

Performing/Informing Rights: Combining Dance and Rights Education to Advance Disability Inclusion

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Executive Summary

Despite the protections of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the promise of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal to "leave no one behind," disabled people continue to face ongoing discrimination and exclusion in accessing social protection schemes. Disabled people can use domestic Right to Information (RTI) laws and processes to improve access to social protection - but only if they are both informed about and empowered to use RTI for that purpose.

Our research (2016-23) has explored how combining inclusive dance (where disabled and non-disabled people dance together) with human rights education (including RTI education) might lead to greater psycho-social and legal empowerment for disabled people in post-war Sri Lanka and Nepal. Our findings show that this approach can lead to increased rights knowledge and rights claiming by some disabled people.[1]

Broad Recommendations

- **For rights advocates:** Use inclusive dance to make human rights education more fun, embodied, memorable, and potentially more transformative
- **For RTI practitioners:** Continue to build stronger relations with those working on the rights of persons living with disabilities
- **For dance practitioners:** Add human rights awareness to community dance projects with groups that experience discrimination and exclusion
- **For development actors:** Support more projects that connect people's empowerment and government accountability in relation to social protection



[1] L Waldorf, H-U Marambio and H Blades, 'Performing/Informing Rights: Mixing Inclusive Dance and Human Rights Education for Disabled People in Sri Lanka and Nepal' (2023) 15(3) *Journal of Human Rights Practice*; H Blades, 'Dancing Right(s): Dance, Disability and Legal Empowerment in Post-War Sri Lanka' (2021) 39(1) *Dance Research*; H Blades, 'Dance, disability and performance in north and east Sri Lanka: evaluating audience responses' in C Vendramin et al. (eds), *Exchanging, Moving, Translating: thoughts on dance and disability* (Coventry University 2019).

Context

VisAbility e.V. is a German/Sri Lankan organisation that has developed an innovative practice of mixing inclusive dance and rights education to empower disabled people. VisAbility was founded in 2014 by disabled German choreographer Gerda König, human rights scholar-activist Dr Helena-Ulrike Marambio, and Sri Lankan dancer-choreographer Mahesh Umagiliya. Funding from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and British Council in Sri Lanka enabled VisAbility to engage in several collaborative, co-creative, action research projects.

Here, we focus on the AHRC-funded "Performing/Informing Rights" project (2021-23) that expanded VisAbility's work to RTI education and extended it to Nepal. VisAbility collaborated with three Nepali organisations: the National Network of Disabled Conflict Victims (NNDCV), the human rights NGO Advocacy Forum-Nepal, and the music school NAAD Sangeet Pathshala. The project largely focused on people with conflict-related, physical impairments in two locations in Sri Lanka and two in Nepal.



Informing through Performing

One key finding is that combining dance and human rights education helped inform people about their rights. A participant noted: "We learned many things we didn't know about. We got to know about our rights by using movements."

VisAbility's workshops combine dance activities with information about human rights and social protection schemes. Workshops often take place over multiple days and result in public performances in local communities. As VisAbility's practice has developed, there has been an increased focus on combining the language of rights and empowerment with dance movements to demonstrate to participants how these areas relate.

The 'Ribbon Dance' is a workshop exercise to explore power dynamics between people and government officials through movement. In this exercise, participants are not taught specific movement, but given prompts and instruction through which to explore their own ways of moving.

The Ribbon Dance

- Divide participants into pairs and give each pair two equally long ribbons.
- Tell participants that they need to hold the ribbons and pull them in opposite directions while moving along and trying to balance their bodies.
- Explain that the ribbons represent the perceived power of each person. Ideally, none of the participants would feel pulled over ('overpowered'). Instead, they need to pull in a balanced way to allow both participants to stand/move.

Another strategy involves developing a movement sequence that relates directly to rights information. For example, when teaching RTI, participants co-created and then learned a sequence in which each movement responds to a different stage of the process of making an RTI claim. This is demonstrated in the 'Give Me Five!' activity outlined below.

The aim of 'Give Me Five!' is for movements to support the learning and remembering of each stage of the RTI process. This worked for some participants. One mentioned, "If we write down the process ... we can't remember anything, but from the movements I can remember them for a long time."

Give Me Five!

- Tell participants to gather in a circle.
- Set out the first 5 key stages of the RTI application process and ask them to repeat the sequence out loud.
- Next, ask them to propose a movement for the first stage and, if there are multiple suggestions, have the group vote on which movement they think either best represents the stage or is easiest to remember. Once a movement is selected, ask the group to repeat it 3-4 times and tell them they will need to remember it for future exercises and any dance performance.
- Turn to the second stage and let the participants develop a movement. Repeat it 3-4 times.
- Instruct the group to do the first movement followed by the second.
- Repeat the process until the group has co-created movements for all five stages and performed them in sequence.



Empowering through Performing

Another key finding is that some participants had an increased sense of empowerment after participating in the workshops. One participant explained:

"We don't need to be afraid anymore. We have been thinking for so long that we cannot talk to the officials. I thought they were powerful. But that idea got changed. I understood that I, too, can speak up for my rights."

Another person stated: "I learned that I can stand up for myself to solve my problem." They went on to say: "I also learned that we can educate others about the RTI law and how they can use it to solve their problems."

Following the workshops, several participants filed RTI applications related to the progress of their own social protection applications, while a few others made RTI requests to gather information about government policies that affect disabled people more generally. Nepal participants filed 18 RTI submissions and received 17 responses, while Sri Lankan participants made 40 RTI submissions (including 3 group submissions) but only received 17 responses.

Conclusion

Combining inclusive dance and human rights education helped disabled people in Sri Lanka and Nepal to know their rights (including RTI) and their entitlements to social protection, and to develop the confidence to act on this knowledge. Further research is needed to ascertain medium- and longer-term impacts.

Human rights educators and movement practitioners should work together more. Movement practitioners can use resources, such as those developed through this project, to train human rights educators in embodied approaches. Sustainable practice does not require significant costs and could include coaching and mentoring participants to continue the work within their own communities.



Further Resources

The "Performing/Informing" website contains training resources, videos, and links to research articles and chapters: www.performinginforming.uk



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