

NEW/ADVENTURES

CYGNET SCHOOL

**Becoming a Dancer: How Cygnet School
Supports Young People to Thrive,
Progress and Enter the Dance Profession**



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

**MARLOWE
THEATRE**



Canterbury
Christ Church
University





Cygnets School began in 2021. This year 5 evaluation builds on the pilot and years 2-4 and was undertaken between October 2025-June 2026 by Angela Pickard, Professor of Dance Education and Director of the Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health at Canterbury Christ Church University.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Cygnets School does not simply teach young people how to dance, it creates the conditions through which young people learn to belong, reflect, embrace challenge, develop agency and could ultimately become dancers.

Cygnets School was established by New Adventures in 2021 to provide a high-quality, inclusive and fully funded pre-vocational dance training programme for talented young people aged 13–18. Since its inception, the programme has provided technical training, creative opportunities, repertoire experiences, professional mentoring and progression pathways for 37 young dancers across the UK. This fifth year of evaluation builds upon four previous years of research and follows the continued development of a cohort of 15 Cygnets aged 14–18. The evaluation included observations across five Cygnets training days, reflective and participatory activities, one-to-one mentoring discussions, alumni interviews and ongoing dialogue with the artistic team and young people.

The evaluation suggests that becoming a dancer is not defined solely by technique, flexibility, strength, turns or jumps. Rather, and importantly, it involves developing a sense of belonging within a dance community, confidence, artistic identity, reflective skills, resilience, professionalism, and creativity.



What makes Cygnets School different?

Across five years of evaluation, Cygnets School has demonstrated a distinctive model of talent development. The programme combines:

- **Technical and physical training**
- **Repertoire learning**
- **Creativity and choreography**
- **Reflection and goal setting**
- **Individual feedback and mentoring**
- **Exposure to a range of genres, professional artists and backstage industries**
- **Performance opportunities**
- **Access to wider dance networks and communities**

Together, these experiences support holistic development and prepare young people for progression to future training and careers in dance and the wider creative industries.

Conditions for Becoming a Dancer

The findings suggest that young dancers thrive when five key conditions are present:

Belonging

Cygnets consistently describe the programme as a place where they feel accepted, understood and valued.

“I love coming to Cygnet School. This is where I can truly be myself amongst like-minded friends.”

Psychological Safety

Young people are able to explore and make mistakes, take risks and ask questions.

“I know I can try things here and although I take a bit longer than others to pick up movement, I am ready on performance days because I can work at the pace I need. People are patient with me and I don’t have to worry about getting the material ‘wrong’. I keep practising and because I am not stressed, I can get it together.”

Reflection

Regular reflection has supported the Cygnets to become more self-aware, respond to feedback and identify future goals.

“Reflection helps me understand where I am now and where I want to get to. I like having time and space to think deeply about what I have achieved so far and where I would like to improve.”

Challenge

The programme sets high expectations while providing the support needed for success.

“The repertoire pushes me, but it is motivating because of the combination of movement, music, the group dancing together and storytelling, it makes me want to be able to dance and improve.”

Agency

The Cygnets increasingly take responsibility for their own development as dancers.

“I know myself well through Cygnet School, what I need to work on now and how to keep developing as a dancer.”

“I love being creative and sharing my ideas.”

Together these conditions support the transition from young person who enjoys dancing to Cygnet who identifies as a dancer.

Learning about Talent Development

This year highlighted significant growth in the Cygnets:

- Ownership of learning
- Ensemble awareness
- Applying feedback
- Technical confidence
- Goal setting
- Professional behaviours
- Musicality
- Artistic expression

Cygnets who initially found the pace of learning repertoire challenging demonstrated increased confidence in their ability to learn and retain movement material over time.

Importantly, dancers were not simply reproducing movement but actively analysing, refining and improving their technical application and performance knowledge, skills and understanding.

Preparing the Next Generation

Alumni interviews also suggest that the impact of Cygnet School extends beyond participation. Former Cygnets who have progressed into Conservatoire and higher education dance training describe how the programme prepared them for the realities of professional dance education through:

- confidence building
- performance quality
- positive mind-set
- creating collaboration and community
- creative thinking
- reflective practice
- storytelling
- resilience

One alumnus described how learning to connect breath, expression and storytelling transformed their understanding of dance and continues to influence their training today.

Contribution to the Wider Dance Sector

The findings suggest that Cygnet School offers a model for inclusive pre-vocational dance training. The programme demonstrates how young people can be supported not only to develop technical excellence but also to:

- build dancer identity
- strengthen wellbeing
- sustain motivation
- progress into further training
- contribute to a more diverse future workforce

At a time when the dance sector continues to seek equitable, inclusive and sustainable talent pathways, Cygnet School provides a compelling example of how talent can be identified, nurtured and retained.

The five-year evaluation suggests that talent development is not technique alone but about creating the conditions in which young people can thrive, grow and begin to see themselves as dancers.

Young people can become dancers when belonging, reflection and challenge work together.



WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BECOME A DANCER?

The Cygnets

The Year 5 cohort reflects Cygnet School's ongoing commitment to widening participation and creating inclusive pathways into dance. The group included 9 dancers who identified as women and 6 who identified as men and 4 participants (27%) identified as neurodivergent.

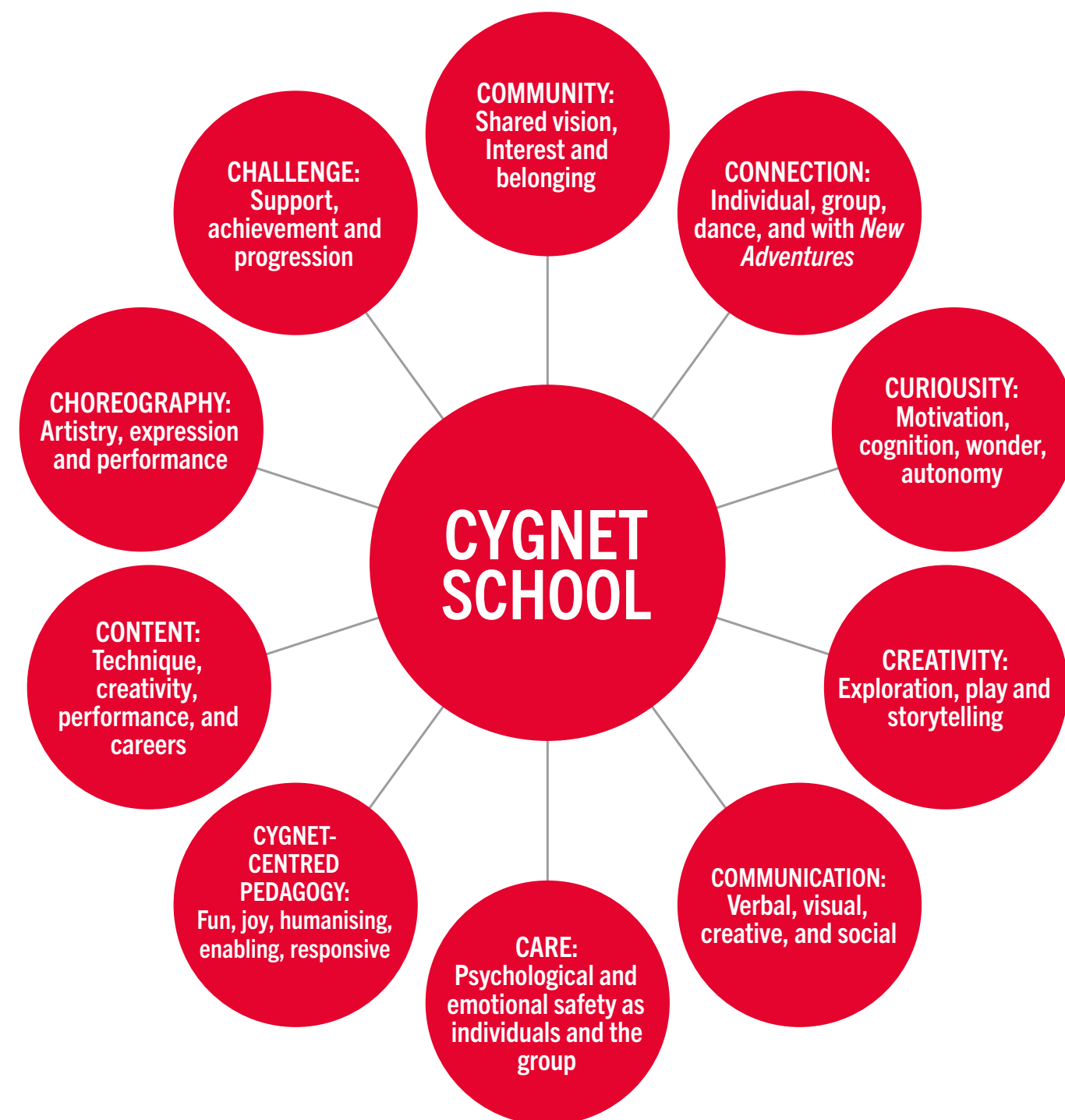
The cohort were from a range of ethnic backgrounds:

- **White British: 9 participants (60%)**
- **Mixed White and Black Caribbean: 2 participants (13%)**
- **Mixed White and Asian: 1 participant (7%)**
- **Mixed White and Black African: 1 participant (7%)**
- **Black Caribbean: 1 participant (7%)**
- **Latin American: 1 participant (7%)**

Overall, 40% of the cohort identified with an ethnic background other than White British, and 27% identified as neurodivergent, indicating a level of diversity and inclusion that is significant in a sector that continues to seek greater representation and inclusion.

The evaluation

Over five years, the evaluation of Cygnet School has moved from exploring how a new pre-vocational programme could be established and creating an enabling environment, to understanding which conditions enable young people to thrive, progress and sustain engagement within dance. Previous phases of the evaluation identified the importance of belonging, reflective practice and an enabling pedagogy in supporting holistic talent development. The 10Cs Model emerged from this work and highlighted the interconnected conditions that support young dancers' growth.



This year, a new question emerged from the observations, reflective tasks, mentoring conversations and alumni interviews: What does it mean to become a dancer?

The answer appears to go beyond technical achievement. The Cygnets rarely responded to questions and reflective tasks just speaking about technique. Instead, they spoke about the importance of confidence, friendships, expression, storytelling, challenge, feedback, belonging, professionalism and identity.

One Cygnet reflected: **“Cygnet School helped me realise I was meant to be there. It gave me the confidence to see myself as a dancer.”**

One alumnus shared: **“Before I came to Cygnet School, I thought dance was movement. Cygnet School taught me that movement tells stories.”**

The findings therefore suggest that becoming a dancer involves much more than learning movement. It involves becoming part of a community, developing confidence, embracing challenge, learning how to learn, and gradually forming a professional identity as a dancer.



Findings

Belonging before brilliance

One of the strongest findings across the entire evaluation is that belonging comes before achievement. The Cygnets consistently described the programme as a place where they felt accepted, valued and understood. Many dancers experience pressures within school environments, social comparison, examination demands and uncertainty regarding their future. Cygnet School appeared to offer a contrasting space; one where young people could bring their whole selves into the room. A recurring theme across observations was the importance of:

- Check-ins
- Informal Conversations
- Humour
- Group Rituals
- Ensemble Experiences
- Shared Goals

Together these created a strong sense of community.

One Cygnet reflected: **“This is the one place where everyone understands why dance matters so much to me, because it matters to us all.”**

Another explained: **“When I come to Cygnets it feels like a home.”**

An alumnus described the importance of finding peers who shared the same passion:

“Being surrounded by people who loved dance like I did made such a difference. I didn’t have that at school.”

The findings align strongly with Self-Determination Theory and the concept of relatedness or belonging. Young people appeared more willing to take risks, ask questions and embrace challenge because relationships, trust and belonging had already been established. The evaluation therefore suggests that belonging is not an additional feature of talent development. It is a prerequisite for it.

“When I come to Cygnets it feels like a home.”

Diversity and being seen

An important aspect of belonging within Cygnet School relates to diversity, representation and the value placed upon each young person as an individual. Across observations and discussions, it was evident that belonging was not experienced simply through being part of a friendly group, rather, it stemmed from feeling seen, heard and valued within a community that celebrated difference, while maintaining a shared commitment to dance.

For some Cygnets, this was associated with seeing people like themselves represented within the group. One dancer reflected that within many dance spaces they frequently found themselves to be the only Black dancer in the room. In Cygnet School, however, this was not their experience. Seeing a more diverse group of dancers enabled them to feel a greater sense of belonging and possibility.

As one participant explained: **“I often don’t see dancers who look like me. Here I realised I wasn’t the only one.”**

Another reflected: **“It makes a difference when you can see yourself in the room.”**

These comments suggest that representation matters not only for recruitment but also for retention, confidence and identity development. The programme’s culture appeared equally important. The artistic team consistently encouraged dancers to bring their own perspectives, experiences and creative responses into the work.

One Cygnet reflected: **“We are all different, but our differences make the work stronger.”**

Another noted: **“We’re encouraged to bring our own ideas instead of trying to be the same.”**

**“We are all different,
but our differences
make the work
stronger.”**

Observations of creative tasks, repertoire exploration and reflective activities suggested that individuality was viewed as an asset rather than something to be minimised. Cygnets are encouraged to make choices, contribute ideas, explore character and develop their own artistic voice.

One Cygnet explained: **“I feel like my ideas matter here.”**

Another reflected: **“I don’t feel like I have to dance exactly like everyone else. I can bring something of myself to it.”**

This emphasis on individuality aligns strongly with the values of creativity, communication and curiosity identified within the original 10Cs Model. It also reflects the autonomy dimension of Self-Determination Theory, where young people are supported to make choices, develop ownership and become active contributors to their learning rather than passive recipients. Importantly, diversity was not experienced as a programme outcome but as an everyday feature of the learning environment. The findings suggest that when young people experience both representation and recognition, they are more likely to develop confidence, embrace challenge and see a future for themselves within dance.

As one alumnus reflected: **“It helped me believe that I belonged there.”**

Seen in this way, diversity and inclusion are not separate from talent development. They are integral to it. Young people are more likely to thrive when they can see themselves reflected within the dance community and when their individual identities, experiences and creativity are recognised as valuable contributions to the collective.

**“I feel like my ideas
matter here.”**



Learning how to learn

Dance training is often understood as developing technique, strength, flexibility, artistry and performance skills. However, one of the most important findings emerging from this year's evaluation relates not simply to what the Cygnets as young people are learning, but how they are learning.

Learning how to learn refers to the ability to become an increasingly independent learner; someone who can reflect on their progress, identify strengths and areas for development, respond to feedback, set goals and take responsibility for their own improvement. These skills are essential in dance training, where progress is gradual, individual and often requires persistence over long periods of time. They are also transferable skills that support success in education, employment and wider life.

Previous phases of the Cygnet School evaluation demonstrated the value of reflective practice as part of talent development. This year, a notable shift was observed. The Cygnets were not simply participating in reflection activities because they were asked to do so, but they were increasingly using reflection as a tool to support their own development. Reflection, feedback, feed forward and goal-setting appeared to be helping dancers become more self-aware, more autonomous and more confident in managing their own progress.

This is particularly significant when considered alongside Self-Determination Theory and the facets of autonomy, belonging and competence. As dancers' sense of competence and belonging developed, they appeared increasingly willing and able to exercise autonomy by taking ownership of their learning. Rather than relying entirely on teachers to identify what needed improvement, many Cygnets were beginning to self-monitor, self-assess and identify their own next steps, and also support each other.

One Cygnet reflected: **"I am starting to notice things myself before someone tells me."** Another explained: **"I know what I need to focus on now rather than waiting for feedback."** Another Cygnet noted: **"The reflection activities help me understand what improved and what I want to work on next."**

Many dancers demonstrated increasing specificity in how they described their development: **"I noticed my timing improved when I listened more carefully to the music."**

"I realised I was concentrating so much on getting the steps right that I wasn't thinking enough about expression or performance."

"I can tell when my movement loses the counts now and I know how to work on it."

One reflective activities session focused on quality of movement, musicality, ensemble work and personal goals and encouraged dancers to analyse their experiences in greater depth and identify personal targets for improvement. Similarly, other feedforward activities encouraged dancers to connect teacher feedback with future actions and goals. These activities appeared to support the development of metacognitive skills, that is the ability to think about one's own thinking and learning processes. Importantly, the Cygnets increasingly felt comfortable to receive individual feedback and viewed feedback as an opportunity for growth rather than criticism.

One dancer explained: **"Feedback feels less scary now because I understand it is helping me improve."**

Another reflected: **"I don't see feedback as something negative anymore. It helps me know where to go next. It is also not pointing out things because I am not good enough, which is what I used to think, but because the teachers can see my potential."**

The alumni interviews also suggest that these skills continue to be valuable after leaving Cygnet School. Reflecting on progression into vocational training, one former Cygnet described how:

"I developed confidence, self-awareness and the ability to ask questions at Cygnets."

This continued to help the alumnus navigate new and challenging environments. Taken together, the findings suggest that learning how to learn may be one of the most significant outcomes of Cygnet School. The dancers were no longer simply acquiring dance skills but they were developing the reflective, adaptive and self-directed learning behaviours that underpin long-term artistic growth and progression.

As one Cygnet summarised: **"I'm learning how to improve myself, not just how to do the movement."**

"Feedback feels less scary now because I understand it is helping me improve"

This shift from dependence towards autonomy represents an important stage in the wider process of becoming a dancer.

A Cygnet explained: **“I used to wait for corrections. Now I am thinking about what I could do for myself.”**

Another reflected: **“I can spot when something doesn’t feel right in my dancing and I know what I need to work on.”**

One dancer linked reflection to development: **“The reflections help me work out what actually changed rather than just whether I enjoyed the day.”**

Another observed: **“I have become better at understanding feedback rather than getting worried about it.”**

A particularly powerful Cygnet reflection is that: **“Feedback feels less like criticism and more like information.”**

The move from dependence to autonomy was evident in comments such as: **“I think more about my goals now.”**

“I know what I need to focus on before the next session.”

“I have started taking responsibility for my own progress.”



Challenge, confidence and growth

Growth rarely occurs within comfort zones. Dance training requires young people to engage with uncertainty, take physical and creative risks, receive feedback, and persevere when things feel difficult. The challenge for educators is therefore not whether challenge should exist, but how it can be introduced in ways that support rather than undermine confidence and to carefully balance support and challenge.

Throughout the five-year evaluation of Cygnet School, the balance between support and challenge has emerged as a defining feature of the programme. Previous findings demonstrated that the combination of psychological safety, positive relationships and belonging created conditions in which young people were willing to take risks and embrace new experiences. Year 5 suggests that these foundations continue to play a crucial role in enabling growth. A key learning from this year’s evaluation is that confidence did not emerge in the absence of challenge. Rather, confidence appeared to develop because dancers experienced challenge, persevered through it, and ultimately recognised that they were capable of more than they initially believed.

The repertoire from The Car Man provided a particularly important vehicle for this process. The material demanded technical precision, musical awareness, performance quality, storytelling and movement memory, often at a pace that initially felt demanding for some dancers. However, observations suggested that many dancers began to develop greater confidence in their own capacity to learn difficult material over time, and that achievement was also significant.

One dancer reflected: **“At the beginning I thought I would never get some of the material. Now I know I can learn things that seem impossible at first.”**

Another noted: **“Every month the repertoire feels difficult at first and then somehow we do it.”**

Importantly, several Cygnets identified changes not only in their technical ability, but in their mind-set towards challenge itself.

One Cygnet reflected: **“I don’t panic when I don’t get it straight away anymore.”**

“I don’t panic when I don’t get it straight away anymore.”

Another explained:

“It is frustrating because I am sometimes really tired after being at school, doing loads of homework and studying for school and I do dance out of school too and sport. I find it hard to pick up the material and I used to worry that the teachers would judge me for being slow because I am so tired. Once I let go of the worries and was encouraged by the teachers because they have patience and know that I take a while but get it in the end, I find that I am able to remember the movement better.”

Another Cygnet shared: **“I have learned that not getting it immediately doesn’t mean you are not good enough and that I can’t do it.”**

These reflections suggest a shift away from viewing difficulty as failure and towards understanding challenge as a normal part of growth and development. Observations across the year also highlighted how the Cygnets increasingly drew upon feedback, reflection and peer support when facing challenges. Rather than withdrawing when material was difficult, many were more likely to ask questions, seek clarification, practise independently or support one another in problem-solving.

One dancer noted: **“I know what to do now when I get stuck.”**

Another explained: **“I trust myself more than I used to. I know now that I just need more practice and it comes together.”**

The relationship between challenge and confidence appeared to be cyclical. Successfully navigating challenges builds confidence, which in turn enabled Cygnets to engage with greater challenges in future sessions.

As one Cygnet reflected: **“The challenge motivates me because I can see myself improving and when I get it, and we are all dancing together, it is a great feeling.”**

The alumni interviews offered further evidence of this developmental process. Looking back on their time in Cygnet School, one former Cygnet described experiencing significant selfdoubt when entering unfamiliar dance environments:

“At first there was definitely imposter syndrome. Then I realised they chose me for a reason.”

“I have learned that not getting it immediately doesn’t mean you are not good enough and that I can’t do it.”

This insight highlights an important feature of talent development. Confidence is not necessarily the starting point; often it is the outcome of repeatedly stepping into situations that may feel uncomfortable, receiving support, and realising that growth is possible.

Another alumnus described how these experiences continued to support them in vocational training: **“If I don’t get something straight away now, I don’t automatically think I can’t do it. I know I need time and practice.”**

The findings therefore suggest that confidence should not be understood as a fixed personal characteristic that young dancers either possess or lack. Rather, confidence appears to be something that is developed through repeated experiences of supported challenge, achievement and reflection. Within the context of Self-Determination Theory, this reflects the development of competence; the growing belief that one is capable of meeting challenges and achieving valued goals. The combination of high expectations, constructive feedback and strong relationships appears to create a learning environment where the Cygnets can stretch beyond their current capabilities without fear of failure.

Perhaps most importantly, the findings suggest that challenge becomes productive because it is embedded within an environment of trust, care and belonging. The Cygnets know they are supported, and this enables them to take risks, make mistakes and keep trying.

As one dancer summarised: **“I trust myself much more than I did when I started.”**

This growing confidence appears to represent a significant step in the wider process of becoming a dancer. Rather than avoiding challenge, dancers increasingly learn to embrace it as an essential part of their development. The Car Man repertoire appeared especially powerful here as one Cygnet reflected:

“At the beginning I thought I would never get some of the material. Now I know I can learn things that seem impossible at first. Every month the repertoire feels difficult at first and then somehow we do it.”

“I trust myself much more than I did when I started.”

Developing a professional identity

One of the most notable findings emerging from this year's evaluation was evidence of young people beginning to develop a professional identity as dancers. While technical development remains important, progression within dance involves much more than acquiring movement skills. Dancers are also required to develop commitment, responsibility, resilience, collaboration, self-awareness and an understanding of professional expectations.

Professional identity refers to the process through which young people begin to see themselves as members of a particular community of practice. In this case, the Cygnets were not simply participating in dance classes but they were increasingly understanding what it means to work, think and behave as a dancer. This shift is significant because research suggests that identity often influences motivation, persistence and progression just as much as technical ability.

“I think more like a dancer now.”

Across the year, observations indicated increasing evidence of behaviours associated with professional practice. Cygnets prepared for sessions, engaged actively with feedback, demonstrated commitment to rehearsals, took responsibility for learning material and showed increasing awareness of the collective responsibility involved in ensemble performance. The one-to-one mentoring conversations, reflection activities and exposure to professional artists all appeared to support this development. Importantly, many Cygnets began to recognise that becoming a dancer extends beyond what happens in the studio.

One Cygnet observed: **“I think more like a dancer now.”**

Another explained: **“I understand more what professional dancers have to do.”**

One Cygnet reflected: **“It's not just about learning choreography. It's about preparing, concentrating and being responsible.”**

Another noted: **“I feel more responsible for my own development.”**

The alumni interviews further reinforce this theme. Reflecting on progression into vocational training, one former Cygnet described how Cygnet School prepared them for the expectations of a professional training environment:

“Everyone is there to work but everyone is also there to enjoy it. That balance is really important.”

The same alumnus highlighted how confidence, communication and collaboration developed through Cygnet School continue to support them in training: **“Cygnets gave me confidence to speak to other dancers, ask questions and share ideas.”**

Perhaps most importantly, they reflected: **“It helped me believe that I belonged there.”** This sense of legitimacy and belonging appears fundamental to professional identity formation.

Young people are more likely to persist in challenging dance environments when they begin to see themselves not only as learners of dance but as dancers in their own right. The findings suggest that Cygnet School contributes to this process by creating opportunities for young people to experience professional expectations within a supportive and age-appropriate environment. In doing so, the programme supports a transition from participation towards professional identity as an important stage in the wider pathway of becoming a dancer.

“It helped me believe that I belonged there.”

Progression, pathways and workforce development

A core aim of any pre-vocational training programme is to support progression. However, progression should not be understood solely as progression into elite performance careers.

Young people follow diverse pathways into dance, musical theatre, community arts, teaching, choreography, arts leadership and the wider creative industries, or may have a lifelong love for dance but not pursue further training. It is equally important to support young people to remain engaged with dance and the arts over time.

Across the five-year evaluation, increasing evidence has emerged that Cygnet School acts as an important bridge between participation and progression. The programme provides young people with access to professional artists, high-quality training, performance opportunities, wider artistic experiences and a community of peers who share similar aspirations. Collectively these experiences appear to broaden horizons, increase aspirations and strengthen confidence in future possibilities.

Cygnets School alumni have progressed to the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Northern School of Contemporary Dance, the Rambert School, London Studio Centre, Wilks Academy of Performing Arts, Italia Conti Academy of Theatre Arts and Jasmin Vardimon Dance Company (JV2). Interviews provide particularly compelling evidence of Cygnets School's role within progression pathways and workforce development.

One former Cygnets reflected: **“The confidence I gained in Cygnets definitely helped me when I went into further training.”**

Another important aspect of progression was the development of creative confidence and agency: **“The creative tasks helped me learn to contribute ideas and trust my instincts.”**

These findings suggest that the programme prepares young people not only for auditions and training environments but also for the collaborative and creative demands of future careers. The alumni interviews also demonstrate that Cygnets School contributes to broader workforce aspirations. When discussing future ambitions, one alumnus explained:

“Whether it’s performing, teaching or working in the arts, I just want to be part of that creative world and Cygnets confirmed this for me.”

This highlights an important contribution of the programme. Rather than promoting a narrow understanding of success, Cygnets School appears to expose young people to the wider ecology of careers available within the arts and cultural sector.

Perhaps one of the most significant findings is the emergence of a sustainable talent pipeline. Former Cygnets are not only progressing into further training but also returning to support future generations of young dancers. One alumnus explained:

“I want to come back and support the next generation of Cygnets.”

This reflects the cyclical and sustainable nature of the programme. The impact of Cygnets School therefore extends beyond individual participants and contributes to the wider development of the dance workforce.

“I want to come back and support the next generation of Cygnets.”

Current Cygnets also recognised the importance of seeing progression pathways made visible:

“Seeing people who have gone on to training makes me feel like it is possible for me too. We have had assistant teachers who are studying a degree in Dance Education, had a chaperone who was studying a degree in Sociology but writing about Matthew Bourne’s work and seen a Cygnets get into Rambert.”

These findings suggest that Cygnets School is acting as more than a pre-vocational training programme, it is contributing to the development of future performers, educators, creative practitioners and advocates for the arts. In doing so, it offers a valuable model for how inclusive talent development programmes can strengthen workforce pathways and support the long-term sustainability of the dance sector.



INTRODUCING THE NEW FRAMEWORK

The Cygnet 10cs Model of Talent Development

When the longitudinal evaluation of Cygnet School began in 2021, the primary focus was understanding how to create and whether a new pre-vocational dance programme could provide an inclusive, nurturing and effective environment for young people to develop their talent. Over five years, observations, reflections, interviews, focus groups, creative activities and discussions with Cygnets, alumni and the New Adventures team have generated rich insights into what supports young people to thrive within dance.

One of the most significant outcomes of the earlier phases of the evaluation was the development of the 10Cs Model of Talent Development. The model identified ten interconnected conditions that characterise the Cygnet School environment:

- **Community**
- **Care**
- **Creativity**
- **Content**
- **Curiosity**
- **Choreography**
- **Connection**
- **Challenge**
- **Cygnet-Centred Pedagogy**
- **Communication**

Together, these conditions explained what makes Cygnet School distinctive and successful as a talent development programme. They demonstrated that talent development is not simply the result of technical training, rather, it emerges through a holistic environment that combines high-quality teaching, meaningful relationships, creativity, challenge, reflection and belonging.

However, as the evaluation entered its fifth year, a new question emerged: what happens when these conditions are sustained over time?

As many of the young people moved through the programme and alumni progressed into further training, vocational education and wider opportunities in the arts, it became increasingly apparent that something deeper was occurring than technical development alone. The Cygnets were becoming more confident, reflective, independent, resilient, more self-aware, more willing to contribute ideas, more capable of managing challenge and more likely to identify themselves as dancers.

One current Cygnet reflected: **“I feel like a dancer when I come here.”**

An alumnus similarly described a shift in how they understood dance itself: **“Before I came to Cygnets, I thought dance was movement. Cygnets taught me that movement tells stories.”**

Across the dataset, there was growing evidence that the developmental journey involved more than improving technical skills, it involved changes in confidence, identity, aspiration and agency. Dancers increasingly took responsibility for their learning, demonstrated professional behaviours, and began imagining themselves as part of the future dance workforce. This analysis led to the development of a new framework.

From Talent Development to Becoming a Dancer

The Cygnet Framework of Becoming a Dancer does not replace the 10Cs Model. Instead, it builds upon it. The 10Cs describe the conditions that support Cygnet development. The Becoming a Dancer framework describes the journey that many young people appear to experience within those conditions. Drawing upon five years of evaluation findings and informed by Self-Determination Theory, the framework proposes that dancers develop through a series of interconnected stages.

Belonging

Cygnets first experience a sense of acceptance, connection and community.

“As soon as I walk through the door, I feel like I belong.”

Through relationships with peers, artists and staff, dancers feel seen, valued and respected.

Reflection

Cygnets begin to make sense of their experiences through reflection, feedback and goal setting.

“I understand my dancing much better because I stop and think about it.”

This stage develops self-awareness and supports learning how to learn.

Challenge

As confidence grows, Cygnets become increasingly willing to engage with challenge and uncertainty.

“The difficult things are the things that help me improve.”

Challenge becomes something to embrace rather than avoid.

Agency

Cygnets begin taking greater ownership of their learning and development.

“I know what I need to work on now.”

“I love being creative and sharing my ideas.”

They move from relying on others to identify next steps towards self-directed improvement and creativity.



Professional Identity

Cygnets begin thinking and acting like dancers.

“I think more like a dancer now.”

They develop responsibility, commitment, resilience and an understanding of professional expectations.

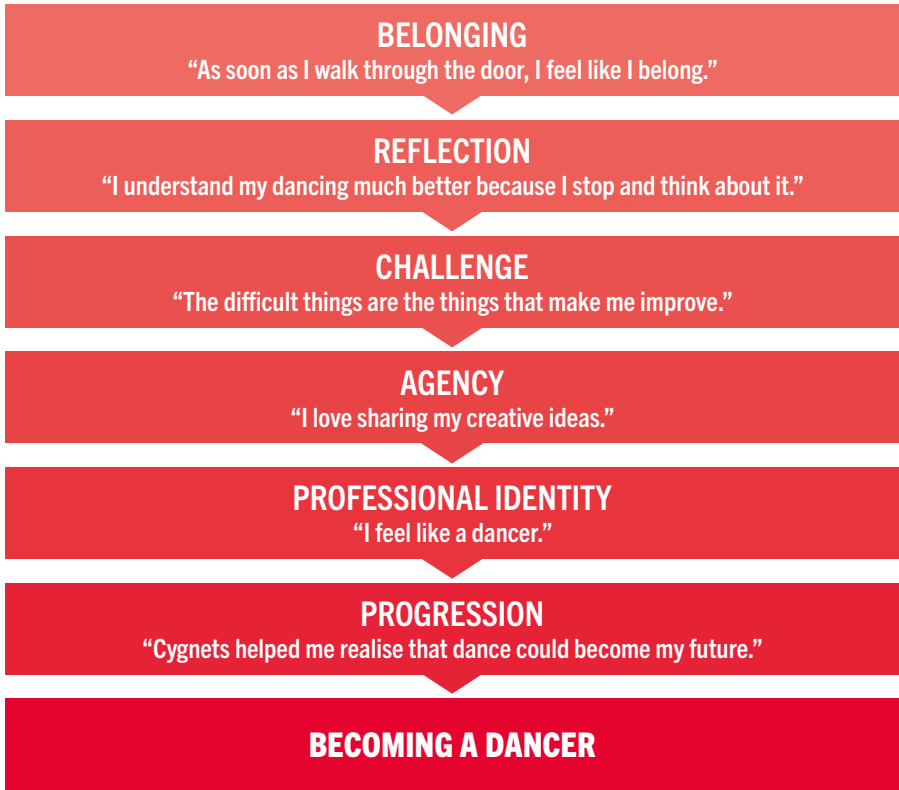
Progression

Cygnets begin to imagine and pursue future pathways.

“Cygnets helped me realise that dance could become my future.”

This may involve further training, higher education, performance, teaching, choreography, community arts or wider creative careers.

Together, these stages form The Cygnet Framework of Becoming a Dancer:



SOCIAL RETURN ON INVESTMENT (SROI) ANALYSIS

The The Cygnet School programme provides:

- 10 monthly training days
- A 5-day summer intensive residency
- Engagement with professional company teaching artists
- Technical and creative training
- Performance opportunities
- Professional repertoire learning
- Guest artist workshops
- Theatre visits
- Progression support
- Reflection and goal-setting processes
- Pastoral support
- Travel, accommodation and food costs

This removes significant financial barriers to accessing high-quality talent development.

While a full Social Return on Investment study would require detailed stakeholder valuation and longitudinal economic modelling, the evidence from five years of evaluation suggests that Cygnet School generates substantial social value across wellbeing, confidence, belonging, cultural participation, progression and workforce development. Based on conservative estimates, the programme is likely to generate at least £1.09 of immediate social value for every £1 invested, rising to a potential £5–£6 for every £1 invested when longer-term benefits and progression outcomes are considered. The findings indicate and Cygnet School is not only developing dancers, but that it is creating social, cultural and workforce value for individuals, communities and the wider dance sector. Becoming a Dancer with New Adventures Cygnet School therefore directly relates to measurable public value and future workforce development

BECOMING A DANCER

The findings suggest that becoming a dancer is not a single moment. It is an ongoing process of growth and development. Importantly, the pathway is not linear. Cygnets move backwards and forwards between stages. Confidence may fluctuate. New challenges emerge. Identities continue to evolve. However, the framework helps explain how the conditions created within Cygnet School can support young people over time to become dancers.

At the heart of this process remain the four values that have shaped Cygnet School since its inception:

- Joy
- Connection
- Wonder
- Creativity

These values run through every stage of the framework and help explain why challenge can be embraced, why reflection feels safe and why Cygnets continue to return to engage month after month.

The findings suggest that dancers do not simply develop through increasing technical challenge. Instead, they develop because challenge sits within a wider ecosystem of care, trust, belonging, reflection and opportunity. The most important lesson from five years of evaluation may therefore be that young people become dancers when they are supported to grow not only in skill, but also in confidence, identity, agency and aspiration. It is this holistic process that ultimately enables them to thrive, progress and contribute to the future of dance, and when they begin to envision a future for themselves in dance.

As one Cygnet shared: **“Cygnet School didn’t just teach me how to dance. It helped me become a dancer and I will take all I have learned into my further training”** Another reflected: **“Being a dancer isn’t just about what happens in the here each month or in the summer residency when we apply all we have learned in a performance. It’s about confidence, belonging, creativity, resilience and believing that you can have a place in the dance world.”** The Cygnet Model of Becoming a Dancer therefore offers not only a framework for understanding Cygnet School, but a potential framework for the wider dance sector to consider when designing inclusive and sustainable talent development pathways.



Summary

Cygnets School was established by New Adventures in 2021 as an inclusive, fully funded pre-vocational dance training programme for young people aged 13–18. Across five years, the programme has evolved into a distinctive model of talent development that combines technical training, creativity, storytelling, repertoire, performance opportunities, professional mentoring and pathways into further training and the creative workforce.

This year’s evaluation focused on a cohort of 15 young people aged 14–18 and explored how dancers developed through engagement with The Car Man repertoire, reflective practice, one-to-one mentoring conversations, goal-setting, feedback and feedforward processes, and wider opportunities such as performance attendance, guest workshops and the New Adventures and Jasmin Vardimon youth exchange project.

The central finding from Year 5 is that Cygnets School is supporting young people not only to learn how to dance, but to move closer to seeing themselves as dancers.

The evaluation suggests that becoming a dancer is a developmental process involving far more than technical challenge and progression. It encompasses belonging, confidence, challenge, reflection, agency, artistic identity, professionalism and aspiration. Over time, Cygnets developed increasing autonomy, took greater responsibility for their own learning, demonstrated more sophisticated reflective skills and showed greater confidence in responding to challenge.

The findings continue to support the original 10Cs Model of Talent Development developed through the earlier phases of the evaluation. However, the Year 5 data also suggest an emerging developmental pathway that helps explain how those conditions support growth over time.

The Cygnets Framework of Becoming a Dancer

Belonging → Reflection → Challenge → Agency → Professional Identity → Progression

This pathway is grounded in the four core values of Cygnets School: Joy, Connection, Wonder and Creativity, and aligns strongly with Self-Determination Theory through the development of relatedness (belonging), competence (achievement and confidence), and autonomy (ownership of learning).

The findings suggest that technical excellence alone does not create dancers, rather, young people become dancers when they experience:

- **A strong sense of belonging;**
- **High-quality relationships with peers and artists;**
- **Opportunities for creativity and self-expression;**
- **Challenge combined with support;**
- **Regular reflection and goal setting;**
- **Increasing ownership of learning;**
- **Visible progression pathways into dance and the creative industries.**

Ultimately, Cygnets School offers a valuable and potentially replicable model for inclusive pre-vocational dance training and workforce development within the wider dance sector.

Cygnets School does not simply teach young people how to dance. It creates the conditions through which young people learn to belong, reflect, embrace challenge, develop agency and ultimately move closer to becoming dancers.

Headlines

Becoming a dancer

Cygnets are not only developing technical skills; they are increasingly developing confidence, identity, agency and professional behaviours associated with becoming dancers.

Belonging before brilliance

A strong sense of belonging, representation and psychological safety continues to be a defining feature of Cygnet School and underpins motivation, confidence and progression.

Learning how to learn

Structured reflection, feedback and goal-setting support dancers to become increasingly autonomous learners capable of monitoring and directing their own development.

Challenge builds confidence

The *The Car Man* repertoire provided appropriately high levels of challenge. Dancers demonstrated increasing resilience, adaptability and confidence when working with demanding material and within a caring and supportive environment.

Professional identity formation

Cygnets increasingly understand what it means to work, think and behave as dancers through exposure to professional artists, feedback processes and performance expectations.

Diversity matters

Representation, inclusion and valuing individual creativity contribute significantly to belonging, confidence and identity formation. Young people reported feeling seen, valued and able to bring their whole selves into the room.

Progression pathways are working

Emerging evidence from alumni interviews suggests that Cygnet School contributes positively to progression into further training, higher education, teaching, performance and wider creative careers.

Workforce development

The programme is contributing to future workforce development through the cultivation of artistic, creative, reflective and professional skills, with alumni beginning to return on placement, assistants, chaperones and role models.

A distinctive contribution to the sector

The Cygnet Framework of Becoming a Dancer offers an emerging framework for understanding how inclusive pre-vocational training programmes can support young people to thrive, progress and sustain engagement with dance.

Recommendations

- 1

Continue to embed reflection and goal setting
Reflection has become a significant developmental mechanism within Cygnet School. Continue to integrate structured opportunities for self-reflection, feedback, feedforward and goal setting throughout the year for greater autonomy, self-awareness and learner agency.
- 2

Maintain the balance between support and challenge
Continue providing ambitious repertoire and creative challenges alongside strong pastoral support, mentoring and individual feedback for sustained confidence, resilience and growth.
- 3

Further develop one-to-one mentoring
The individual conversations with teaching artists appear particularly valuable in supporting professional identity formation for improved progression planning, confidence and selfunderstanding.
- 4

Continue to strengthen alumni engagement
Continue to find opportunities for former Cygnets to return as mentors, ambassadors, assistants, chaperones and workshop leaders for strong progression pathways and sustainable workforce development.
- 5

Further explore opportunities and workforce pathways
Continue exploring opportunities for New Adventures progression pathways from community, talent development to workforce development including more potential courses and qualifications and exposing Cygnets and dancers to a range of careers within dance and the wider creative industries.
- 6

Continue to prioritise diversity and representation
Maintain recruitment and retention strategies that ensure young people can see themselves reflected within the programme and feel valued for their individuality for increased inclusion, belonging and retention of diverse talent.
- 7

Disseminate the Becoming a Dancer Framework
Consider sharing the emerging framework through dissemination activities and potentially testing the 10Cs and the Becoming a Dancer Framework with a cohort in a different region. This is an important contribution to wider knowledge of talent development and inclusive dance education.
- 8

Consider rolling out Cygnet School in another part of the country
Cygnet School was purposely started in Kent due to a paucity of pre-vocational opportunities, particularly for boys, and the opportunity presented by New Adventures being resident at The Marlowe Theatre, Canterbury. Now that the 10Cs model is established it would be useful to test the 10Cs with another cohort in a different part of England, with a one-year evaluation using the same evaluator for consistency.

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the cygnets for enabling me to continue to gain depth of understanding and insight into your development as dancers, creatives and artists. Thank you also to the cygnets for your enthusiasm and willingness to share your thoughts and reflections, and for engaging in all the feedback tasks.

Thank you to Leah Fox, Sian Brackett-Hayes, Glenn Graham, Sophia Hurdley, Danny Reubens, Kerry Biggin, Etta Murfett, Kayla Collymore, the wider New Adventures team, and The Marlowe Theatre, Canterbury, for continuing to welcome me into the Cygnet School space.

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