# Visibility in the Arts: Examining the barriers experienced by visually impaired dancers in Northern Ireland

## Sheena Kelly

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# Abstract

This research brings forward the voices of three visually impaired dancers to unravel the complexities of accessing the dance sector in Northern Ireland. The multi-method approach used desk research, movement and conversation to investigate the existing barriers, intending to compile suggestions on how best to move forward. The findings identified the importance of the process in highlighting the challenges of being accessible whilst understanding the nuances of the individual experience, suggesting that no one approach is sufficient. The research also argues the significance of the role of dance as a research tool to interrogate and gather new knowledge and the importance of practice-based research methods to help fill the existing literature gaps.

**Biographical statement:**

Sheena Kelly recently graduated with a distinction from Queen's University Belfast, with an MA in Arts Management. She has 15 years of experience working within the dance sector with a strong focus on increasing engagement with those often excluded from dance. Her practice takes her across Northern Ireland and internationally with current projects in Romania and Germany. She currently works as Community Engagement Artist for DU Dance (NI) and as a freelance dance artist for Open Arts NI.

**Keywords: inclusive research; dance; accessibility; disability.**

# New Voices: Visibility in the Arts: Examining the barriers experienced by visually impaired dancers in Northern Ireland

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### Introduction

Since the United Kingdom (UK) passed the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) nearly 30 years ago, much positive change has occurred to promote a more accessible and inclusive society. Accessible buildings and public spaces, better employment rights and high-profile events such as the Paralympics (Penty, 2020) have brought disability to the forefront of society. However, there is still much to do (De Cordova, 2020). The cultural sector still demonstrates significant gaps in creating a more inclusive industry. With a lack of disabled people in positions of power (Sharratt, 2019), a perceived hierarchy of diversity with gender and race more prevalent in literature (Brook *et al*., 2020), and significant gaps in access to dance training (Aujla, 2021; Whatley, 2007), there is further to go. A transnational report by On the Move entitled *Time to Act* (2021) discovered that a

lack of knowledge was one of the most significant barriers 'to supporting and programming work by disabled artists' (On the Move, 2021, p.4). The Arts Council of Northern Ireland suggest disabled people are underrepresented in the cultural workforce (2019), a view also demonstrated in the UK's national arts portfolio, with only 1% of organisations being disability-led (Penty, 2020).

This research examined visually impaired dancers' barriers to accessing Northern Ireland's dance sector. A multi-method approach was implemented using practice-based research methods and an inclusive research framework to achieve this. Three visually impaired dancers were embedded in the process, which used dance as a tool for data collection and conversational analysis.

The findings demonstrated how vital the process and the methods were in illuminating how challenging it can be to be accessible. Whilst many policies highlight relevant barriers, many fail to recognise the nuanced ones that impact accessibility. These findings only came to light during the workshop element of the research, which revealed more about the individual experiences of the dancers. Whilst no one solution can be offered, what did transpire was how important the inclusive practice-based framework was in better understanding the barriers.

**Methodology**

The main objectives were to examine the barriers present in line with the social model of disability, compile suggestions on how we can create better access, and understand the tensions between the areas of professional and amateur. Acknowledging the complexities of the subject matter meant that a multi-method approach was the most appropriate way to collect data and gain a rounded view of the findings. Choosing this approach allowed for a broader perspective on the research and the chance to 'gain a better understanding of connections or contradictions' (Shorten and Smith, 2017, p.75). It involved three elements: desk research, improvised movement tasks, and conversational analysis. Combining all three overcame any limitations identified in each component, offered the opportunity to represent different perspectives and obtained a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

Three dancers were identified, each with a different experience of the Northern Ireland dance sector. Ethics approval was obtained through the School of Arts, English and Languages Research Ethics Committee at Queens University Belfast. As the lived experiences of the three visually impaired dancers differed from mine, it was essential to place the research within an inclusive framework. This framework can offer a greater insight into the voices and opinions of those often excluded (Walmsley et al. 2018).

Each dancer was consulted at three key stages to offer participants 'some control over the process and outcomes' (Vega-Cordova et al. 2020, p.319). Following the desk research, an accessible overview of the findings was given before the workshop. Secondly, there was an opportunity for collaboration within the workshop design and, finally, time to respond and interact with the results to ensure their input in the writing-up process.

**The workshop process**

The structure of the workshop process was influenced by my artistic practice, which is disability-led and movement-orientated and involves four stages, as described below.

- Exploration: Participants were given improvised movement tasks based on a theme which arose from the desk and literature review.

- Sharing: Following time to explore, the participants shared their movement pieces; each piece was audio described by the researcher.

- Describe: The participant then described their movement and what it represented.

- Respond: Through open conversations; participants could respond and reflect on what they experienced and interpreted from each other.

As a dance practitioner, I am accustomed to communicating, researching, and analysing using movement. For the participants, who are also dancers, this process is comfortable and familiar to them in a way that traditional research methods may not be. Dance as a research tool has shown benefits in several research papers (Hujala et al., 2015; Sevdalis and Keller, 2011), particularly in how we can understand the human experience (McNiff, 2004). In this context, dance was used from both an interpretive and a participatory perspective, offering richer interpretations when the final element of conversation analysis began. Springborg further explains that 'collecting data through dance exercises can be seen as an interview where the body contributes to the dialogue' (2020, p.4).

The two-hour workshop combined improvised movement tasks and guided conversations, which compliments audio description, an essential component of a movement workshop with visually impaired dancers. Audio description can include a description of movement, body language, pauses and expressions. It formed a part of the workshop process and meant it was natural to have the conversation follow from the movement element. Findings from this stage were documented solely through audio recordings rather than visual methods to ensure everyone was on an equal footing.

An example of the process is as follows; one task proposed the word 'pathway' with dancers given six minutes to improvise movement in response to the word. A further four minutes was timed to allow dancers to hone the movement into a short-improvised sequence that they felt encapsulated their response. Following this, one dancer would share their sequence, audio described by the researcher, before the dancer interpreted the movement in their own words. Lastly, there was time for everyone to respond to what they had witnessed with time to reflect and discuss anything which came up. This cycle was completed for each dancer. Each of the three elements, desk research, movement and conversation, was analysed using Braun and Clarke's updated approach of reflexive thematic analysis (2019).

**Findings**

The multi-method approach to this research has revealed numerous findings relevant to the research question and objectives, some diverging from it. Four main themes were identified: the

relevance of the process, the challenge of being inclusive, the question of responsibility and the perception of the disabled dancer. Each contributes to the different aspects of accessibility, including structural issues within the working environment of the arts, an unalignment between policy and provision and the limited perception of what a disabled dancer looks like. However, for this article, I will draw attention to the findings connected to the methodology. This unexpected result highlighted how relevant the process was in illuminating the challenges of inclusivity.

## Unravelling through dance

Incorporating elements such as practice-based research methods, dance as a form of data collection, and the lived experiences of visually impaired dancers revealed more about the research topic than anticipated. The use of dance as a tool for data collection unravelled different layers of the process, revealing more than a case study or interview approach may have offered. Utilising dance as a research tool was an advantage of the research method and interrogated the participant's embodied experiences in a familiar way to them. Most importantly, it allowed us to begin the process on an equal footing, giving ownership to the participants in a way in which using words may not have. The four stages of the workshop process, Explore, Share, Describe and Respond, meant that the participants critically analysed their discoveries and those of the other participants, further adding to the depth of knowledge gathered. This unravelling was demonstrated in the 'respond' stage, giving a deeper insight into each participant that would not have happened if we had used the first three stages. A clear example of how this stage impacted the findings is described below, starting with an audio description of Brooke's movement in response to the word 'identity'.

> She rolls onto her back into a star shape, reaching her knees up and spinning around on her bum, she comes up to her hands and knees and pushes up to a lunge reaching forward.

When describing her movement in the third stage of the process, Brooke explained, "I don't see it as a big thing about my identity". However, during the fourth stage, 'respond', Anna shared what she had observed about Brooke's movement, "there was a sense of ebb and flow, always having to go between different ways of being and different ways of finding your way through your identity". This observation provoked further discussion as Brooke began to reveal more by saying, "it is hard to identify yourself as one thing when there are so many different things I could say; sometimes it is not knowing how to choose my identity". Encouraging conversation during this stage meant that Brooke was able to delve deeper and later revealed that "being a female and having a disability is difficult enough…and then being gay on top of that and trying to get into various groups… it's a case of where you fit in". This example demonstrates how the different interrogation levels were vital in uncovering the embodied experiences of the dancers.

## The challenge of being inclusive

The most prominent finding was how challenging it is to be inclusive, with the methodological approach highlighting this. Even though much thought and effort were given to ensure the accessibility of the workshop, at different times, accessibility issues came to the forefront, demonstrating that there was not one solution.

One barrier that had not been anticipated when designing the workshop was translating a theme into movement. As a sighted dancer, I took this for granted; however, having set the first task, I noticed that one participant took more time to improvise than the others. Following sharing their piece, this participant stated, "I find it difficult when you give a theme, if you have never seen before, how do you actually put that into movement". This was a different experience for the other two participants, one partially sighted and one who had sight at one point in their life; both found the process easier. At that moment, everyone's experience and needs were different, bringing to the forefront the importance of ensuring that lived experiences of marginalised people are included in research.

The second task in the workshop set out to discover barriers in more depth. Findings from this highlighted several aspects often overlooked or unmentioned within reports. During this section, Brooke spoke of the "constant visual side of what people are putting across", whether that concerns translating a theme into movement as discussed above or reading body language. For many sighted people, the visual side can form an integral part of communicating and understanding each other.

Exploring the concept of barriers further, Anna expresses how it impacts her directly. Below is the audio description of her movement.

> she sits crossed leg, her hands are in front of her face, palms facing away.
> Her fingers are spread open not totally blocking her vision but creating a
> criss-cross so it is obscured but there are little peep holes.

When describing the movement and what it means to her, Anna talks about how growing up, she was always told not to let her disability hold her back. However, she says, "it has become more clear that there are a lot of barriers and it is not just access to a building or a class it is all the little things that go with it, like it is harder to network and harder to read through all the information about what opportunities are out there". In agreement Brooke was prompted to talk about her experience as a singer, "sometimes it is the simplest things, the eye can scan something faster that what our fingers can in braille, it is frustrating because I have to memorise everything, or I fall behind". Whilst offering braille versions of song lyrics would be seen as being accessible, on this occasion, she describes the implications that follow from this. This frustration was felt by all, including Clare, who said, "sometimes it feels like there is no way forward, even when you explain all the accessibilities and you get it working it then only works for a short time and you are back to square one". The complexities and nuances which impact accessibility are immense: simply offering audio description at your performance or workshop does not necessarily mean it will be accessible. Often many small challenges can make everything harder. "They are all informed, and one has an impact on the other", Anna explains.

In response to these findings, Anna recalled the difficulties she experienced when creating an audio description for her solo dance piece. Explaining that "the area of sight loss is such a wide spectrum. I had to accept that my creative audio description wouldn't necessarily cater for everyone". Having an audio description available did not make the piece accessible to visually impaired people. If we relate this to Brooke's experience at the workshop, for someone who has never seen before, how do you audio describe visual things such as costumes or movements when she has no reference point for this? Hence, it is integral that when acknowledging access

issues, assumptions are not made, and by only recognising the social factors and excluding the individual aspect, access may only be tokenistic.

## Conclusion

The findings indicate that although the research question has been answered to some degree, what has been revealed are the many complex factors impacting the answer. Simply stating suggestions to improve accessibility would not be adequate. As the research worked with a limited sample group is not indicative of every experience; however, it does reflect the need for further investigation. Limitations were also apparent in the lack of policy on dance in Northern Ireland and the time implications of applying an inclusive framework. All the same, the research did bring to light the value of the process and inclusion of lived experiences and was one step towards filling the gap in the literature.

The most prominent finding to emerge from this study is the complex and nuanced barriers that impact how challenging it is to be accessible. Whilst no one solution can be offered, we can conclude that including lived experiences will be integral to creating long-term, meaningful inclusion. This approach brings forward many additional challenges, such as financial and time implications; however, the procedure is necessary to develop a complete picture.

A key policy priority, therefore, should be to consider the representation of disabled people through a consultation process. This approach will ensure a more robust policy considering all aspects of access. However, we should be cautious, as highlighting the complex barriers without taking responsibility for the broader issues at play would be entirely inadequate. A recommendation would be to consider a dual approach of policy and provision with explicit outcomes that recognise everyone has a responsibility to ensure inclusivity.

Given the significant findings of how the process impacted the results, a further recommendation would be to include inclusive practice-based research methods in other research. The role of dance as a research tool created a level playing field for all participants and offered rich interpretations of each lived experience. This approach proved helpful in expanding our knowledge of the subject matter and revealed significant findings that may not have come to light through other methods.

The understanding that the benefit of inclusion will be to the advantage of the disabled dancer and the wider dance sector should also underpin all future development of dance policy. Increasing the visibility of the visually impaired dancer can create a new and innovative paradigm of dance.

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