

## ***ANOTHER WAY THAT HUMAN BEINGS ARE BRILLIANT<sup>1</sup>***

Findings from the evaluation of the balletLORENT Neurodiversity Project: Company training and learning to enable greater diversity and inclusivity in class, workshop and performance opportunities for children and young people in Newcastle



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<sup>1</sup>Quote taken from baseline Questionnaire response by company dancer Benedicta Mamuini  
Photo taken during the first day of a 2-day dance intensive in February 2022

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A full version of the Report is available at [www.balletlorent.com](http://www.balletlorent.com)

### INTRODUCTION

balletLORENT's Neurodiversity Project was set up to enhance and increase skills and understanding about neurodiverse diagnoses and behavioral patterns in children and young people (CYP), so that company members would have a greater ability to offer fully supported inclusion and participation in classes, workshops, and performance activities.

In March 2020 balletLORENT was awarded funding from Newcastle Culture Investment Fund, to provide the training and implementation opportunities for members of the creative and education team. Due to the delays which affected all communities as part of the Covid19 pandemic, the period of the Project was extended to run from March 2020 to February 2022.

#### *Evaluation Aims*

- ❖ To measure, track and document (pre- and post- training) any changes in the members of the Creative team's confidence, skill, and ability levels when engaged with children who are diagnosed or displaying characteristics of neurodiverse conditions and behavioural patterns.
  
- ❖ To gather and document learning outcomes and reflections, post-training, and implementation, of providing participatory opportunities for children with diagnosed or displaying characteristics of neurodiverse diagnoses

### METHOD OF EVALUATION

A mainly qualitative methodology was adopted comprising data collection and analysis techniques which would capture and interpret the experiences of those involved, as they relate to the aims of the project and of the evaluation. A small statistical analysis was undertaken while tracking changes in confidence and skill levels over time. The feedback data was primarily gathered to investigate the experiences and learnings of the balletLORENT creative and education team as their training and implementation periods unfolded. Additional feedback data came from a small number of parents whose children were known or new to the Company.

## FINDINGS

The first aim was to assess any changes in confidence and ability levels as the training and implementation periods unfolded, beginning with a baseline multiple choice questionnaire completed by nine company members:

- 78% (7 respondents) reported a level of 'reasonably confident' and 22% (2 respondents) reporting 'not at all confident'. No-one reported 'high confidence' levels
- 67% (6 respondents) reported 'some specialised experience, skill and ability'; 33% (3) reported 'no specialised experience, skill or ability'. No-one reported having 'considerable specialised experience, skill and ability'

At the end of the Neurodiversity Project, the Company members were asked the same questions and all who were able to respond to the follow-up request reported an increase in either **confidence** or **skill and ability** and, in most cases, there was an increase in both areas. Where there was no reported increase, it became clear through the analysis that this was not due to a failure of the training but represented more of a natural humility emerging as individuals learned about the complexity and wide-ranging nature of Neurodiversity as an area of study and learning:

*I could certainly do with more training – which we hope to do over the coming year – and to have further discussions with peers would be useful.*

The second evaluation aim was to gather and document key learning outcomes and reflections as the creative team undertook their training and went on to implement their new learning in settings which included children diagnosed with, or who were displaying characteristics of, neurodiverse behaviours.

Five learning areas emerged as significant, and which demonstrated a direct correlation between challenges experienced and identified before the formal training began, and which were addressed through the different training experiences.

1. What is Neurodiversity, how to identify and talk about differing conditions
2. What are the best ways to sustain engagement when neurodiverse children are present in creative sessions
3. Knowledge and cues to help in recognising when neurodiverse children are engaged or distracted
4. Ways to handle distraction, conflicting needs, and disruptive elements in the room
5. The role and need for additional specialist support/assistance or one to one attention

In terms of implementing the training and learning within teaching and workshop sessions, the effect of the Covid19 pandemic meant the Company had difficulties in finding opportunities to work in specialist schools and settings:

*...we hit brick walls. Three that were reliable contacts, completely shut down due to Covid and because of the more vulnerable children in their care.*

Liv Lorent, in conversation during 22 February CYP Dance Intensive

Instead, and as the Company began their transition in 2021 to new premises at the John Marley Centre, they were able to bring their new skills to the delivery of family dance workshops in Scotswood Community Gardens which included many children with neurodiverse conditions and learning disabilities. During 2021 the new Youth Academy initiative began, providing a practical and available pathway to implement their training, with some re-positioning and adapting of their earlier strategy.

The implementation stage of the Neurodiversity Project culminated in a 2-day half-term intensive in February 2022 where the Company were able to put their learning into practice, and to reflect on how it was experienced and received. The findings were analysed and sorted around the identified themes of:

1. Prepare a Space (both physical and metaphorical) that is safe and enhancing based on their needs
2. Being Open to everyone in the room, offering empowered creative exploration

The physical aspect of a **preparing a safe and enhancing environment** could be well evidenced in the carefully considered spatial layout of the main rehearsal room and the adjoining spaces which the CYP fully utilised throughout the days.

A **safe enhancing space** was further established through an increase in the frequency of breaks between sessions. Additionally, where children had a greater need to step out of structured activity, they were allowed the choice to do that within the large rehearsal room; either to the writing desk or to move through the areas which surrounded the dance floor, in sight and safety but with freedom to attend to **their own needs** for self-regulation.

In general, the increased breaks and freedom to step out of structured activity was helpful to the CYP, though there were some examples where some children found it more challenging when their partner disappeared, for example, or their focus was interrupted. The team were able to reflect together and come up with future solutions to the situations which arose.

**Being open to everyone in the room** was again evidenced during the audio recorded debrief where the team discussed how different CYP responded, the varied strategies they had adopted to encourage and sustain engagement; and the recognition of what kept CYP engaged, and what didn't.

This level of openness and responsiveness had required more effort from the creative team, leading to reflection and identifying ways to support each other when energy levels were not sustainable. Tom Charlton, a young apprentice dancer whose lived experience of ADHD and Autism is highly valued by the Company, commented:

*I've never been in a space that is actually as aware as this ... I remember being in school ... 99% of the teachers I had grown up with ... would be completely oblivious*

The findings related to **empowered creative exploration** were observable throughout the two days, particularly visible in an embodied exploration of TRUST. The Company are already highly skilled in facilitating creative exploration with CYP, making this an area where the Neurodiversity training dove-tailed and enhanced their experience, even affirming the possibilities for understanding the role of truly creative approaches more widely.

## CONCLUSION

The Neurodiversity Project delivered high quality training experiences to the balletLORENT Creative Team which allowed them to build on their current skill and knowledge in creative dance workshop delivery that is inclusive of all CYP. The training provided new ideas and knowledge which the Company were successfully able to put into practice and which culminated in supporting them to provide an environment in which CYP from the ages of six to fourteen, across the neurodiverse and neurotypical spectrum, were able to explore movement and creativity over a 2-day half term intensive, in a safe, enjoyable, and creatively empowering way.

Alongside external evaluation, the Company gave time to develop their own evaluative and reflective processes where they: assessed their changing and growing confidence and skill development levels, individually and as a group; identified what worked well in terms of introducing new elements into their workshop set-up and acknowledged areas to be worked on and improved for the future; aspired to continue learning:

*We 'think' we know, but this is such an evolving and growing area and the training is essential to build the confidence in **Caring, Sharing and Daring***

## Future Recommendations

The Company are committed to sharing their ground-breaking and pioneering work with others who are also inviting participation with their communities that has the possibility of impacting physical health, emotional wellbeing, and community cohesion through artistic collaboration. This evaluation report and its additional data could form a documentary resource which may be drawn on and included in further research leading to more detailed analysis and wider dissemination of findings.