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Inclusive Dance and Perceived Changes in Emotion Regulation and Self-Evaluation among Adults with Developmental Disabilities

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ABSTRACT: Background: Adults with developmental disabilities often face reduced structured participation and weakened social networks after leaving school-based systems. Although previous studies have reported positive outcomes of inclusive dance participation, relatively little is known about how belonging, recognition, and identity-related resources are formed through participation and carried into everyday life. This study examined how adults with developmental disabilities perceived and narrated changes in emotion regulation and self-evaluation through participation in an inclusive dance company, and explored how identity-related processes of recognition, role enactment, and continuity shaped their experiences. **Methods:** This qualitative embedded case study was conducted within an inclusive dance company in Seoul, South Korea, using in-depth interviews with three adult dancers with developmental disabilities and three primary caregivers. These interviews were supplemented by non-participant observation of practices and performances. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, with the Social Identity Approach to Health and the Social Identity Model of Identity Change serving as sensitizing concepts. **Results:** Participants described rehearsals and performances as recurring recognition scenes in which being addressed as a “dancer” and receiving audience and within-group feedback provided a credible basis for self-definition and self-appraisal. Identity gain strengthened through enacted role responsibilities (e.g., assistant-instructor tasks), and this increased perceived competence but also expectations and evaluative pressure. Identity continuity was supported when performance meanings were carried into home and community settings, often through caregiver-mediated recontextualization. Resources were ambivalent: recognition could intensify evaluative pressure, role responsibilities could concentrate coordination demands, and sustained participation entailed physical and practical costs. **Conclusions:** Participation in an inclusive dance company may support emotion regulation and self-evaluation among adults with developmental disabilities through socially authorized identity gain and identity continuity that extend into everyday life. However, benefits can turn into a burden as expectations and coordination demands escalate. Programs should create safe visibility and repeated legitimacy, distribute responsibilities, and coordinate participation with caregiving and access to supports.

KEYWORDS: Inclusive dance; developmental disability; social identity; emotion regulation; self-evaluation; identity gain; identity continuity

1 Introduction

Adults with developmental disabilities often face intensified psychosocial vulnerability after transitioning out of school-based systems [1]. After leaving school-based settings, opportunities for structured participation and everyday social networks tend to dwindle, and daily life is reshaped by caregiving arrangements, mobility constraints, financial conditions, and limited access to leisure [1–3]. In this context, adult

mental health is more appropriately understood as contingent on social conditions that make participation, relationships, and belonging feasible, rather than as an individual weakness.

Adults with disabilities face disproportionate health outcomes owing to social inequalities and barriers to healthcare access. The World Health Organization emphasizes that early mortality, chronic disease burden, and restrictions in everyday functioning among people with disabilities should not be attributed to individual “deficits;” rather, they should be ascribed to institutional environments, social barriers, and gaps in service accessibility [4]. Accordingly, this study focuses on how social connections and a sense of belonging develop and sustain psychosocial resources in adulthood. Mental health promotion is therefore more plausibly conceptualized as strengthening psychosocial resources than as narrowly reducing symptoms [5,6].

In the present study, emotion regulation is defined as the ability to recognize emotional arousal in evaluative and relational contexts, monitor and modulate emotional responses, and manage their behavioral and relational consequences [7,8]. Self-evaluation denotes a socially situated process of appraising one’s competence, worth, and social recognition and reconsidering the criteria by which they judge themselves within a given social setting [9,10]. These constructs are central to psychosocial changes in adulthood as participation settings can reorganize how emotions are managed in interactions and how self-worth is anchored in socially meaningful evaluation and feedback.

Research indicates that physical and leisure activities contribute to the well-being and quality of life of individuals with disabilities [11]. Similarly, systematic reviews suggest that sports participation plays a meaningful role in their daily lives [12]. However, less is known about how psychosocial change is experienced, negotiated, and consolidated within specific participation ecologies—particularly among adults with developmental disabilities, whose sustained involvement depends on relational conditions and the stability of assistance [12–14]. Existing reviews of dance-related programs for adults with developmental disabilities have also noted fragmented intervention targets and outcome indicators; thus, qualitative research is needed to clarify how shared group experiences, recognition, and relational safety become observable social processes enabling psychosocial change [15].

Inclusive dance companies provide an informative case for addressing this gap. “Inclusive dance” refers to group-based, arts-focused practices that foster participation across abilities through environmental and relational accommodations, rather than a clinical treatment model. As it involves rehearsals, interpersonal feedback, and public performance, inclusive dance renders expression and evaluation publicly visible and interactionally consequential. This visibility enables examination of recognition and role processes as mechanisms through which psychosocial resources may be built [15]. At the same time, performance-oriented visibility can recalibrate evaluative standards and intensify burden, enabling analysis of both benefits and costs within the same context [15].

Research on inclusive dance and inclusive activities is shifting from simply expanding participation to examining the conditions under which individuals can freely express themselves and feel a sense of belonging [16,17]. Studies concerning adults with disabilities have highlighted that sustained participation depends on environmental adaptation and relational safety, underscoring accessibility as a structural condition of possibility in inclusive arts [17,18]. The effects of inclusive dance on mental health should be explored not merely as “effects of participation” but as mechanisms through which belonging and identity foster emotion regulation and self-evaluation [5,19].

To explain these mechanisms, this study draws on the Social Identity Approach to Health (SIAH) and the Social Identity Model of Identity Change (SIMIC) as primary analytic lenses. The SIAH emphasizes how group membership and belonging shape psychosocial experiences and well-being [5,6]. Within arts-focused

groups, acceptance and role participation may support social identification and psychosocial stability [20]. SIMIC further highlights how identity-related resources may be sustained through ongoing participation and new forms of membership [5,21,22]. Inclusive dance can thus be conceptualized as a participatory context that offers new group membership and recurring interactional “verification” scenes through which identification may be strengthened and extended into everyday life [5,22].

Disability identity is not uniformly protective. From a social identity perspective, disability is not merely an individual deficit but an identity shaped through social relations and institutional conditions. Therefore, mental health experiences should be interpreted in contexts where stigma and discrimination intersect with opportunities for collective meaning-making [23]. In performance-oriented settings, recognition may function as a resource for self-definition while also recalibrating expectations and responsibilities, making identity-based resources context-dependent and potentially ambivalent. Therefore, the present study focuses on how recognition and responsibility are co-constituted within the dance company and whether relational and organizational conditions buffer or intensify this ambivalence.

Prior research has suggested that arts-focused group participation can support psychosocial change by fostering a sense of social belonging. One study examined vulnerable adults’ participation in a choir and reported perceived changes in emotion regulation and self-understanding; moreover, these changes were interpreted through social identity processes [24]. Recent studies highlighting relational safety and mutual respect as prerequisites for sustained participation in inclusive activities [17] further underscore the need for refined qualitative accounts of how inclusive dance reorganizes everyday social networks and psychosocial resources among adults with disabilities [25]. Accordingly, this study provides an empirically grounded and theoretically interpretable account of how participation in inclusive dance organizes the sense of belonging, relational safety, recognition, role processes, and continuity among adults with developmental disabilities, and how these conditions are experienced as changes in emotion regulation and self-evaluation.

Guided by the SIAH and SIMIC [5,22], this qualitative case study aimed to examine how adults with developmental disabilities perceived and narrated changes in emotion regulation and self-evaluation through participation in an inclusive dance company. Specifically, the study addressed the following research questions: (1) How did participants perceive and describe changes in their emotion regulation and self-evaluation resulting from participation in an inclusive dance company? (2) How were these experiences shaped through identity-based resources such as belonging, relational safety, and recognition? (3) How was membership in the dance company experienced as both a psychosocial resource and source of pressure in participants’ everyday lives?

2 Theoretical Framework

We considered participation in inclusive dance as an analytic entry point—a group-based participation context in which individuals receive recognition and feedback, and take on roles through their interactions. These experiences influence how they regulate their emotions and how they evaluate themselves. We interpreted these mechanisms through the SIAH and, complementarily, the SIMIC [5,6].

2.1 The Social Identity Approach to Health

Social identity approaches to health assume that individual psychological characteristics or healthcare utilization patterns alone cannot sufficiently explain health and well-being [6,26]. Accordingly, SIAH treats group membership and its relational organization—interactional norms, status relations, and role expectations—not as contextual background but as conditions that structure psychosocial experience and support emotional stability and psychological adjustment [5,26]. This orientation is particularly relevant to

disability research because disability is a social identity shaped through social relations and institutional conditions, in which stigma and discrimination may coexist with collective solidarity and shared meaning that can support well-being [23].

The SIAH posits that group membership is a constitutive condition of psychosocial experience [6,26]. Group membership provides shared meaning systems, standards of value, and normative expectations, thereby shaping stress appraisal, coping orientation, and the availability and interpretation of social support [6,26]. In the present study, SIAH is used to examine how belonging, relational safety, recognition, and role enactment are produced through interaction within an inclusive dance company, and how these conditions organize emotion regulation and self-evaluation as psychosocial accomplishments rather than isolated intrapersonal states [5,26]. The analytic focus is on the socially meaningful standards and evaluative signals through which self-worth and competence are affirmed, recalibrated, and rendered emotionally manageable in participation contexts [5,6].

Being recognized as a “welcomed member” of an arts-focused group can support perceived competence, emotional stability, and the expansion of relational networks among adults with developmental disabilities [5]. This emphasis aligns with the social cure perspective, which proposes that arts-focused group participation can support recovery through social identity pathways [20]. Arts-focused groups are particularly salient because recognition and evaluation are repeatedly produced through interaction, feedback, and role participation within them. This allows “scenes of recognition” to accumulate and serve as identity-relevant resources, rather than remaining isolated one-off moments [6,20].

This view is supported by integrative empirical evidence indicating that social identity indicators are systematically associated with health behaviors and psychosocial outcomes, reinforcing the plausibility of identity-based pathways as more than interpretive metaphors [27]. In this study, we apply SIAH to interpret participation in inclusive dance not merely as “program effects,” but as a group-based process in which relationships, recognition, and role expectations are organized through interaction, and to specify how these patterned experiences are narrated as psychosocial resources reflected in perceived shifts in emotion regulation and self-evaluation.

2.2 The Social Identity Model of Identity Change

The SIMIC provides a transition-sensitive account of how social identity organizes emotional experience, self-understanding, and relational expectations, and how the maintenance and formation of group memberships lay the groundwork for health and well-being [5,22]. Rather than treating belonging as a background factor, the SIMIC specifies when and how identity resources are preserved, acquired, and linked across contexts during periods of change [22]. It also recognizes that meaningful group belonging can either support or undermine psychosocial foundations, depending on how it is enacted in context [5].

The SIMIC conceptualizes these dynamics through three interrelated ideas: identity continuity, identity gain, and multiple group memberships [22]. Identity continuity refers to sustaining valued memberships in ways that maintain a coherent sense of self and emotional stability despite shifts in routines and contexts [21]. In this study, continuity concerns whether and how inclusive dance company membership becomes integrated into participants’ daily lives and relational networks. In this framing, emotion regulation is narrated as stabilizing through predictability, relational reassurance, and a more coherent sense of self across situations [5,21]. Identity gain captures the acquisition of a new “we,” through which individuals access identity-based resources that support psychological functioning in new social contexts [22]. Within the dance company, gain may be realized through repeated role participation, patterned feedback, and recognition. These processes can reshape the criteria by which participants evaluate themselves as compe-

tent and valued. Accordingly, changes in self-evaluation are interpreted less as an intra-individual “increase in confidence” and more as alignment with shared standards of value, through which one’s contribution becomes legitimate and socially meaningful within the collective frame [5].

Multiple group memberships refer to the distribution and expansion of psychosocial resources—such as social support, meaning, and perceived control—across more than one valued group [5,28]. In this study, this concept provides a lens for examining how dance company membership, family relationships, and everyday relational contexts may function as distinct yet compatible sources of psychosocial resources [28]. Inclusive dance may facilitate entry into a new social space without requiring the severance of pre-existing memberships, thereby enabling identity continuity and identity gain to be jointly realized [20,28]. This aspect is particularly salient for adults with developmental disabilities, whose opportunities for everyday belonging may be structurally constrained. Under such conditions, compatible memberships across the dance company, family relationships, and everyday relational contexts may provide differentiated psychosocial resources, including recognition, emotional reassurance, and social belonging, through which participation-related experiences are interpreted and sustained [21].

The SIMIC was not treated as a causal model to be tested for effects. Instead, it was employed as a set of sensitizing concepts for interpreting how identity resources are carried, reconfigured, or strained as participants moved between the dance company and broader everyday life [22]. The analysis focused on how belonging was formed and strengthened through participation, how role and recognition experiences were narrated, and how links to contexts outside the dance company—including family, community, and everyday relational networks—were articulated as part of perceived changes in emotion regulation and self-evaluation. By examining whether existing and newly formed memberships were described as mutually reinforcing or as generating tension, the study sought to clarify the ambivalent experience of identity-based resources, particularly the co-presence of recognition as a psychosocial resource and role-related responsibility as a potential burden [5].

2.3 Inclusive Dance Participation through the Lens of Social Identity

From a social identity perspective, participation in an inclusive dance company is best understood as a group-based relational process in which interaction unfolds over time, roles are allocated and negotiated, and participants come to inhabit a shared “we” [5,6]. As inclusive dance typically follows recurring cycles of practice, rehearsal, and performance preparation, it provides repeated opportunities to build relational safety, establish patterned recognition and feedback, and socially validate role enactment. Accordingly, perceived changes in emotion regulation and self-evaluation are interpreted as psychosocial processes made intelligible through these patterned conditions of belonging and recognition, rather than as isolated intra-individual fluctuations.

This interpretation aligns with recent research on inclusive dance participation, showing that the quality and sustainability of participation are shaped by social conditions—such as accessibility, support systems, and the normative climate—that enable legitimate membership [16]. This shifts the focus from program “attendance” to the interactional and organizational arrangements through which inclusion is enacted in practice, including how norms and role expectations are structured and how they influence emotional stability and self-understanding [16].

Integrated dance and disability arts pedagogy further suggests that relational formation is not reducible to verbal exchange: bodily attunement, shared rhythm, and mutual attention function as primary media through which relationships are built [29]. From a social identity perspective, such embodied coordination can be understood as an interactional medium through which relational safety is enacted and recognition

cues are communicated, thereby positioning participants as legitimate contributors to a collectively produced performance [29]. Recognition generated in these routines can be consequential for self-evaluation, as it provides socially meaningful cues through which competence, value, and self-respect are affirmed and revised. Consistent with this view, qualitative research on the participation of individuals with intellectual disabilities in the performing arts has indicated that arts activities create contexts in which social participation is enacted and relational networks are extended. Inclusive dance is thus more fruitfully interpreted as enabling conditions under which belonging and recognition become possible, rather than as a direct cause of individual change [30]. On this account, perceived changes in emotion regulation and self-evaluation are understood as outcomes of processes through which collective performance accumulates recognition and legitimizes membership over time, making it more plausible that identity continuity and identity gain are co-narrated when participation remains compatible with pre-existing affiliations and everyday supports [20,31].

In this sense, inclusive dance can be understood as a site where recognition may become a resource for self-definition, while role responsibility and performance expectations may also be experienced as sources of pressure, thereby rendering the process of becoming and remaining a group member empirically visible [5,6].

3 Materials and Methods

3.1 Design

We adopted a qualitative embedded case study design to examine how adults with developmental disabilities perceived and narrated changes in emotion regulation and self-evaluation stemming from their participation in an inclusive dance company [32]. The present study was designed as an exploratory and interpretive inquiry focusing on how these processes were experienced and narrated in a bounded case context [33]. The bounded case comprised the dance company and its core activity cycle (practice, rehearsal, and performance preparation), including the interactional scenes through which participation was enacted and evaluated. Consistent with the logic of an embedded case study, the dance company was treated as a single collective case, with each participant serving as an embedded unit of analysis [32,34]. The study was grounded in a relativist ontology and a constructionist epistemology, interpreting accounts of change as situated meaning-making shaped by relationships and institutional arrangements rather than as objective reports of a single reality. The SIAH and SIMIC served as sensitizing concepts to guide the analytical interpretation of participants' narratives concerning how belonging, relational safety, and recognition were produced and sustained through participation, and how these processes were linked to participants' accounts of emotion regulation and self-evaluation [5,22,28,34,35]. The interpretation followed an interpretivist orientation—reading participants' narratives in relation to the case context and its interactional norms. Inclusion in a shared “we” and the pursuit of social validation were considered relational processes that influence emotional experiences and inform self-evaluation criteria [36].

3.2 Sampling and Participants

We used purposive sampling to recruit information-rich cases for examining how emotion regulation and self-evaluation were constituted and narrated within a shared, performance-oriented group context [37,38]. The study population comprised adult members with developmental disabilities of a single inclusive dance company in Seoul, South Korea, along with their primary caregivers, who were familiar with the changes in their daily lives before and after participation. We sought to recruit eligible individuals and their primary caregivers from an inclusive dance company in Seoul, South Korea. Recruitment was

conducted in cooperation with the dance company. The organization distributed study information, while enrollment was completed through direct contact with the researcher to preserve voluntariness. As an organizational gatekeeper mediated access, recruitment procedures were designed to minimize undue influence by clearly separating organizational facilitation from the consent process [39]. Nevertheless, the small number of eligible participants within a single organization and the gatekeeper-mediated recruitment process may have contributed to sample homogeneity and potential selection bias. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Sogang University (IRB No. SGUIRB-A-2510-67). Additionally, written informed consent was obtained from all participants and caregivers prior to data collection. For participants with developmental disabilities, the study information was provided in accessible language, and assent was reaffirmed throughout the research.

Dancers were eligible to participate if they were aged 19 years or older, had participated in the dance company for at least one year, were able to participate in interviews and observations, and could express their experiences verbally and nonverbally and with meaning-confirmation procedures when needed [40,41]. Exclusion criteria were applied to ensure safety and feasibility. Participants were excluded if health conditions posed foreseeable risks during physical activity or if communication or emotional difficulties were expected to substantially compromise safe participation or meaningful engagement in the interview. Caregivers were eligible if they were the dancer's legal guardian or primary caregiver and were able to provide contextual information regarding the participant's emotional changes and everyday life circumstances before and after participation. Caregiver accounts were treated as contextual and corroborative data rather than as substitutes for dancers' accounts [42].

The final sample comprised six participants: three adult dancers with developmental disabilities who had participated in the dance company for at least one year and three primary caregivers. Demographic and background characteristics of the dancers and caregivers are presented in Table 1. All dancers combined employment with weekly rehearsals, and some also took on supportive roles within the company (e.g., assisting dance teachers with warm-ups). Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and potentially identifying details (e.g., exact age, workplace, and residence) were generalized to protect confidentiality. The sample size was determined based on the study's narrow analytic aim, bounded and relatively homogeneous nature of the case, and theory-informed interpretive design [43]. Although the number of focal participants was small, sample adequacy was supported through repeated in-depth interviews, the inclusion of contextual data obtained through caregiver interviews, and sustained non-participant observation, which together enabled iterative comparison of recurring meaning patterns across the participants and data sources [44, 45]. Under these conditions, the sample provided sufficient depth and coherence for examining how identity-related processes, recognition, and perceived psychosocial change were articulated within a shared participation structure [33,46]. As all participants were drawn from the same organizational setting, engaged in comparable rehearsal and performance routines, and were interpreted within a clearly bounded case, the sample size was considered sufficient to support in-depth case-based analysis and reach saturation at the thematic patterning level rather than through numerical redundancy [47].

3.3 Data Collection

From October to December 2025, data were collected using semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation to establish multiple sources of evidence for the single case [32,36,38]. These methods captured participants' narrated experiences and the interactional conditions through which participation was enacted during rehearsals and performances. Interview guides addressed participation trajectories; emotion-related experiences and regulation in rehearsal and performance contexts; interpretations of others'

reactions, recognition, and feedback; role and relationship experiences within the dance company; and perceived links between company participation and everyday self-evaluation. To support comprehension and minimize response burden, questions were presented in brief units and clarified through paraphrasing and summary checks when meaning was unclear.

Table 1: Participant characteristics.

Participant	Role	Gender	Age	Disability Type	Participation/Background
P1	Dancer	Male	30s	Developmental disability	Dance company member for 13 years
P2	Dancer	Female	20s	Developmental disability	Dance company member for 9 years
P3	Dancer	Female	20s	Developmental disability	Dance company member for 12 years
Caregiver of P1	Caregiver	-	-	-	Contextual informant for P1
Caregiver of P2	Caregiver	-	-	-	Contextual informant for P2
Caregiver of P3	Caregiver	-	-	-	Contextual informant for P3

A total of 12 in-depth interviews were conducted, including nine interviews with the three dancers and three interviews with their primary caregivers. Each dancer participated in three interviews lasting approximately 40–70 min, whereas each caregiver participated in one interview lasting approximately 60–90 min. Dancer interviews were conducted face-to-face in emotionally secure settings, such as the dance company’s rehearsal space or a quiet room in a welfare institution. Caregivers were generally not present during dancer interviews, although their presence was allowed in some cases to support communication or reduce anxiety. Caregiver interviews were conducted face-to-face in the participants’ homes. Repeat interviews were scheduled as needed to support recall, reduce fatigue, and clarify meaning. Interviews with participants with developmental disabilities were conducted flexibly with attention to response patterns and fatigue, using procedures that supported concrete recall and meaning confirmation when needed. Caregiver interviews focused on contextual accounts of change across family and community settings, including everyday routines, support arrangements, and post-performance recontextualization. Observational data were collected across 10 sessions, each lasting 2–3 h, during practices, rehearsals, and public performances. The focus was on relational dynamics in collective performance scenes, such as bodily synchrony, interaction patterns in role allocation and enactment, and the circulation of emotional feedback. These scenes were systematically documented in field notes, which provided contextual grounding, and were iteratively read alongside interview data [48–50]. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts and field notes were organized in an integrated database to facilitate iterative cross-source analysis [51].

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis [52]. Reflexive thematic analysis views themes as interpretive constructions developed through the researcher’s sustained engagement with the data, rather than as patterns that are simply discovered within the dataset [52]. Consistent with this constructionist and interpretivist orientation, the analysis involved iterative processes of coding, comparison, refinement, and theme development. Interview transcripts and field notes were repeatedly read to ensure familiarity with the full dataset. Initial codes were generated for meaning units related to emotional experience and regulation,

self-evaluation, belonging and relational safety, recognition and role processes, and interactional norms and feedback scenes. The codes were first reviewed within each participant's dataset and then compared across the participants and data sources (dancer interviews, caregiver interviews, and observations) to identify convergences and variations that were organized into candidate themes. In this process, dancers' first-person accounts were treated as the primary basis for interpreting emotion regulation, self-evaluation, and subjective meaning, whereas caregiver interviews and observations were used to contextualize how these experiences were recognized, supported, and carried into everyday environments. Meaning-confirmation procedures were used to clarify participants' responses and contextual details within the interpretive analytic process. When participants' clarifications qualified an initial interpretation, the relevant codes and candidate themes were revisited and refined to better reflect the contextual meaning of their accounts and experiences. Themes were refined and named through iterative engagement with the raw data to confirm internal coherence and clarify thematic boundaries. Final interpretation drew on the SIAH and the SIMIC as sensitizing concepts rather than as deductive coding frameworks. Specifically, belonging and relational safety were interpreted in relation to group identification and health; links with existing networks through identity continuity; accumulated role enactment and recognition within the dance company through identity gain; and the extension of company experiences into everyday networks through multiple group memberships [5,22,28]. We used reflexive memos and analytic discussions throughout the analysis to document interpretive decisions and maintain an explicit link between excerpts, codes, and themes. Memos documented the rationale for thematic boundary decisions (e.g., merging, separating, or re-specifying themes) and were revisited when discrepant or deviant instances prompted further refinement. The final themes and subthemes are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Final themes and subthemes.

Final Themes	Subthemes
Identity Reinforcement: Reaffirming the "Acknowledged Member" Identity Through Audience Responses and Self-Expression	Emotional Uplift in Response to Audience Feedback
	Justifying Self-Evaluation Through Audience Responses
	Articulating Identity Through Embodied Self-Expression
Identity Gain: Forming Role-Based Self-Definitions Through Assistant-Teacher Responsibilities	Repositioning Within the Group Through Role Assignment
	Reconstructing Perceived Competence Through Teaching Experiences
	Internalizing Role Responsibility and Sustaining Practice
Identity Transfer and Repositioning: Extending Identity Formed Within the Dance Company into Everyday Networks and Social Position	Everyday Endorsement and Recontextualization of Stage-Based Identity
	Role Expectations and the Reconfiguration of Social Position
	Enacting Transferred Identity in Everyday Life and Stabilizing Emotion Regulation
Contingent Nature of Identity Resources: Accumulating Recognition Alongside Burden	Recognition Becoming Expectation: Evaluative Feedback Turning into Performance Pressure
	Belonging Becoming Normative: Care and Coordination Roles Accumulating as Relational Burden
	The Costs of Sustaining Identity: Motivational Force Coexisting with Physical-Practical Burdens

3.5 Methodological Rigor

We ensured methodological rigor using Lincoln and Guba's trustworthiness criteria: credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability [53]. Credibility was ensured by comparing thematic interpretations across dancer interviews, caregiver interviews, and non-participant observations. Convergences across sources supported the developing interpretations, whereas divergences prompted further analytic discussion and refinement of themes. Meaning-confirmation procedures were also used during interviews to clarify participants' responses and contextual details, and these clarifications were considered when refining codes and candidate themes during analysis. Confirmability was strengthened by maintaining reflexive memos and documenting an explicit chain of evidence linking excerpts, codes, and themes. Transferability was addressed through a thick description of the participation context and its interactional structure. Dependability was supported by an audit trail documenting key procedural and analytic decisions during data collection and analysis. Researcher positionality was addressed by performing reflexive memoing during data collection and analysis; documenting the assumptions related to disability, inclusion, and performance-based evaluation; and reflecting on how the researchers' external position relative to the participants' lived experiences could influence interpretation. The research team had professional and research experience related to dance, disability arts participation, adapted physical activity, and disability sport, which supported reflexive attention to inclusion, performance, and relational interaction throughout the study process. This process was used to monitor potential bias and refine the interpretations across interviews and field observations [54,55].

3.6 Integrity and Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the approved ethical protocol. All data were anonymized and securely stored to ensure confidentiality. Participants and caregivers were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Particular attention was given to the participants' autonomy and comprehension throughout the research process.

4 Results

Participation in the dance company was described as a process through which participants experienced meaningful emotional moments, shifts in self-evaluation, and repeated recognition as members through multiple public performances and everyday interactions. Across in-depth interviews, with caregiver accounts and non-participant observations as contextual support, change was described as more durable when performance was socially visible and interpreted by others as evidence of contribution within a shared "we," rather than as a self-contained, intra-individual shift. Thus, public performances emerged as high-salience recognition events that participants later reminisced about while describing subsequent role enactment and everyday interactions through which their sense of self was sustained.

4.1 Identity Reinforcement: Reaffirming the "Acknowledged Member" Identity through Audience Responses and Self-Expression

For participants, the stage functioned as a socially consequential scene of recognition, where their identity as dancers was publicly affirmed through immediate audience responses. Applause and cheers were understood both as affective encouragement and as socially legible evaluative cues of acceptance and affirmation, supporting a more durable self-definition as competent performers.

4.1.1 Emotional Uplift in Response to Audience Feedback

Participants described the audience's applause and positive reactions as emotionally salient moments in which their performance was received and valued. Across cases, audience feedback was described as an emotionally meaningful response through which participants recognized the positive reception of their performance in a public setting. P1 framed audience feedback as an emotionally resonant experience of being moved.

"I felt grateful to the audience and was really moved... When I heard that, I got choked up... I felt really good." (P1, in-depth interview)

Similarly, P2 regarded audience reactions as recognition of the value of her performance and articulated the experience in terms of pride.

"I hope people think, 'She's really good.' ... When I get the audience's response, I feel so good." (P2, in-depth interview)

P3 considered the audience's applause as external acknowledgment of her effort. She regarded the audience's response as confirmation that her diligence had been acknowledged.

"I hope the audience is moved... When I get applause, I feel so good... I want them to think I'm someone who puts a lot of effort into dance." (P3, in-depth interview)

These accounts indicated that audience feedback served as an effective marker of public acceptance across participants, although the specific emotional meaning attached to that acceptance—such as being moved, feeling proud, or having one's effort acknowledged—varied among participants. In this respect, audience response functioned not only as immediate encouragement but also as public confirmation that their performance was meaningful for others.

4.1.2 Justifying Self-Evaluation through Audience Responses

Audience responses were perceived as socially consequential signals that participants used to judge whether their performances were legitimately received and valued. Verbal praise and applause provided a public basis for affirming the performance's value, which participants then used to build a clearer foundation for self-evaluation. P1 described how audience appraisal became an internal judgment that he had "really done well."

"When people say I did well, it feels like I really did well. And when the audience applauds, I feel so good that I start thinking, 'I really did well.'" (P1, in-depth interview)

For P2, applause functioned as public validation of capability, rather than a response she saw limited by body size or disability. She described the moment as recognition that "being able to dance" was socially accepted.

"Even if I'm overweight, I can dance. And people with disabilities can dance too. Seeing others applaud made me feel recognized. That was the best part." (P2, in-depth interview)

Likewise, P3 did not interpret applause as politeness; instead, she regarded it as external acknowledgment that her sustained effort had been noticed, which created a more affirmative basis for self-evaluation.

"It feels like the audience recognizes everything I've practiced and worked for. When I hear the applause, I think, 'My effort wasn't in vain,' and it makes me feel good." (P3, in-depth interview)

This evaluative function became especially salient when juxtaposed with earlier experiences of exclusion. In P2's case, her caregiver recalled that, in a conventional dance academy, she had been denied the chance to appear on stage despite wanting to participate.

"When she used to attend another academy, P2 really wanted to be on stage at the recital, but they wouldn't include her. She was very upset then." (Caregiver of P2, in-depth interview)

Overall, applause and praise served as public forms of acceptance through which participants considered their performances to be socially acknowledged and worthwhile, thereby providing a more secure basis for self-evaluation. While this pattern was evident across accounts, repeated recognition on stage became especially consequential in cases where prior exclusion formed part of the biographical frame of reference. This is because repeated recognition was described as a contrasting experience through which participants' sense of competence and self-worth was gradually reinforced.

4.1.3 Articulating Identity through Embodied Self-Expression

As participants' stage experiences increased, they increasingly described dance not just as technical execution but also as an embodied mode of self-expression and communication. Participants who experienced constraints in verbal communication described dance as a practical medium for conveying their intention and emotion, with the stage allowing such expression to become socially legible through others' reactions as well as publicly recognizable. When asked what the stage meant to her, P3 defined dance explicitly as "language," stressing that bodily expression feels more accessible than speech and operates as a medium of communication among people with disabilities.

"What is the stage to me? It's language. ... Usually people express things with words, but it's more comfortable to show it through dance. Dance is a language for people with disabilities." (P3, in-depth interview)

In her account, performance was tied to being remembered as someone who "works hard," indicating that effort and diligence were made visible and recognizable through public performance. Similarly, P2 framed dance as "something to be proud of," describing performance as a way of presenting herself in a positive light to others. As she accumulated affirming feedback, such as "you look cool," she anticipated how she would be seen and evaluated based on her on-stage movement.

"Dancing is 'showing off with my body.' ... I think that if I become a 'cool person' on stage, people won't bully me. Since I started dancing, I've heard 'you're cool' a lot of times." (P2, in-depth interview)

She also linked the stage to feeling proud of being a dancer while living with a disability, indicating that public performance helped reorient her self-evaluation.

"I felt proud that now people with disabilities can also be on stage. ... I feel proud of myself because I'm dancing even though I have a disability." (P2, in-depth interview)

Throughout these narratives, in which dance is described as "language" and performance as "pride," the participants repeatedly used their stage experiences as reference points to articulate their sense of self through embodied self-expression. Across accounts, stage experience functioned as a context in which embodied expression became socially interpretable through others' responses. However, the meaning attached to that experience differed in emphasis and was described by participants in terms of communication or as a source of pride. In this way, publicly acknowledged performance provided a basis for participants to

understand themselves as recognizable and legitimate members of the company beyond the immediate performance event.

4.2 Identity Gain: Forming Role-Based Self-Definitions through Assistant-Teacher Responsibilities

Some participants were positioned not only as “dancers on stage” but also as members who helped and guided others during practice and class sessions. This role shift moved participants from “performer” to “contributing member,” as recognition became tied to role-based contributions. Assistant-teacher responsibilities were not presented as a simple division of tasks; instead, they were linked to recognition as a “contributing member” and to the expectations that accompanied that recognition. Forms of address such as “assistant teacher,” “leader,” and “teacher” served as socially recognizable labels through which participants identified their contributions while also acknowledging the responsibilities associated with those positions. This role-based identity became increasingly familiar through repeated enactment, was affirmed in interaction, and became an ongoing point of reference for conduct over time.

4.2.1 Repositioning within the Group through Role Assignment

Role-based identity gain was most clearly expressed in participants’ descriptions of being invited to take an assistant-teacher role as well as in embracing that role on their own terms. In these narratives, role assignment was described as not just a task but as a position in the group through which participants’ responsibilities and contributions became more visible. P3 distinguished her role as an “assistant teacher,” rather than a lead teacher, and described her role enactment in terms of responsibility.

“I’m not the main instructor; I’m an assistant instructor. I thought I should take on the role with a sense of responsibility, so I practiced hard and became an assistant teacher. At first, I didn’t want to do it because I was worried that I might not teach well, but now I’ll do my best as an assistant instructor.” (P3, in-depth interview)

Likewise, P2 noted that the leadership role began as a suggestion, emphasizing that the suggestion was grounded in a positive evaluation of her performance. She described considering the role assignment as legitimate because it followed recognition of prior participation.

“I was told I was doing well, and I was encouraged to take on the role of an instructor. ... I will work hard as an assistant instructor in the dance company.” (P2, in-depth interview)

P1 took up being called “teacher” as a central descriptor of his position, linking the act of teaching to both enjoyment and meaning. Here, the repeated use of the title functioned as a visible marker that the role was socially recognized.

“As a teacher, I really want to teach a lot. It’s kind of fun because I’m trying to teach the kids. They call me ‘teacher.’” (P1, in-depth interview)

Throughout these accounts, the participants described being addressed as “assistant instructor” and “teacher” in ways that acknowledged the responsibilities associated with those roles. These role titles functioned as socially recognized markers of position within the group; however, participants differed in how they emphasized the meaning of the role by referring to it in terms of responsibility, earned recognition, or enjoyment in teaching. Role assignment was described not as externally imposed duties but as a way to understand one’s contribution and place in the group more concretely and meaningfully.

4.2.2 Reconstructing Perceived Competence through Teaching Experiences

Taking on an assistant-teacher role within the company provided participants with opportunities to describe competence in interactionally grounded terms and to relate their self-evaluation more closely to role enactment. In these accounts, competence was described not as an abstract personal quality but as something confirmed and strengthened through teaching others in the group.

“After becoming an assistant instructor in the dance company and teaching the kids, my confidence really went up. When I take on the instructor role, I feel like I become more special, and I’m proud that I can share the abilities I have.” (P2, in-depth interview)

For P3, the teaching role was closely tied to being addressed as “teacher” within the group. Being called “teacher” was not described as a momentary uplift; rather, it was articulated as recognition coupled with responsibility, grounded in her perception that others relied on her presence.

“When they call me ‘teacher,’ it makes me feel good. It feels like I’m being recognized. I also feel responsible because it seems like the kids would feel anxious if I weren’t there.” (P3, in-depth interview)

This interpretation was supported by non-participant observation. Field notes repeatedly documented P3 checking peers’ condition before practice, encouraging a dancer with pronounced emotional fluctuation by suggesting, “Shall we try it together?”, and soothing a younger dancer who was crying. These scenes contextualized how the title of “teacher” was enacted as practical relational work—monitoring, encouraging, and soothing—rather than remaining merely symbolic recognition. P1 likewise connected teaching to positive affect and to the sense that instruction was an expected enactment of his role, emphasizing both enjoyment and perceived competence.

“I want to teach my friends a lot as a ‘teacher,’ and I think that would make me feel better. I’m pretty good at dancing, so it’s fun when I try to teach the kids.” (P1, in-depth interview)

In participants’ accounts, teaching was narrated not as an auxiliary task but as an occasion to demonstrate competence in practice and to redefine it in role-based terms. Thus, teaching enabled participants’ competence to become grounded in interaction and role enactment, although they emphasized somewhat different aspects of that experience, including confidence, responsibility, and enjoyment. Repeated enactment of the role and being addressed as “teacher” provided a more stable basis for self-evaluation by linking participants’ competence to what they were able to do for other members of the group.

4.2.3 Internalizing Role Responsibility and Sustaining Practice

A defining feature of identity gain was that the assistant-teacher role was not experienced as a discrete, one-off assignment; rather, participants described it as an interactionally sustained standard of conduct and an ongoing sense of responsibility within the dance company. In these accounts, role responsibility was described not as a temporary obligation attached to a title but as an enduring expectation that guided participants’ conduct during practice and beyond. In practice scenes, P3 described this responsibility as requiring timely intervention, construing peers’ distraction or disengagement not as “someone else’s issue” but as a situation in which she felt obliged to step in.

“Since they’re younger than me, I have to look after them. ... If the kids don’t dance and just fool around, I go over and tell them, ‘You need to do it properly,’ because I’m the teacher.” (P3, in-depth interview)

Similarly, P2 referred to herself as both a “dancer” and an “assistant instructor” toward the end of her interview and expressed a clear intention to sustain the role. Her account framed the role not only as something requested by others but as a position she intended to continue enacting over time.

“As I keep dancing, I will work hard as a dancer and also as an assistant instructor within the dance company. I want to continue teaching the kids in the future.” (P2, in-depth interview)

This sense of responsibility also extended beyond the dance company and functioned as a reference point for regulating emotional responses in everyday contexts. The caregiver of P2 explained that reminding her of her teacher role helps her regain composure when she becomes withdrawn or stubborn, suggesting that role-related expectations were used as a practical cue for reorienting conduct in daily interactions.

“When she is struggling and cries or becomes stubborn, when I say, ‘You’re an instructor in the dance company—can you show such a weak side? A teacher shouldn’t act like that,’ she pulls herself together quickly. She takes being a teacher very seriously.” (Caregiver of P2, in-depth interview)

Overall, responsibility was described in practice-related terms—such as monitoring peers’ participation, intervening when needed, and sustaining rehearsal flow—rather than as an abstract moral principle. These accounts suggest that role responsibility was sustained through repeated enactment in concrete situations, while caregiver data further indicates that such role expectations could also be mobilized outside the company as practical cues for restoring composure. Therefore, the “teacher” role was described as extending beyond the immediate practice setting and as informing participants’ conduct and emotion-related behavior in ongoing and concrete ways.

4.3 Identity Transfer and Repositioning: Extending Identity Formed within the Dance Company into Everyday Networks and Social Position

The identities formed in the dance company were not confined to the performance setting; they were also carried into everyday networks and served as reference points for recognition and positioning. Routine interactions, adjustments to work and daily schedules, and self-presentation in online spaces served as occasions for stage-based meanings to be reiterated beyond the venue. For adults with developmental disabilities, this extension was described as an ongoing and often mediated process in which caregivers and others shared performance materials and reorganized their practical conditions to enable continued participation.

4.3.1 Everyday Endorsement and Recontextualization of Stage-Based Identity

Stage experiences extended into participants’ everyday lives, and being “someone who dances” was reaffirmed through daily interactions. In these accounts, stage-based identity was described as being reiterated through subsequent interactions and everyday forms of acknowledgment. P1 most directly described how the sense of performing well on stage continued beyond the performance moment and remained meaningful even afterward.

“After the performance, I was so moved. I also felt like I really did well in front of the fans... I felt like I did much better than before, so I was really happy.” (P1, in-depth interview)

Caregiver accounts further suggested that such stage-based recognition was carried into everyday settings through practical accommodation and self-presentation. P3’s caregiver reported that workplace awareness of her dance participation translated into concrete accommodations, including schedule adjustments.

"I told people at her workplace that P3 dances, and they even asked me to send performance photos, so I did. ... On those days, because she had dance class, they sometimes let her leave work about 30 min early. People at her workplace all know that she dances, and there's an atmosphere of acknowledging it." (Caregiver of P3, in-depth interview)

P2's caregiver described how participation in the dance company became linked to everyday self-presentation. The caregiver reported that P2 used her dance photos as her KakaoTalk profile picture, which suggested visible pride and a way of presenting her role within the group.

"She really loves coming here. She even uploads photos of her dancing as her KakaoTalk profile picture. For her, that's a big source of pride, and it seems like a way of showing her identity as one of the 'teachers.'" (Caregiver of P2, in-depth interview)

Overall, stage-based recognition was sustained through concrete arrangements and daily practice, with its continuation described differently by participants, such as lasting emotional affirmation, workplace accommodation, or everyday self-presentation. Rather than remaining tied to the performance venue, dance participation became embedded in participants' daily routines and in the ways they were positioned within everyday contexts.

4.3.2 Role Expectations and the Reconfiguration of Social Position

As experiences extended into everyday life, participants came to be positioned not only as individuals who "dance" but also as members bound by role expectations. Those who served as assistant instructors described a dual experience: being addressed as "someone who teaches" often felt burdensome, yet the responsibility of coordinating others' participation gradually became part of practice and daily contexts. P3 recalled that when the assistant-instructor role was first proposed, she experienced substantial psychological pressure related to teaching and responsibility for others.

"At first, I didn't want to do it. Becoming a teacher felt burdensome. I worried that I wouldn't teach well, and I'm still not good enough but would have to take care of the kids, so that felt like a burden." (P3, in-depth interview)

Despite this hesitation, P3's conduct in rehearsals reflected an enacted instructor position characterized by emotional care and mediation. The observation notes reported several rehearsal instances in which P3 offered reassurance to a younger dancer who had begun crying after receiving strict coaching (e.g., "It's not because they don't like you" or "The teacher isn't angry at you"). This suggested that she sometimes functioned as an interactional buffer during emotionally charged moments. Observation notes also reported that P3 offered immediate, directive feedback to peers (e.g., "Come closer," "Good job"), indicating that the perceived weight of the role was accompanied by practical, in-the-moment guidance.

Role expectations were also referenced in home settings. Caregiver accounts indicated that the dance-company role title functioned as a practical standard for everyday conduct. P2's caregiver explained that invoking her "teacher" position within the company could quickly reorganize her attitude and bring social responsibility to the forefront.

"When she gets stubborn, if I say, 'You're a teacher in the dance company, so you should behave like that at home too, so you can speak confidently to the professor,' her attitude changes right away. Her position in the dance company becomes connected to the standards for how she behaves at home." (Caregiver of P2, in-depth interview)

Overall, role-based recognition transcended beyond the company as a socially consequential expectation—what was initially described as psychological pressure was later enacted in concrete situations as emotional mediation, directive guidance, and a standard for everyday conduct. Hence, role expectations were described as reconfiguring participants' social position across rehearsal and home contexts.

4.3.3 Enacting Transferred Identity in Everyday Life and Stabilizing Emotion Regulation

Participants' accounts of identity transfer were not limited to others' recognition following performances; they also included descriptions of recurrent adjustments in everyday conduct and more settled emotional responses in daily life. In these accounts, role-based identities such as "teacher" and "dancer" were described as practical reference points for consideration in everyday situations. Continued engagement with dance outside the company, whether through self-directed practice or role-related reminders, was described as a routine with positive affect and as sustaining behavioral regulation in daily life.

P1 described repeatedly dancing at home, indicating that the positive affect associated with performance could be sustained in everyday life through continued, self-directed practice.

"Even when I dance alone at home, I just feel so good and happy. I keep thinking I want to keep doing it." (P1, in-depth interview)

Caregiver accounts further suggested that role identity could also function as a practical cue for restoring composure and reinforcing responsibility in daily life. P2's caregiver described how she used her role identity to regain composure when she felt emotionally unsettled.

"When she is having a hard time, she tells herself, 'I'm a teacher, so I should do well,' and she pulls herself together. That process boosts her self-esteem and really helps her regulate emotions in everyday life." (Caregiver of P2, in-depth interview)

Similarly, P3's caregiver emphasized that continued participation, along with assistant-instructor responsibilities, appeared to strengthen her confidence and sense of responsibility in daily life.

"She gained a lot of confidence through dance. Especially since becoming an assistant instructor, she seems to feel a much stronger sense of responsibility than before. Her overall attitude in everyday life has become more composed." (Caregiver of P3, in-depth interview)

Overall, identities such as "dancer" and "teacher" were sustained through recurring cues—including self-reminders, routines, and caregiver prompts—with their everyday significance described somewhat differently as positive affect during solitary practice, restored composure through self-reminding, or a more composed attitude linked to ongoing responsibility. Rather than remaining tied to performance events, these role meanings continued to shape participants' emotional responses and behavioral standards in daily life.

4.4 Contingent Nature of Identity Resources: Accumulating Recognition alongside Burden

Participation in the dance company afforded experiences of belonging and social recognition. However, participants' accounts indicated that recognition did not translate into uniformly positive emotional responses. Being considered someone others relied on was described as emotionally affirming; however, it also generated performance pressure and relational responsibility. When recognition was coupled with role expectations, positive emotions were accompanied by tension and burden.

4.4.1 Recognition Becoming Expectation: Evaluative Feedback Turning into Performance Pressure

Participants described being positioned as someone “reliable” or “excellent” as emotionally rewarding. However, it was also associated with increased vigilance about mistakes and an intensified sense of responsibility. When other members oriented toward a participant as a reference point for coordinating group activity, recognition was narrated by participants as causing heightened sensitivity to error and its anticipated consequences. In these accounts, recognition was described as a condition that increased awareness of being watched, relied upon, and held responsible for maintaining others’ participation. P3 described that being watched and relied upon, especially when others followed her as a “teacher,” felt burdensome because any error could destabilize the group.

“Now the pressure feels so big... It’s stressful when the kids look up to me. They trust me as a teacher... If I make a mistake, it can confuse them. That worries me so much.” (P3, in-depth interview)

Similarly, P1 framed the stage as a socially evaluative setting in which being watched quickly translated into stress about performing well.

“When I’m standing on stage and people are watching, it can feel like I’m being judged. So I get a lot of stress, thinking that I have to do well.” (P1, in-depth interview)

P3’s caregiver further indicated that being repeatedly labeled an “ace” could become psychologically costly when physical strain and fatigue were present. In this account, public recognition was experienced less as support and more as an obligation to persist despite pain.

“Even when she wants to rest because something hurts, people say, ‘You’re the ace,’ and tell her to keep going. They call her the ace all the time... She says that makes it harder and more stressful. She endures the pain because she feels that she has to meet those expectations.” (Caregiver of P3, in-depth interview)

Overall, these accounts suggest that recognition operates as an ambivalent resource, with its burden described varyingly as fear of making mistakes in front of others, stress associated with being watched and evaluated, or pressure to endure pain to meet repeated expectations. Rather than remaining a source of affirmation alone, recognition reportedly became consequential when it was accompanied by ongoing evaluative attention and responsibility toward others.

4.4.2 Belonging Becoming Normative: Care and Coordination Roles Accumulating as Relational Burden

As participants’ sense of belonging within the dance company deepened, it was accompanied by heightened normative expectations to sustain the rehearsal flow and absorb interactional disruptions, including coordinating others’ emotions and performances. Helping and caring for others were described as meaningful and identity-affirming experiences. However, repeated acts of helping could consolidate into routinized relational labor, with demands for adjustment and emotional buffering being described as burdensome by participants. In these accounts, belonging was described not only as an emotional closeness to the group but also as an expectation to remain available for others through continued care, coordination, and emotional adjustment. P3 explained that feeling responsible for “looking after” other members functioned not only as a reason to continue attending but also as a source of psychological pressure.

“Honestly, I keep coming because of the kids... There’s no one else to take care of them, so I feel like I have to come. But that also feels like a burden—this pressure that I must take care of them.” (P3, in-depth interview)

Similarly, P1’s caregiver portrayed P1 as someone who had difficulty letting go of responsibilities once assumed. While helping others carried personal meaning, the same commitment could become excessive and emotionally taxing over time.

“He’s the kind of person who can’t let go of the role he’s taken on—it’s the same in dance. Helping someone matters a lot to him, but sometimes it becomes too much and ends up weighing on him.” (Caregiver of P1, in-depth interview)

This burdened side of belonging was also visible in observation notes. When strict coaching made a younger member cry, P3 reassured the dancer, explaining that the strictness was not personal and that the instructor was not angry. These materials showed care and coordination as forms of interactional work that supported group functioning while also indicating the ongoing need to monitor others, intervene emotionally, and maintain rehearsal participation as relational burdens. Thus, although helping others was considered meaningful, it also became burdensome when care and coordination were required repeatedly for sustaining group practice.

4.4.3 The Costs of Sustaining Identity: Motivational Force Coexisting with Physical–Practical Burdens

Sustained participation within the dance company was not explained solely by emotional rewards; it also entailed practical and bodily demands, including physical fatigue and the need to reconfigure daily routines. Participants frequently described enduring pain and exhaustion to continue performing as well as expectations to “do well” as burdensome. In these accounts, continued participation was described as being sustained through ongoing efforts for managing physical discomfort, fatigue, and disrupted routines while still meeting role- and performance-related expectations. Thus, these burdens became part of the conditions under which participation was sustained over time.

P1 described physical discomfort during rehearsal in relation to concerns about performance quality. Despite this, he felt that he had to continue.

“My ankle hurt a little during practice... I was worried that it might make me do poorly on stage. But I thought I should just push through.” (P1, in-depth interview)

P3’s caregiver provided a concrete account of accumulated fatigue produced by combining paid work with dance participation, describing the practical strain of transitioning directly from work to rehearsal and the added pressure of needing to perform well.

“On Mondays, as soon as she gets off work, she has to go straight to dance. That’s honestly very hard. She gets tired, and there’s also the pressure to go there and still do well... It can be painful to watch.” (Caregiver of P3, in-depth interview)

Observation notes further contextualized the coexistence of motivation and strain. During performance rehearsal, P3 briefly sat down due to severe calf cramps and, after being advised to rest, returned to practice. Overall, these accounts indicated that identity-related motivation (being recognized and expected to “do well”) coexisted with physical and routine costs, with such costs described varyingly as performing through pain, managing accumulated fatigue, or reorganizing everyday schedules around continued participation. Rather than diminishing commitment altogether, these burdens were regarded as part of the ongoing conditions through which participation is maintained over time.

5 Discussion

Stage-based recognition was described as a social identity process in which recognition served as a foundation for self-definition and group endorsement [5,56]. The psychosocial value of participation lay less in the act itself than in the way social identification rendered recognition, meaning, and relational support practically available within-group life [5,6]. In this case, stage-based recognition was sustained through repeated enactment and everyday reauthorization, and this process helps explain how inclusive dance participation became associated with perceived changes in emotion regulation and self-evaluation while also revealing the demands involved in maintaining identity-based resources.

5.1 Mechanisms Generating Identity Gain

The central change observed among participants was an identity-gain process through which they came to define themselves as “dancers” and stabilized that definition within relationships. This identity gain is best understood as a change in social positioning within the company’s moral and relational order, rather than as a residual effect of post-performance mood. Participants’ narratives indicated a transition from being primarily treated as recipients of support to being recognized as contributors whose performance and conduct became interpretable within a shared evaluative frame and a collective “we” [6,56]. What matters here is not participation *per se*, but the specific interactional conditions under which contribution becomes legible and warrantable. This interpretation aligns with social identity accounts of arts-based group participation, which locate well-being–relevant effects in collective meaning and recognition rather than in mere exposure to activity [20].

This trajectory of identity gain closely aligns with the identity-gain pathway posited in the SIMIC: new group memberships facilitate psychosocial adaptation by restructuring shared meanings and evaluative reference points [5,57]. The present case refines this pathway as a staged mechanism: (a) rehearsal enacted membership through repeated co-presence and coordinated practice; (b) public performance amplified recognition by providing socially legible cues (audience responses and within-group feedback); and (c) repetition stabilized self-definition over time by making the identity claim repeatedly confirmable within shared norms.

In this study, identity gain was not explained solely by the affective dimension of belonging; public performance and social naming emerged as central mechanisms of authorization. Forms of address such as “dancer” and, in some cases, “teacher” functioned as social authorizations within the participation context. These terms served not only as descriptive labels but also as role identities that carried qualifications, expectations, and accountability. Such authorization is analytically consequential because it renders identity claims socially warrantable and anchors self-evaluation in shared standards rather than private appraisal alone [5]. Audience responses and within-group feedback therefore operated simultaneously as recognition and as normative cues, structuring social standing and recalibrating evaluative criteria within the group.

Role-based identities formed through inclusive arts participation extended beyond situational role performance to a broader reorganization of self-concept. Participants described experiences in which the body was re-signified not only as an object of management or deficit, but as a medium of expression and communication. Viewed through a social identity lens, these accounts indicate that the participation ecology afforded an alternative evaluative frame in which capability was publicly recognized, enabling a more affirmative and practically usable basis for self-definition [58–60]. Moreover, some participants expanded their identities beyond stage performance to roles such as assistant instructor or helper, thereby deepening their contributions to the group’s functioning. Importantly, this role differentiation broadened

the occasions for enacting and socially iterating contribution, reducing reliance on the episodic visibility of performance alone and strengthening the durability of identity claims in everyday interaction.

Overall, the identity gain emerged through the convergence of performance as a public practice, the social legitimation of naming and role, the specification of self-definition through enacted responsibilities, and the deepening of agency through expanded role involvement. It was strengthened when membership was coupled with publicly confirmed role identities that could be repeatedly enacted and relationally acknowledged, thereby providing stable normative grounds for participants to narrate greater emotional stability and more affirming self-evaluation [56,57].

5.2 Mechanisms Sustaining Identity Continuity

The stage-based identity did not operate as a transient emotional episode that faded once the performance ended. Rather, it functioned as an identity claim that repeatedly reactivated and repositioned in everyday life, shaping participants' self-understanding and social positioning over time. Even after performance, continued recognition as "dance company members" or "dancers" allowed the stage-based identity to remain socially available within everyday interactional settings.

Identity continuity is defined here as the sustained social usability of a role identity across settings, observable in recurring moments when membership is named, displayed, and practically taken up in daily life, rather than as the persistence of a private feeling or post-performance mood. Consistent with the SIMIC, this continuity was maintained through repeated interpersonal re-authorization: others' reactions and feedback recurrently reconstructed "being a dancer" as socially consequential, keeping the identity usable as a basis for recognition, accommodation, and self-presentation beyond the performance venue [5,21]. In this framing, continuity is not an internal residue of performance but an ongoing social process, dependent on whether identity meanings remain actionable within everyday networks.

Such continuity was not automatic. It was strengthened in environments where relational confirmation and social support were consistently available, and where caregivers and care systems actively rearticulated and recontextualized performance experiences in daily life. In this process, family meaning-making functioned as a mediating condition linking stage-based recognition to household norms, role expectations, and evaluative reference points. Under these conditions, the dancer's identity was more likely to shift from episodic achievement to a sustainable self-definition, consistent with evidence that adjustment is reinforced when identity meanings can be carried across contexts through compatible group memberships [5,28].

Identity continuity was shaped not only by continued participation but by the conjunction of (a) interactional conditions that permitted identity reaffirmation and (b) access conditions that made repeated engagement feasible. When caregiving environments affirmed performance and framed it positively, the dance company identity secured a "social place" that could be repeatedly invoked within everyday relational orders. Conversely, when surrounding networks minimized performance or returned participants to prior stigmatized categories, opportunities for everyday validation narrowed, and identity continuity weakened.

Identity continuity is best conceptualized as a context-dependent resource maintained through relational confirmation and feasible opportunities for enactment. It is most plausibly sustained when identity enactment can recur without disproportionate strain on everyday coordination [28,61]. Overall, the mental health-relevant value of inclusive arts participation hinges on whether identity meanings remain repeatedly reactivatable and socially validated in everyday settings, and on whether the access and coordination demands of continued engagement remain sustainable [5,21,28].

5.3 Ambivalent Nature of Identity Resources

The identity formed through inclusive arts participation functioned as a psychosocial resource, providing a sense of belonging and meaning; however, the same relational processes that sustained this identity also generated burdens and costs, rendering these identity resources ambivalent rather than uniformly protective. In social identity terms, identification can expand access to support, meaning, and perceived control; however, it can also become costly when norms, expectations, and obligations intensify, consistent with “social cure–social curse” accounts [5,56,62]. Therefore, the present findings are best understood as a single coupled process in which identity-based resources and identity-based demands are co-produced within the same participation ecology, rather than as separate “benefits” and “costs.”

Social recognition and legitimation generated pride and belonging while also recalibrating what counted as “adequate” performance and raising expectations within the group. Recognition as a “dancer” operated simultaneously as both affirmation and regulation: it authorized a positive self-definition while imposing a normative standard that required continued competent performance. In analytic terms, recognition did not simply “add” confidence; it reorganized local evaluative criteria by making competence more visible, comparable, and consequential, thereby intensifying the ordinary tension between inclusion and differentiation within groups [63].

This ambivalence may be especially pronounced in inclusive dance participation among adults with developmental disabilities, where the burdens of maintaining identity can extend beyond the psychological domain and intertwine with relational and lifeworld conditions. As interactional expectations increased, identity maintenance could entail emotion coordination and relational labor unevenly concentrated on particular members, for instance, through informal “care” practices such as monitoring others’ emotions and buffering conflict to stabilize group atmosphere. In this sense, role expansion can function as an identity-gain mechanism while simultaneously creating exposure to relational overload when coordination tasks remain tacit, weakly distributed, or insufficiently supported [60,62]. Related evidence on artists with intellectual disabilities suggests that an “artist” identity can strengthen visibility and self-affirmation while also amplifying expectations regarding professionalism, achievement, and consistent performance, indicating how recognition may be reorganized into a pressure pathway under escalating standards [64].

The ambivalence becomes even more concrete when identity maintenance is situated within the physical and practical costs of everyday life. Preparing for performances and engaging in rehearsals provide achievement and meaning, but also entail tangible burdens such as schedule adjustments, transportation, physical fatigue, and the reconfiguration of daily rhythms. As the everyday lives of adults with developmental disabilities are often enabled not by individual choice alone but through caregiver and care system coordination, sustaining participation depended on resource investment within family and caregiving environments [65]. Thus, identity maintenance cannot be explained solely by internal motivation; it becomes feasible when caregiving coordination and resource allocation make repeated participation possible [5]. This is consistent with studies showing that family-based identifications and support processes can operate simultaneously as enabling resources and as sources of burden when demands and coordination pressures accumulate [66]. Identity-based resources are therefore contingent: sustained through the coupling of identity enactment with lifeworld coordination of time, mobility, and caregiving, and capable of functioning as protective in some contexts while shifting into a burden pathway in others [56].

Taken together, these findings indicate that the ambivalent nature of identity resources should not be treated as a secondary complication of participation but as a constitutive feature of identity-based involvement itself. More specifically, the present case analysis suggests that this ambivalence may be understood through the coexistence of two interrelated dimensions—identity affirmation, reflected in

legitimacy, pride, and belonging; and identity-related burden, reflected in evaluative pressure, concentrated responsibility, and the practical and relational demands of sustained participation. In such a framework, ambivalence becomes analytically useful for interpreting participants' accounts as well as for guiding future research toward a more systematic examination of identity functioning as a psychosocial resource and as a source of strain [66,67].

5.4 Integrative Synthesis

The changes in emotion regulation and self-evaluation observed in this study are best interpreted as outcomes of cumulative social identity processes within inclusive dance participation. These perceived changes were anchored in recurring interactional conditions through which performance became publicly visible, membership was relationally confirmed, and feedback provided normative grounds for self-reappraisal. Emotion regulation appeared more stable not because it was secured by individual willpower, but because belonging ensured reliable access to psychosocial resources such as social support, shared meaning, and normative affirmation under conditions of evaluative tension and emotional uncertainty. This interpretation aligns closely with social identity-based approaches that conceptualize identification as a core pathway through which health and well-being are shaped [5,68].

The case is most parsimoniously explained by a linked pathway: (a) identity gain was consolidated through role-based recognition in rehearsal and performance contexts, and (b) identity continuity was sustained when those role meanings remained socially usable across everyday relationships beyond the performance setting. For many adults with developmental disabilities, everyday participation is contingent on caregiver coordination and the scaffolding of care environments. Thus, identity continuity is better conceptualized as a context-dependent social process than as the persistence of memory. These findings align with the SIMIC's proposition that new group memberships protect well-being during transitions when identity resources remain usable across contexts rather than confined to a single setting [5,68]. In this framing, the mental health-relevant value of inclusive dance is not indexed by participation intensity, but by the repeated reactivation and affirmation of socially authorized roles without disproportionate coordination strain, ensuring that psychosocial resources remain available at moments of everyday uncertainty [69]. Furthermore, this synthesis clarifies a salient boundary condition: risk emerges when authorization is coupled with escalating expectations and unevenly distributed coordination demands. This is consistent with social identity scholarship that recognizes both beneficial and adverse trajectories of group-based processes [20,62].

5.5 Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

This study advances social identity-related health literature by extending the prevailing view that group membership "matters." At a mechanistic level, it specifies how well-being pathways consistent with the SIAH and SIMIC are enacted through inclusive dance participation within the lived experiences of adults with developmental disabilities [5,68]. More specifically, the study specifies how recognition is translated into a socially authorized role identity that becomes a resource for emotion regulation and self-evaluation under evaluative conditions. Relative to existing arts-based group research, which has often emphasized that arts participation can foster identification, belonging, and mental well-being [70], the present study clarifies three substantive theoretical points. First, it shows that recognition becomes psychosocially consequential when it is translated into a socially authorized role identity under evaluative conditions [20]. Second, it indicates that identity continuity depends not only on continued membership but also on the extent to which participation is reaffirmed, coordinated, and made usable across everyday situations [5,28,68].

Third, it suggests that identity-based resources are not uniformly protective; rather, they may become burdensome when authorization is coupled with intensified expectations and concentrated coordination demands [69,71]. These findings together show that the benefits, rather than being automatic outcomes of participation or accumulation over time, depend on a sequenced process in which: (i) performance becomes safely visible across rehearsal and performance settings; (ii) member legitimacy is relationally authorized through address and feedback; and (iii) authorization is stabilized as role-based self-definition, reinforced through repeated enactment within the participation ecology [5].

The study's findings suggest that inclusive dance programs should be designed as identity-supporting infrastructures rather than just participation opportunities. First, these programs should structure interactional conditions such that participants' performances are visible without threat and member legitimacy is repeatedly affirmed [72]. Recognition, in this sense, should be operationalized through feedback practices, clarified norms, and protective responses to mistakes and failure, so that performance acquires a stable public meaning rather than episodic praise [5]. Second, programs should treat role assignments as a protective resource only when their scope, rotation, and support are institutionally specified. While role assignments can strengthen self-worth and a sense of contribution, programs must specify the scope of responsibility and the support architecture so that repeated assigning of the same role does not intensify performance pressure or relational overload. Role rotation, shared enactment, gradual increases in responsibility, structured opportunities for rest, and alternative participation may serve as practical safeguards, helping participants sustain gains while limiting avoidable costs [69]. Third, because sustained participation among adults with developmental disabilities tends to depend on everyday coordination (e.g., mobility, transportation, accompaniment and support, and time scheduling), connections with caregivers and care systems should be considered core operational components rather than peripheral supports. Establishing structures for meaning-sharing and communication can enable participation experiences to be reaffirmed in everyday contexts, while accessibility, transportation, and time coordination should be addressed as constitutive "gateways" that shape whether identity resources can be sustained over time [5,18,20,73]. Together, these implications suggest that inclusive dance programs should be organized around recognition, shared responsibility, and feasible access as interrelated conditions for sustaining identity-based gains without increasing burden. This also has implications for evaluation, indicating that program effectiveness should be judged not only by participation or satisfaction but also by whether inclusive dance supports sustainable emotion regulation, credible self-evaluation, manageable role expectations, and limited burden accumulation. Overall, these suggestions position inclusive dance not only as an activity to be offered but also as a social infrastructure to be designed—one that supports recognition, distributes responsibility, and ensures feasible access so that identity-based gains can be sustained without unnecessary escalation of demands.

5.6 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study offers an in-depth qualitative case analysis of an inclusive dance company, specifying interactional conditions through which identity formation and maintenance occur in the lives of adults with developmental disabilities. A key limitation is that the analysis was conducted in a single organization; thus, the observed pathways may have reflected setting-specific arrangements, local norms, and program design features. The small number of primary participants also means that the identified patterns should be interpreted as situated qualitative pathways shaped by particular biographical, relational, and organizational conditions, rather than as uniform mechanisms across adults with developmental disabilities. In particular, the burden associated with identity maintenance may vary depending on participants' role positions, support

arrangements, and everyday coordination demands. For this reason, the findings are intended to support analytic transferability to comparable contexts rather than analytic generalization. Such transferability is more plausible in settings that share core relational and organizational conditions, including repeated performance routines, publicly visible recognition, structured feedback and naming practices, role allocation, and stable caregiving and access supports. For contexts in which these conditions are absent or weakly sustained, the identity-related processes identified here may operate differently or be less durable over time.

Future research should extend this work through longitudinal and comparative designs. Studies involving larger and more diverse participant groups would help clarify how far these qualitative pathways travel across different disability profiles, program types, caregiving arrangements, and levels of performance involvement. Longitudinal follow-up is needed to clarify when role-based identity processes remain protective and when they become burdensome as expectations, role demands, and coordination pressures evolve.

6 Conclusions

Across all participants, perceived shifts in emotion regulation and self-evaluation were linked to social identity processes through which performance became publicly visible, and membership was relationally authorized through interaction. In rehearsal and performance contexts, participants were addressed as “dancers” and encountered audience responses and feedback within the company. They interpreted recognition not as a transient emotional after-effect but as socially credible grounds for self-definition and self-appraisal within the group. Identity formation extended beyond generalized belonging; it was defined through enacted roles, such as assistant-instructor responsibilities and self-naming, and, for some participants, through contributions considered practically consequential to group functioning. Identity-related gains were also sustained beyond the performance settings through everyday recognition and role enactment. The findings also indicate that these identity-based resources are conditional rather than uniformly protective. Recognition and role enactment may therefore function as psychosocial resources when participation remains feasible, supported, and responsibly structured.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

SIAH	Social Identity Approach to Health
SIMIC	Social Identity Model of Identity Change

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