and communication in autistic people. Specifically,

benefits including emotional expression, body awareness, and psychological wellbeing were noted. Similarly, enhanced social responsiveness and communication were observed in a cohort of children with autism who engaged in an 11-month dance-movement program (Ma and Wang 2025). Although the evidence base is less voluminous in other conditions, dance has also been found to be a positive and engaging activity for individuals with dyslexia (Baranovich 2011), ADHD (Levin 2018), and dyspraxia (Díaz-Pérez, Vicente-Nicolás, and Valero-García 2020).

It is noteworthy that many of these studies adopt a dance-movement therapeutic approach, and do not explore the experience of neurodivergent individuals in "mainstream" dance settings such as formalized dance class or competition. This is an important distinction as dance-movement interventions are typically holistic strategies that address therapeutic or inclusivity aims via the medium of dance. In comparison, mainstream dance classes frequently focus on acquiring dance skills, improving technical dance ability, and/or competitive success, in addition to serving as a recreational outlet.

Despite growing research on dance-movement therapy for neurodivergent individuals, little is known about how neurodivergent dancers are supported within mainstream dance environments. Even less research has examined the perspectives of dance teachers in highly structured and competitive genres such as Irish dancing (ID). ID is a traditional dance form that has spread far beyond Ireland and the Irish diaspora over the last few decades, with ID schools and academies in dozens of countries internationally (Foley 2001). It is known for its characteristic erect, unmoving position of the torso, with the hands held firmly by the sides of the body. ID features both "light" and "heavy" dancing, with the former performed in supple leather pumps, and featuring elegant leaps, kicks, and tricks performed on the tops of the toes. Heavy dancing uses shoes with fiberglass tips and heels, and is characterized by rhythmic, percussive sounds, and powerful syncopation (Póvoa et al. 2023). Competition is the hallmark of Irish dancing, culminating in the annual World ID championships

(Cahalan, Bargary, and O'Sullivan 2018). Strict regulations regarding music speed and length, as well as costuming apply. Leading up to this event, smaller competitions or *"feiseanna*" take place locally and regionally year-round, scaffolded by endless hours of practice in dance halls and studios.

ID is a highly structured dance form which can present unique pedagogical challenges when supporting diverse learners. By its very nature, ID locations are typically frenetic, chaotic places, with a cacophony of music, dance, color and movement. Such settings may present challenges to neurodivergent students and the teachers who are instructing them (Butcher and Lane 2025). Anecdotal reports have further highlighted the challenges of both ID footwear and costuming (including hair pieces and wigs, accessories and certain fabrics), for people with heightened tactile sensitivity. The strictly regulated competition setting with busy halls, loud music, imposing adjudication panels, and a host of other challenges are also likely to be testing places for some neurodivergent individuals. Taken together, the ID environment may be a difficult place for neurodivergent pupils, which may lead to distress, frustration, and ultimately disengagement and exclusion. There is an absence of research exploring the experience of any stakeholder (dancer, teacher, and parent) regarding this topic in ID. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore ID teachers' knowledge, experiences and attitudes regarding the inclusion of neurodivergent dancers in mainstream ID classes and competition.

METHODS

Study design: A convergent mixed-methods design was adopted combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide both breadth and depth of understanding. A structured questionnaire was developed to generate quantitative data on teachers' backgrounds, experiences, and perceptions, offering a broad overview of perspectives from across the sample. To complement this, focus groups and semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed using a qualitative descriptive approach (Akyıldız and Ahmed 2021), which is particularly suited to capturing participants'

161 experiences in their own words and presenting findings in a manner that remains close to the data.
162 The qualitative element of the study was conducted in line with the Standards for Reporting
163 Qualitative Research (SRQR) (O'Brien et al. 2014) framework. The study design was informed by broad
164 team expertise in neurodivergence, inclusion, and education (A1, A3, A4), as well as one
165 neurodivergent researcher with expertise in neurodiversity (representation) in the arts and education
166 (A5). Additionally, one additional team member has an extensive ID background (A6). Researchers
167 engaged in reflexive discussions throughout the analysis process to consider how their professional
168 backgrounds might influence interpretation of the data.
169
170 Questionnaire: The questionnaire was developed by drawing on pre-existing instruments in inclusivity
171 and education. These included the Teachers' Attitude Toward Inclusion Scale (Monsen, Ewing, and
172 Boyle 2015), Multidimensional Attitudes towards Inclusive Education Scale (MATIES) (Sharma, Forlin,
173 and Loreman 2008), and the Sentiments, Attitudes, and Concerns about Inclusive Education Revised
174 Scale (SACIE-R) (Forlin et al. 2011). The questionnaire was piloted with two ID teachers, one of whom
175 also works as a support teacher for autistic children in a mainstream primary school. Minor
176 amendments were made to the questionnaire based on feedback from these teachers.
177
178 Participants were asked to provide basic demographic data related to gender, nationality, ethnicity,
179 educational attainment, and years of ID teaching experience. They were also asked about their
180 knowledge and prior expertise of neurodiversity and inclusion. Answer options were proposed in
181 drop-down form, with "other" option available where required. Participants were then presented
182 with a bank of 25 statements and invited to select their level of agreement with each using a 5-point
183 Likert scale ranging from "Strongly agree" to "Strongly Disagree". The domains explored included:
184 attitudes toward inclusion; strategies and support for ID teachers; inclusive pedagogical strategies to
185 support neurodiversity in ID; and teacher confidence and self-efficacy. At the end of the questionnaire,
186 participants were also presented with an option to participate in subsequent focus groups/semi-

structured interviews to further explore core themes. No additional recruitment for focus groups/semi-structured interviews was conducted.

Questionnaires were disseminated online, and data was collected via the Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Provo, UT) cloud-based Experience Management (XM) platform. Focus groups/interviews were held online via Microsoft Teams (version 1808) and conducted by team members A1, A2 and A6 following an a priori bank of questions that closed mirrored the areas explored in the questionnaire, and which were designed to elicit more extensive and detailed information related to the topic.

Participants: Qualified current and/or former ID teachers, aged 18 years or older were eligible to participate. Prior experience of interactions with neurodivergent individuals either within or outside of a dance setting was not required. Participants were recruited internationally via the contacts of author RC, who is well known in the ID community. This was achieved by posting project details on numerous social media sites and via contacts with ID governing bodies and professional contacts of researcher RC. Snowball recruitment was employed, and teachers who were both neurotypical and neurodivergent were encouraged to participate. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the faculty research ethics committee of the lead author's university. All participants provided online informed consent.

Analysis

A simple descriptive analysis was used to evaluate participant responses to the quantitative questionnaire data. Focus group/interview data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019). Familiarization, engagement and reflection with the transcribed raw data was followed by a recursive, reflexive coding process as shared meaning was identified and initial themes generated across the data. As analysis progressed different interpretations of the data were collaboratively and reflexively discussed by two authors (MO'D, AC)

to achieve richer interpretations of meaning as codes and themes developed enhancing trustworthiness and credibility of data analysis. Collaborative input from the broader team led to the development of the final themes and subthemes as outlined below (Table 3).

RESULTS

Questionnaire: In all, 111 complete questionnaires were collected in August/September 2025 and included in the analysis. Participants included 99 (89.2%) females, eleven males (9.9%), and one non-binary individual (0.9%) with a mean (standard deviation (SD)) age of 44.6 (11.9) years. Participants represented nine nationalities, primarily from the United States (44.6%), Ireland (25.9%), and Australia (11.6%). The cohort was overwhelmingly White (99.1%) and most participants (82.9%) had achieved a third level qualification. A mean (SD) teaching experience of 21.1 (11.7) years was reported. Twenty-nine participants (25.8%) identified as neurodivergent. When asked about their knowledge of neurodiversity, 13 (11.7%) participants stated they were not knowledgeable; 63 (56.8%) felt somewhat knowledgeable; and 35 (31.5%) said they were very knowledgeable on the topic. When asked about their knowledge of inclusivity, the number of participants who were not, somewhat, and very knowledgeable on the topic was six (5.4%), 57 (51.3%), and 48 (43.2%) respectively. Demographic details for both the questionnaire and focus group/semi-structured interview participants are provided in Table 1.

232

Gender n (%)		Country of origin n (%)		Ethnicity n (%)		Highest educational achievement n (%)		Neuro-divergence status n (%)		Countries where participants teach ID* n (%)	
Questionnaire	**Focus Group**	**Questionnaire**	**Focus Group**	**Questionnaire**	**Focus Group**	**Questionnaire**	**Focus Group**	**Questionnaire**	**Focus Group**	**Questionnaire**	**Focus Group**
Female: 99 (89.2)	Female: 12 (85.7)	United States: 50 (45.0)	United States: 7 (50.0)	White 110 (99.1)	White 14 (100)	Bachelor's degree: 51 (45.9)	Bachelor's degree: 7 (50.0)	No: 73 (65.8)	No: 8 (57.1)	United States: N=60	United States: N=8
Male: 11 (9.9)	Male: 2 (14.3)	Ireland: 29 (26.1)	Ireland: 2 (14.3)	Prefer not to say: 1 (0.9)		Master's degree: 26 (23.4)	Master's degree: 4 (28.6)	Yes: 29 (26.1)	Yes: 5 (35.7)	Ireland N=28	Ireland N=3
Non-binary: 1 (0.9)		Australia: 13 (11.7)	Australia: 3 (21.4)			Doctorate or higher: 8 (7.2)		Unsure: 8 (7.2)	Unsure: 1 (7.1)	Australia: N=18	Australia: N=3
		United Kingdom: 6 (5.4)	United Kingdom: 1 (7.1)			Associate degree: 7 (6.3)		Prefer not to say: 1 (0.9)		United Kingdom: N=14	United Kingdom: N=1
		Canada: 5(4.5)	Canada: 1 (7.1)			Some college (no degree): 7 (6.3).	Some college (no degree): 1 (7.1)			Canada: N=9	Canada: N=1
		New Zealand: 4 (3.6)				Upper secondary: 4 (3.6)	Upper secondary: 1 (7.1)			New Zealand: N=7	
		South Africa: 2 (1.8)				Post-secondary non-tertiary:	Post-secondary non-tertiary:			Germany: N=5	

						4 (3.6)	1 (7.1)				
		Italy: 1(0.9)				Prefer not to say: 3 (2.7)				United Arab Emirates: N=3	United Arab Emirates: N=1
						Lower secondary: 1 (0.9)				Switzerland: N=3	Switzerland: N=1
										Japan, Mexico, Netherlands, Ukraine, Italy: N=2 (in each country). **	Chile, Qatar, Russia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Granda, Oman: N=1 (in each country).

*Many participants may teach in more than one country

** Additionally, one participant teaches in Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Chile, China, Egypt, Grenada, Hungary, Indonesia, Iraq, Israel, Malaysia, Norway, Oman, Qatar, Russia

Table 1: Demographic details of questionnaire (n=111) and focus group/semi structured interview (n=14) participants

The majority of questionnaire participants (85%+) believed very strongly or strongly that an inclusive ID environment benefits all students and can support an empathetic and collaborative dance class culture. Approximately 83% of participants believed that inclusion of neurodivergent dancers aligns with core ID values, with 68% reported positive impacts of inclusivity on classroom dynamics. Regarding teaching practices, over 96% of participants very strongly or strongly believed that adaptations were important to facilitate neurodivergent dancers. A similar number also believed that neurodivergent students could develop strong ID skills in mainstream classes, and that building positive relationships with these students enhanced their engagement and learning. A large majority very strongly or strongly agreed on the utility of strategies including adaptations to choreography and teaching pace (92%), or visual aids, demonstrations, and hands-on adjustments (81%) to support diverse learners. Just 58% implemented sensory or behavior support strategies. Approximately 79% of participants collaborated with parents/specialists to support neurodivergent dancers, with 68% very strongly or strongly agreeing that inclusion of neurodivergent students fosters innovation in how they (teachers) structured lessons and choreography.

One in four teachers felt unprepared to meet the specific needs of neurodivergent Irish dancers in their classes. However, a large majority felt confident in their ability to modify approaches (81%) or strategies to support neurodivergent dancers (76%). Approximately 91% very strongly or strongly agreed that teaching neurodivergent students had made them more reflective about their teaching style. However, just 74% felt emotionally prepared to support the needs of these students.

A large majority (85%+) very strongly or strongly agreed that they would like more training opportunities on this topic and that teachers contribute to the decision-making process around inclusion strategies. Approximately 74% of participants agreed that ID schools should have clear inclusion policies. Roughly 62% of participants felt supported by their studio or school when it comes to inclusive teaching, and 54% stated that professional development about neurodiversity had enhanced their teaching. More detailed questionnaire data are presented

in Table 2.

	Strongly agree n (%)	Agree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Disagree n (%)	Strongly disagree n (%)
Inclusive Irish dancing classes benefit all students.	56 (50.5)	39 (35.1)	10 (9.0)	6 (5.4)	0 (0)
Including neurodivergent students leads to a more empathetic and collaborative dance class culture.	62 (55.9)	43 (38.7)	3 (2.7)	3 (2.7)	0 (0)
Depending on the person, it's possible for neurodivergent students can develop strong Irish dancing skills in mainstream classes.	61 (55.0)	46 (41.4)	3 (2.7)	1 (0.9)	0 (0)
For the most part, I have seen how diverse learners positively influence group creativity and classroom dynamics.	37 (33.3)	39 (35.1)	30 (27.0)	5 (4.5)	0 (0)
It is important to adapt teaching methods to meet the needs of neurodivergent Irish dancers.	70 (63.1)	37 (33.3)	2 (1.8)	2 (1.8)	0 (0)
I feel unprepared to meet the specific needs of neurodivergent Irish dancers in my classes.	9 (8.1)	19 (17.1)	19 (17.1)	47 (42.3)	17 (15.3)
I regularly use visual aids, demonstrations, and hands-on adjustments to support diverse learners.	44 (39.6)	46 (41.4)	14 (12.6)	6 (5.4)	1 (0.9)
I adapt choreography and teaching pace to accommodate different learners.	71 (64.0)	31(27.9)	6 (5.4)	2 (1.8)	1 (0.9)
Supporting neurodivergent Irish dancers has improved my teaching practice overall.	45.95	35.14	16.22	2 (1.8)	1 (0.9)
I am confident in my ability to modify choreography and instruction for neurodivergent students.	45 (40.5)	45 (40.5)	13 (11.7)	8 (7.2)	0 (0)
I know how to use teaching strategies that support neurodivergent dancers.	35 (31.5)	49 (44.1)	18 (16.2)	9 (8.1)	0 (0)
Typically, peer collaboration and group work benefit from the inclusion of neurodivergent students.	35 (31.5)	37 (33.3)	32(28.8)	5 (4.5)	2 (1.8)
I feel emotionally prepared to support the needs of neurodivergent Irish dancers.	36 (32.4)	46 (41.4)	20 (18.0)	8 (7.2)	1 (0.9)

Building positive relationships with neurodivergent students enhances their engagement and learning.	71 (64.0)	38 (34.2)	1 (0.9)	1 (0.9)	0 (0)
I collaborate with parents and/or specialists to support neurodivergent dancers.	57 (51.4)	31 (27.9)	17 (15.3)	5 (4.5)	1 (0.9)
Including neurodivergent students fosters innovation in how I structure lessons and choreography.	31 (27.9)	44 (39.6)	33 (29.7)	3 (2.7)	0 (0)
Professional development about neurodiversity has enhanced my teaching.	30 (27.0)	30 (27.0)	41 (36.9)	8 (7.2)	2 (1.8)
I implement sensory or behavior support to help neurodivergent dancers participate fully.	22 (19.8)	42 (37.8)	31 (27.9)	15 (13.5)	1 (0.9)
I feel supported by my studio or school when it comes to inclusive teaching.	38 (34.2)	32 (28.8)	31 (27.9)	10 (9.01)	0 (0)
I believe neurodivergent dancers are an asset to our Irish dancing community.	65 (58.6)	34 (30.6)	10 (9.01)	1 (0.9)	1 (0.9)
I would like more training opportunities on neurodiversity in dance settings.	63 (56.8)	33 (29.7)	8 (7.2)	5 (4.5)	2 (1.8)
Teaching neurodivergent students has made me more reflective about my teaching style.	63 (56.8)	38 (34.2)	8 (7.2)	1 (0.9)	1 (0.9)
All Irish dancing schools should have clear inclusion policies.	51 (46.0)	31 (27.9)	18 (16.2)	7 (6.3)	4 (3.6)
Instructors should be part of the decision-making process around inclusion strategies.	65 (58.6)	40(36.0)	6(5.4)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Inclusion of neurodivergent dancers aligns with the core values of the Irish dancing tradition.	62 (55.9)	30 (27.0)	15 (13.5)	3 (2.7)	1 (0.9)

Table 2: Questionnaire responses (n=111)

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241 **Focus groups/interviews:** Fourteen teachers participated in eight online focus groups/interviews,
242 lasting approximately 45 minutes each. Participants included 12 female and two male teachers, with
243 a mean (SD) age of 44.7 (10.7) years, and a mean (SD) teaching experience of 22.1 (7.7) years.
244 Participants were located in the United States (50%), Australia (21.4%), Ireland (14.3%), Canada
245 (7.1%), and the United Kingdom (7.1%). A third level education was reported by twelve participants

(85.7%). Five participants (35.7%) described themselves as neurodivergent, eight (66.7%) did not, and one person (7.1%) was unsure. Ten participants (71.4%) considered themselves somewhat knowledgeable on the topic of neurodiversity, while four (26.8%) were very knowledgeable. Regarding knowledge of inclusivity the number of participants who were not, somewhat and very knowledgeable on the topic, was three (21.4%), six (51.3%), and five (35.7%) respectively (Table 2).

Four main themes were generated from the data, including 1) Ethos of inclusivity; 2) Practice and pedagogy (challenges, strategies, knowledge and training); 3) Place and peers (social environment and setting); and 4) Parents (partnership and engagement). These themes indicated that the ID teachers interviewed were deeply committed to inclusion, often driven by personal values, lived experience, or professional backgrounds. Dancers across the spectrum were accommodated and welcomed wherever possible, but on occasion, this was untenable. Teachers identified a plethora of environmental challenges in both class and competition settings, and adopted a wide range of creative, often improvised strategies to support neurodivergent dancers. However, there were numerous reports of limited access to training and support, with several participants conceding that they felt overwhelmed at times. Teachers also reported that the social environment of ID was frequently a safe and empowering space for neurodivergent dancers. Relationships with peers were generally positive and supportive, but on occasion frustrations arose in neurotypical dancers when they perceived that their own experience was adversely affected by the inclusion of a neurodivergent peer. Finally, participants felt that effective inclusion depends on open, honest, and respectful communication with parents, and that these relationships can frequently be delicate and complex. Themes, subthemes and supporting quotes are detailed in Table 3.

Themes	Subthemes	Supporting Quotations
1.Ethos of inclusivity: Teachers create strongly inclusive environments where possible**.**	**1.1 Strong desire to welcome all dancers, regardless of diagnosis.**	Participant (P)7: "I never want to tell a child that you can't take Irish dance. Because thank God that wasn't said to me." P3: "See, I don't think about it. I just take them in. I don't have a problem. Yeah, when you when you get them in and you say, OK, this child has a problem, I suppose because of my nursing background, I kind of, I don't fear it." P14: "You just get in and help.. I would always very happily have the children that really needed that help, and that's like all right, so we just need to find your dance language".
	1.2 Teachers with lived experience of neurodivergence bring unique empathy and insight.	P11 "As like an autism mom myself, I spot it in other kids fairly quickly, and I have I have stumbled into it by accident." P5: "I'm a speech and language therapist with … a particular interest in neurodiversity and how we can support neurodiverse needs in in a neuro-affirmative way within the dancing class" P14: "I'm neurodivergent myself — I see things differently, and that helps."
	1.3 Teachers actively foster inclusive class cultures. Inclusion is often instinctive and unplanned.	P8: "Read the room and if someone looks uncomfortable, um, try to change what I'm doing to make them more comfortable." P9: "You have to pivot as a teacher, you definitely have to pivot. So staying calm and you know changing maybe not what you had originally planned as part of the game." P1: "I think if you learn the child and you get to know the child, you kind of know what triggers them, what doesn't trigger them and you can kind of structure the class semi around them without it being a

		massive issue for parents or the other children."
	1.4 Inclusion may be beyond the capacity of the teacher/unfair to other dancers.	P5: "The reality is if the needs are too significant, you know a group setting may not be the most ideal activity for this child. Like we have to be real, you know, I mean we have other children in the class too." P8: "if that child is taking so much of my attention that I can't teach the other 11, then I have to really be honest with myself and with the parents about what the limitations of what I can offer are." P9: "I feel like sometimes I'm doing other things beyond my job description and it's that's where it gets, like, tiring and overwhelming sometimes because, like, I'm trying my best, but I'm not even getting to the part that I enjoy doing because I'm putting out fires."
2. Practice and pedagogy: Challenges, strategies, knowledge and training.	**2.1 Environmental challenges exist including:** - Sensory overload (noise, lights, crowds).	P1: "Our classes tend to be quite loud environments, especially with having such a big school. It's not just the music playing, it's not us shouting, it's all the kids talking, it's everything in one room going off. Yeah, it's overwhelming for me, never mind somebody that struggles with that (neurodivergence challenges)." P8: "this particular girl, she gets overwhelmed with noise in the classroom…if there's too much commotion and talking and inattentiveness from the group, she can get overwhelmed."
	- Anxiety and performance pressure.	P14: "While they're dancing (on stage), I'm running around the other side, ready to put their headphones about common, but I think you know, with neurodivergent individuals, there's, you know, anxiety, anxiety, as with autism and anxiety with

		ADHD, and that's amplified." P10: "I think for my little guy that wears headphones, that would 100% be very challenging for him to ever do anything like a feis". P13: "if they're putting a garbage can next to the stage (if children vomit due to nerves), what is the level of anxiety that's going on that stage that this is just a standard thing now that all stages have next to them? It's it. Yeah. The anxiety is massive."
	- Tactile sensitivity including costume and footwear discomfort.	P6: "There has been a few children they've struggled with wearing the bubble socks and wearing soft shoes… for a lot of dancers, wigs can be a pain in the neck." P14: "You know, they have to wear the particular shoes… and we've got another little dancer who's struggling with shoes. Why can't they just wear jazz shoes?"
	2.2 Teachers develop innovative solutions including: - Visual aids, structured routines and predictable class formats.	P9: "I have the videos and then like in the class I'll have like dots on the floor so they know where they're going." P14: "So we've got a schedule of the different things that happen in class and everyone likes to move it from the red to the green to the red like we've done that, we've had the break. We've had the drink. We're back into dancing."
	- Sensory accommodations, reduced workload and differentiated expectations.	P6: "I've got a little side room, so sometimes I'll take the beginners in there where it's just not as echoey and it just reduces the distraction a lot for them." P10: "..you're coming into this space, and this space is going to be a quiet space and it's going to be focused and where it's OK for my kids to have their little fidget spinners or their sensory things in their hands while they're dancing."

	- Use of peer support and buddy systems.	P1: “We buddy people up and it rotates every week. Every week we change the buddying system, so each class somebody's got somebody different to dance with. So, I think that also helps the neurodiverse children because at the start of the week they know who their buddy is for that week, so they can feel a bit less scared to come into the class and think no one's going to want to dance with me. P10 “So we got a big buddy to come in and be his one-to-one big buddy so that she could help him when he was getting frustrated with the things.”
	- Additional competitive accommodations to facilitate neurodivergent dancers.	P1: “Actually, we have an accessible feis syllabus, we've got a part of our syllabus that welcomes neurodiversity and if there is anything that's needed for children to be able to compete, we try and facilitate that as best as possible.”
	2.3 Appropriate training resources are lacking and can cause uncertainty and anxiety for teachers.	P1:” I think that's what's really lacking is the training for us even to be able to welcome these people into our classes.” P5: “Even week to week, every week in my class. I'm like that was tough. What could I do differently next week to, you know, to make it easier for the children and for me?” P13: “(I feel) that I may be under qualified for dealing with a lot of that stuff like I just don't know enough about it.“ P12: “I don't really have the capacity right now to like do a massive amount of learning, but small tidbits are good and make a can make a big difference.”
3. Place and peers: Social environment and setting can often be enriching, but challenges may arise.	**3.1 Dance as a space for connection, identity, and belonging.**	P1: “I think for the (neurotypical) children's benefit, I think it really enriches their lives because it shows them that there are other people in the world that aren't the same as them. “

		P2: “I think it became like her thing and she really leaned into it. She really like also made a lot of friends through it and it just became like her, like a big part of her identity. And I think it meant a lot to her. It was a place of belonging.” P13: “The amount of times I had parents come back to me and say what you did with my kid made a difference. A huge difference. Like I've had those kids come back 20 years later to say how much that changed their life, just the one place where they felt heard, where they felt challenged.”
	3.2 Peer empathy and support often emerge organically.	P11: “I feel like the majority of kids these days are just lovely. And so willing to be kind, at least my experience has been so willing to be kind and patient and embrace those who are a little quirky.” P1: “Knowing how to treat people that may be different to them with a bit more respect and a bit more patience. I think it teaches people patience”. P6: “I have a neurodivergent child in one of the teams and she is the weakest link in the team and she definitely has the most challenges. But the positive thing about this is that the dancers around her really get behind her and really work with her.”
	3.3 There can also be challenges with peers and group dynamics	P10: “Being on the spectrum that she, she particularly has a hard time with, and it does bleed into the rest of the class and the kids, I think. They can get tired of (it).” P13: “The problem is maybe more in the handling of it, so they (teacher) take everything that they would be doing in the class and dumb it down to the level of the person with the special needs. And as a result, the people- the rest of the class is feeling like they're not being pushed. They're not having the same opportunities

		and there becomes a resentment towards the person." P12: "Some of the dancers - it's not that they're intentionally being rude or anything, but you can kind of see them being like, "OK, OK" , you because you know, they're wanting to move on. And so that does take an element of patience."
4. Parents: Partnership and engagement	**4.1 Varied parental communication:** Engagement and collaboration v's denial or unaware of their child's needs.	P8: "I've had parents come to me, and I've also had parents not come to me. And it's always more helpful when they do come to me, because then they can let me know what kinds that they've already observed or gleaned about the way that their child functions best in the classroom." P11: "In my advanced class we've got a girl who's got ADHD. Her mom has told me she has ADHD. She has a twin sister in the class who doesn't have ADHD. They're fraternal and not identical, and the dad refuses to acknowledge, refuses to have any things put in place. Refuses medication like he's just in complete denial. And so it's hard because I watch her lag and I don't know what to do to help her." P6: " I just sort of explain to the parents like it's very much a two-way street, this relationship. ..any information that you receive or anything that that can help me, please let me know and I'll fill you in in the same way."
	4.2 Teachers need tools for sensitive conversations.	P2: "We need guidance on how to say, 'Your child might need something different." P10: "I think more just being aware of just the different spectrum and how to speak with parents." P11:" I wanted to mention I think the hardest part about teaching neurodivergent kids is when the parents don't have a diagnosis or are in denial because it's really easy if they can come to

		you and talk to you about it. It's really hard when you can't, you know, it's a it's a taboo to be like, I think your kids on the spectrum."
	4.3 Parents' expectations can clash with what's feasible in class	P9: "it got to the point where the class was progressing so much faster and I could only do so much for that dancer. I kind of had to tell the mom, like, I don't think, like, my classes are going to be suitable for (child's name), but she kind of took it in a different (negative) way." P13: "I think there's also a pressure there too that they want their kids to achieve a certain thing, but most of the time, especially when they come up with ADHD. I taught (one dancer) who was severely ADHD, her parents used dance class as a punishment tool. So, if she didn't do well at school or she wasn't concentrating at home, she lost her dance classes."

Table 3: Themes, sub-themes and supporting quotations from focus groups/interviews.

DISCUSSION

This study provides the first empirical evidence of how neurodivergent inclusion is currently negotiated within Irish dance education. Participant feedback from the questionnaire and focus group/interviews were closely aligned, reflecting similar perspectives, experiences and concerns. Findings from both sources indicate that ID teachers are motivated and committed to an ethos of inclusivity and strive to accommodate the needs of students in creative and intuitive ways. Despite a host of sensory and other challenges inherent in the ID class and competition environment, creative strategies and the support of peers and teachers frequently create a positive experience for all parties. Transparent communication between parents and teachers is also fundamental to successful inclusion. It was noted that incompatible needs of neurotypical and neurodivergent dancers, and limited teacher resources and training, may occasionally constrain inclusivity. The need for targeted

training and support for ID teachers was consistently reported by participants.

While much of the earlier literature regarding inclusivity in dance related to accommodating physical disability (Boswell, Ko, and Yoon 2023), work by Aujla and Redding (2014) explored the perspectives of dance teachers regarding the support and progression of talented dancers with various conditions including autism and dyspraxia. These authors identified several important guiding principles for inclusivity in dance including the need for clear communication based on a detailed understanding of the needs and abilities of each dancer, and the creation of a safe space where mutual respect between all parties is prioritized. Additionally, transparent and focused discussion with parents to enhance the dance experience for all parties was recommended. The fundamental importance of many of these themes is echoed in the current work in ID.

The positive ethic of inclusivity demonstrated by the participants in this study reflects findings in other educational settings such as schools. An international systematic review of 23 studies involving staff from primary and second-level schools reported largely positive attitudes towards the inclusion of autistic students (Roberts and Simpson 2016). As with the current work, teachers expressed concern about their limited knowledge of autism and relevant teaching strategies. However, within the school setting, there does appear to be potential for greater frustration by all parties, due to the requirement for more rigid structures and behaviors than may be accommodated in the more fluid setting of a dance class. Finkelstein and colleagues identified a number of high-quality inclusive practices to address potential barriers to inclusion in education (Finkelstein, Sharma, and Furlonger 2021). Many of these practices, including facilitating peer learning, providing choice in learning approaches, social/emotional/behavioral support, and collaboration with peers and parents, reflect the approaches and strategies employed by the participants in this study. These initiatives also embody key tenets of Universal Design for Learning (Lynne and Nathan Andrew 2019), with the resulting flexibility and accessibility potentially enhancing engagement and enjoyment of all dancers in ID

312 classes. However, further study is required on whether the current ID competitive environment is truly
313 amenable to some neurodivergent individuals, or whether other approaches, or dispensations such
314 as specific categories for neurodivergent dancers may be required for authentic inclusion.
315
316 Neurotypical peers are key stakeholders in mainstream environments, and their understanding and
317 acceptance of differences may be enhanced by spending time in integrated, inclusive environments
318 (Kavitha 2022). Teachers in the current study described neurotypical peers as key in supporting
319 inclusivity. These relationships were largely warm and respectful, but teachers reported that friction
320 occasionally arose when neurotypical students perceived that their ID progress and development was
321 impaired due to the extra time and attention required by neurodivergent peers. Similar findings have
322 been reported in educational settings where integrated classes led to enhanced social skills and
323 academic performance in the children with autism and enhanced understanding and acceptance
324 among neurotypical peers. This success was heavily mediated by extensive preparation involving the
325 physical space, communication, adaptive processes, and input from family, peers and other experts
326 (Kavitha 2022). Other research has identified a reduction in stigma of neurotypical children towards
327 peers with dyslexia and autism following a two-week virtual Summer camp. Again, the need for
328 structure and guided interaction was identified by the authors (Schuck and Fung 2024).
329 Neurodivergent people describe spending considerable time and effort to reduce miscommunication
330 or misunderstandings with their peers and maintain friendships (Sharman and Seedorf 2025). ID
331 teachers may need to support positive peer interactions and promote understanding across
332 neurotypes (Donaldson, Nolfo, and Montejano 2018).
333
334 Parents were also identified as central to the inclusion of neurodivergent dancers in mainstream dance
335 classes. Typically, participants found it beneficial when parents were willing to disclose information
336 relating to their child's support needs. In some instances teachers perceived the parents as either
337 unwilling to disclose or unaware that their child required extra support. Disclosure decisions are

complex with parents weighing the costs and benefits around managing stigma, protecting their privacy, advocating for their child and the perception that supports will be made available as a result of disclosure (Mateo-Arriero et al. 2025). While ID dance teachers acknowledged the reasons for non-disclosure (including fear of stigma, managing social perceptions and concerns about discrimination), a lack of transparency and pertinent information was roundly viewed as unhelpful.

A common issue that arose in the current study was the lack of relevant training and education on neurodivergence and inclusivity for participants. There is no formalized training provided on these topics by any of the governing bodies who regulate ID. This adversely impacted many of the ID teachers in this study. Many reported feeling inadequate, unprepared, and exhausted in some instances. However, this was not consistent, with the considerable number of self-identified neurodivergent participants in this study drawing on their own-lived experience to support their teaching. The phenomenon of harnessing this unique understanding and insight to benefit all students has led to the evolution of a novel theoretical lens of Disability-Reflective Pedagogy, which is a valuable area of emerging research (Sarchet 2026).

ID is not alone in a paucity of training in this area. A recent Delphi study of recommendations for inclusive dance, which involved dance educators and support persons working with neurodivergent dancers, found that current dance teacher training rarely includes inclusive strategies.(Ladwig et al. 2025) In the absence of pertinent literature in dance, learning may be taken from the world of sport and education. A recent Spanish study reported a similar phenomenon in Physical Education teachers, where redesigned teacher-training curricula to empower teachers to appropriately support all children in their classes (Villa-de Gregorio et al. 2023). The parallels with ID, in terms of being a skill-based, frenetic, high-energy environment are obvious, and suggests the need for more targeted teacher training in ID. This should focus on the specific challenges of the ID environment as outlined by the participants in this study, including sensory challenges of noise and music, tactile issues related

to costuming, shoes and accessories, how to balance the diverse needs of all dancers in the class, and the creation of positive and productive relationships with parents. Additionally, input from willing neurodivergent ID teachers, and neurodivergent dancers, should be sought to create optimal resources, informed by their unique insights.

Limitations: The sample in this study is almost universally White, and representing a limited pool of nationalities. Although quite homogenous and is largely representative of the ID community, findings may not entirely reflect the level of cultural nuance inherent in this topic. The proportion of neurodivergent teachers in our sample (questionnaire:25.8%, focus group/interviews: 35.7%) is higher than the estimated 20% prevalence in the general population (Helmold and Martensen 2025), which may be indicative of inherent participation bias. Finally, this study reflects only the perspectives of teachers. Insights from neurodivergent dancers themselves, as well as parents, are required to ensure a comprehensive understanding of this topic.

CONCLUSION

ID teachers strive to be inclusive, employing strategies and tools to address a host of sensory and environmental challenges that are inherent in ID. The experience of integrated classes appears to be largely positive for all stakeholders, where there are sufficient personnel, expertise and resources available. However, teachers are frequently using improvised strategies because they feel under-qualified and are currently carrying the burden of inclusion without formal support. There are some important areas of focus moving forward to support a truly inclusive and positive environment for all involved in ID. These include targeted training that considers the specific challenges of the ID environment for neurodivergent dancers, as well as integration of the knowledge of those teachers with a lived experience of being neurodivergent. Governing bodies should also consider structural amendments to the competitive *feis* environment to ensure authentic inclusion for neurodivergent dancers.

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