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Attracting and retaining boys in ballet: A qualitative study of female dance teachers

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Attracting and retaining boys in ballet: a qualitative study of female dance teachers

ABSTRACT

Dance provides both psychological and physical benefits and yet many boys miss out due to societal perceptions surrounding the feminization of dance. These perceptions can lead to bullying of boys who dance. Since dance teachers are in a unique position to engage boys in dance, it is important to investigate their perceptions. This article reports the experiences of ten female dance teachers from the UK vis-à-vis attracting and retaining boys in dance, especially ballet. Here we focus on three salient themes that emerged from the data: “dancing boys in social context”, “parental and teacher support”, and “improving the dancing boy's milieu”. The dance teachers identified a number of strategies for engaging and retaining boys in ballet, such as privileging boys within the dance studio and improving opportunities to dance in schools. This article posits potential strategies to engage boys in ballet that could potentially empower all genders within the dance-world.

Keywords: dance pedagogy; dance teachers; feminization; male dancers; masculinity

INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that in Western industrial societies boys constitute the minority in the dance studio as well as in the professional dance world (Risner 2007; Holdsworth 2013; Wright 2013). In a large sample of American adolescents, 34.8% of girls reported participating in dance in the previous month compared to just 8.4% of boys, although demographics such as age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status do impact upon engagement (O'Neill et al. 2011). Dance, especially ballet, is traditionally considered a female activity, with a wide spread perception that it can impact on a child's expressed femininity. For example, some female participants in Karen Bond's (2017) study described their mothers enrolling them in dance specifically to bring out their more feminine qualities. Consequently, one of the most significant barriers to engagement of boys in dance has been identified as the feminization of dance. This can lead to boys' internal conflict about expressing socially acceptable forms of masculinity, and also conflict with others outside dance, who engage in homophobic bullying of boys who dance (Risner 2007, 2014; Holdsworth 2013). Dance genres, such as street dance, which conform to more heteronormative forms of masculinity, often attract more boys than do genres such as ballet, which are perceived as 'feminine' (Clegg et al. 2016).

To counteract the perceived feminization of dance, a "make it macho" strategy has been implemented by many in the dance world, especially ballet, to engage and retain boys in dance (Fisher 2007). This involves presenting a strong heterosexual, masculine narrative around dance by emphasizing opportunities for heterosexual "conquests", equating ballet steps with strong athletic moves, and highlighting that the stamina and strength required for ballet are commensurate with those of sports such as football. In Doug Risner's (2009) study of boys who dance, however, boys expressed dissatisfaction with such restrictive portrayals. Jennifer Fisher (2007) argues that this strategy is inappropriate for ballet given that the genre demands more flexible and varied expressions of masculinity than the "make it macho strategy" allows. She also illustrates film and television efforts to improve the status of ballet boys, for example, in "the Billy Elliot effect" where the British film "Billy

Elliot” sees a boy from a tough working class-background overcome prejudice to enter The Royal Ballet School. The film supports the “make it macho” strategy by establishing Billy as a firmly heterosexual boy whose dancing has a strong, athletic quality (Rodosthenous 2007). Although an increase in the number of male applicants to The Royal Ballet School was attributed to the film (Fisher 2007), there is little empirical evidence of “the Billy Elliot effect” having any major impact on recruitment of boys into ballet more generally (Ashley 2009).

A further strategy to attract and retain boys is to “privilege” them within the dance studio. Susan Stinson (2005) argues that binary notions of masculinity and femininity are played out within the dance world. When boys are present in the dance studio their behavior can be perceived as typically masculine, and hence somewhat challenging for female dance teachers who are more used to teaching purportedly more “passive” and “compliant” girls (Clegg et al. 2017). The challenge of teaching boys can lead to a change in pedagogy towards a form that is more creative and empowering and hence increases proficiency in the skills required for success in the professional dance world. It may also create boys who are better prepared for the more prestigious roles, such as choreographer, and can foster an acceptance of privileging of boys over girls, which continues into the professional dance world (Clegg et al., 2017). This may lead to women dancers encountering a glass ceiling vis-a-vis top professional roles in dance (Stinson 2005; Meglin and Brooks 2012; Clegg et al. 2016, Larson 2017). Evidence for this has emerged from a study by Eliza Larson (2017), where males were found to hold choreographic and other leadership positions that were more prestigious and attracted considerably more finance than females in similar roles. This increased monetary value of male work and male-led companies suggests a valorization of males over females in the dance world. Jan Van Dyke (2017) argues that such gender disparity may also, in part, be accounted for by the paucity of males entering the dance world, which provides less competition for specifically male roles and increases their bargaining power. Thus, while the privileging of boys in the dance studio can be viewed as one strategy to retain their motivation to dance, this may lead to unintended consequences in negatively impacting

on girls'/women's dance careers.

Although the dance world is attempting to engage and retain boys in dance, negative stereotypes nevertheless persist within wider society and create boundaries for boys. Boys are thus potentially excluded from an activity providing both physical and psychological benefits (Connolly et al. 2011; Giguere 2011). Kai Lehtikainen (2006) found that when boys do experience high levels of support from across their varying social contexts, they can more easily engage in dance with less ambivalence since they do not have to compromise previously formed identities. Dance teachers are particularly well-placed to observe and reflect on the support available to boys in dance, but little research has to date investigated teachers' experiences and perspectives (Owton et al. 2016). The current study addresses this research gap. As women predominate in dance teaching (Risner 2014) ten female dance teachers were interviewed to explore in-depth their experiences and perceptions of attracting and retaining boys in dance.

METHOD

Participants and data collection

Ethical approval was granted by the relevant University, and prior to the interviewing process participants were required to provide informed consent. The researchers also adhered to British Psychology Society (2014) ethical guidelines for research. Convenience and snowballing sampling were employed to recruit participants, via advertisements on the One Dance UK website (<http://www.onedanceuk.org/>) and direct contact with private dance schools. Only private dance schools providing after-school, part-time dance classes were contacted. Full-time, vocational dance schools were not included as the female teachers in such schools may have a different experience of

dance teaching and a relatively homogeneous group of dance teachers was required for the study. Key inclusion criteria were: being a female dance teacher, and currently teaching/having previously taught dance to both girls and boys. Ten full-time professional dance teachers were recruited, with ages ranging from 24 to 71 years (mean=37.8 years), and interviewed; Table 1 provides demographic information (with pseudonyms used). In general, participants specialized in one dance genre, while teaching a variety of styles (e.g. ballet, contemporary, street jazz, modern). However, in the interviews, participants tended to focus primarily on ballet despite the researchers taking a broader perspective, in terms of genre. The length of time participants had 'formally' worked as a dance teacher ranged between 3 and 30 years, but many had begun assisting in dance classes during teenage years, or while completing dancer teacher-training. All but two of the dance teachers had experience of teaching children from the ages of 3/ 4 years old to 18 years of age. Emily's and Esme's experience focused on teaching children aged 11 to 18 years.

Table 1 to be placed here

Through reflection on the relevant literature an interview guide was developed to provide a focus for the semi-structured interviews, which enabled us to guide the conversation, while remaining open to interviewees' development of their own topics of discussion. The interview guide included the following themes: (i) life experiences; (ii) dance background; (iii) experiences and perceptions of attracting and retaining boys and girls in dance. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face in a private room at the university or, for Skype and phone interviews, in the participants' own homes. The approach employed was "an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena" (Kvale and Brinkman 2009, p.3).

Data Analysis

Once interviews were transcribed verbatim, Virginia Braun and Victoria Clark's (2006) six-phase guide to thematic analysis was employed. The first phase, familiarity with the data, was addressed by Authors 1 and 2 moving back and forth between the entire data set, the coded extracts of data, and the analysis of the produced data. Next, initial codes were generated from the data, by identifying patterns of interest and meaning pertinent to the research question. An initial discovery sheet of recurring words, concepts, and ideas was developed to generate the codes. To address the third phase, Authors 1 and 2 searched for themes by combining the initial codes into potential themes and setting-aside those falling outside salient patterns within the data. Phases 4 and 5 were conducted by reviewing, defining, and naming themes (Braun and Clark 2006). The concluding phase involved producing the narrative that allowed a final opportunity to strengthen the "cores" of the themes.

Further to enhance the strength of the analysis, Author 3 took on the role of a "critical friend", as suggested by Andrew Sparkes and Brett Smith (2014, 182), which provided a more "analytically distanced" perspective via further scrutiny and critique of the themes. Since she was not directly involved in the data collection, Author 3 provided a degree of bracketing in the research process (Allen-Collinson 2011) by encouraging critical reflection and challenging pre-existing assumptions and interpretations that Authors 1 and 2 may have held. All participants were provided with the opportunity to comment on their interview transcripts, and later, with a draft of the paper; none wished to alter or make comments on either document.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the data, three themes emerged as particularly salient: "dancing boys in social context", "parental and teacher support", and "improving the dancing boy's milieu".

Dancing Boys in Social Context

Boys who dance negotiate a number of social environments where support for their dancing may vary widely. Thus, the social context for dancing boys is a key factor in sustaining their engagement with dance.

In line with previous research (e.g. Risner 2009; Li 2011), all participants identified a lack of boys in dance, especially for genres such as ballet. This was often attributed to the challenge of performing “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) for dancing boys:

And actually, we had erm, a boy, not last year, the year before, and he came and he was okay when he first started and he worked so hard and he got so strong...towards the end of the first term, you would look at him and you would think: wow, what a transformation from when he first started. And then he was getting bullied a lot, you know from his, his friends back home. And he left to go and join the army... He was humming and hawing about what he was going to do and he just decided that he couldn't take, you know, the heckling, if you like, from his friends. And so he completely walked away from dance and he's gone and joined the army. And because, you know, that's, that's sort of the masculine thing to do, I suppose, isn't it, if he's getting ridiculed for dancing, what, what else could he have done that's more masculine than go and join the army to be a soldier? (Laura, 39)

Laura was frustrated with the young man's decision to conform to hegemonic masculinity expectations, although she also notes that boys in dance must be “strong willed” to continue in dance due to the “many obstacles” faced. Bullying is prevalent for boys who dance (Lehikoinen 2006; Polasek and Roper 2011; Risner 2014) and the boys studied by Kai Lehikoinen (2006) identified that high self-esteem is required to manage such bullying. While some boys may have this “strength”, others must survive bullying in other ways, such as asserting their heteronormative masculinity by pursuing careers and activities commensurate with traditional concepts of masculinity.

Although many within wider society hold traditional stereotypical notions of boys in dance, two interviewees, Melanie and Claire, considered such stereotypical constructs were more persistent in rural communities. Melanie, who teaches dance in a rural community, noted the intersection of gender and farming:

Yeah, I mean like in [...] where we teach, it's a farming community and farm men do not want their boys to be ballet dancers [laughs] you know. So, not that many do, get, you know it's just the thought, you know, some men will not let their boys go to a class. We've found that there's quite a prejudice (Melanie, 71)

Heidi, whose experiences of teaching dance are more focused within city populations, considers socioeconomic deprivation to impact negatively on perceptions of boys who dance, with poorer communities holding more negative views of homosexuality and constructing male dancers as inevitably gay. Erin Sanchez, Imogen Aujla and Sanna Nordin-Bates (2013) found that dance students from low-income families perceived less support from their parents towards their dance studies. However, the reasons for the lack of support were not identified, and in a US study by Jennifer O'Neill, Russell Pate and Angela Liese (2011), dancing boys were found to be more likely to come from lower-income groups. Thus, cultural and economic factors may impact on barriers to boys dancing, but this aspect requires further research.

Societal attitudes towards traditionally perceived masculine and feminine activities may also create barriers to engaging boys in dance. For boys, activities that are constructed as masculine are often valorized above pursuits constructed as feminine. Several participants in this study alluded to such valorization by highlighting the gendering of sports and dance, including at school:

When I go into primary schools, and like I see the sort of advertising material for stuff, I'm like you are naturally appealing to more, for more girls for a dance club than you are for boys. And you're naturally appealing to more boys for a sports-related club than you are for girls. Just often in sort of the, like the flyers or the posters or whatever that's put up. And I think, I think that we already have that kind of preconceived view of what girls and boys like to do and that's not necessarily the case (Eva, 25)

Recent research suggested that people hold both implicit and explicit attitudes that associate sport with masculinity (Clement-Gullotin et al. 2011). Some sports are associated with femininity, such as dance and gymnastics, and gender-appropriate stereotypes are often formed early in childhood (Chalabaev et al. 2013). In the current study, participants perceived football in particular to be

positioned favorably in comparison with dance as a more appropriate activity for males, even leading to 'picking on' boys who transgress such stereotypical thinking and attend dance classes:

The girls probably won't have been picked on, on the playground because they're going off to dance rehearsal. Whereas the boy may have had sort of that you know that bullying if you like, or you know that little bit of banter: oh you're going off to dance class. I'm going playing football and you're going off to your dance class sort of thing (Laura, 39).

Research on boys in dance consistently identifies that boys are bullied by their peers for being homosexual, due to the perceived femininity of dance (Polasek and Roper 2011; Risner 2014). 'Masculine' sports such as football are presented as allowing the construction of heteronormative masculinity in contrast to dance, which is associated with traditional notions of femininity. Such rigid constructions of masculinity and femininity are highly constraining, and not necessarily reflective of dancers' experiences. Nevertheless such constructions impose barriers for boys engaging in dance.

Parental and Teacher Support

The reinforcement or challenge of traditional constructions of gender and dance by significant adults also emerged as salient. Caitlin and Melanie both highlighted the importance of parental support for boys engaging in dance:

...[support for dancing] does come from parents as well. They need to be willing to, you know, because the children do so much after school, they've got to be willing to bring them to class. And sometimes they think: oh well you know it's more important they [boys] go to football than ballet. You know so it is up to parents (Melanie, 71)

Lehikoinen (2006) claims that, in relation to the Finnish context, masculinized discourses surrounding sport have changed, so that boys no longer feel a need to engage in male-dominated sport to "prove" their masculinity, although fathers in particular can appear unsupportive of boys in dance, due to fathers' needs to express their own masculinity through their sons. Caitlin (24) highlights the

role of parental experience in contouring support:

I would say that it's erm, things like as a child themselves, the dad probably did football and things like that. So all they want is for their children to experience what they experienced. So they enjoyed it so much, so obviously their child would enjoy it. And I think there is a lot of that, so. You know, if mum's danced then of course [inaudible] love dance. Whereas if the dad hasn't, he's like: oh no, I didn't enjoy it when I was younger. But he probably didn't actually try.

Claire (62), however, believes that the perceived association of homosexuality with male dancers could create a barrier for parental encouragement, whatever the socio-cultural background:

I had up till recently professional parents, intelligent educated professional parents who would come up to me and say: 'oh but I'm not, I'm sending you my daughter, but I'm not sending my son, I still don't agree with it.' That I've [gasps] unfortunately and I would say: well why? And we never very, I never got very far with those conversations, if that parent was still adamant...against boys dancing. [...] Because they thought they were automatically going to turn into homosexuals. Honestly, I can't believe I'm having to say these words to you, but that was still what people thought. It was unmasculine, erm, soppy, not in any way strengthening, the mind, the body or anything and wouldn't have led to anything [sighs]. [...] So I would carefully say: 'Well, I have had no experience or there are very little records of showing that just because boys go to ballet it makes them into gays.' So that, there was quietness about that. I said: 'Well does it, do you not think that the wonderful physicality of it is good for them?' Never had any good response to that. Erm and I said the social, it makes you more, it makes you like any other woman, a more avid responsive person as an audience member in the future. Never got anywhere with these.

Such parental attitudes are still widespread, and male dancers often have to negotiate with their parents when choosing to pursue dance (Risner 2002). There has, however, been found to be a perceived gender difference in the support from parents, with both boys and girls perceiving their fathers as being less supportive than their mothers (Risner 2009; Polasek and Roper 2011). Lehtikainen (2006) argues that fathers may fail to support their sons' engagement in dance because their sons are "refusing" to perform heteronormative masculinity, and hence are seen as decreasing their father's social position due to loss of reflected masculine status. Relatedly, Caitlin (24) describes an experience where a father aligned his son's good behavior in the dance class with femininity:

I'd given a sticker out to a boy and erm, the dad came up and was like: oh you've got the sticker today. And

I was like: yeah you worked really hard, didn't you? And then the dad went: oh you're one of the girls now, teacher's pet. And I was like: don't say that. But the dad had kind of said like: oh look you fit right in with the girls... He was almost saying that you know, it was not the right thing here for him to do, to try really hard in the lesson, because that's what the girls do.

Other participants similarly noted the gendered nature of parental support:

There are some dads that are incredibly supportive of their children, whatever they've chosen. And interestingly the boys' dads tend to be, of the children that are working seriously through the school, do tend to be very involved with their children, more so now than previously. But you also, I can probably name on maybe two hands, the number of dads that I know of all my children, you know, four hundred dads and how many of them actually do I see come into the dancing school to pick their children up or make any arrangements about their children's... ? It's mum's job [...] I just think it's mostly because they're a little bit frightened of it. They don't understand it. [...] I mean we encourage the parents to come in and watch any exam class that the children are doing, so that they can help with practice. And occasionally dad's been forced to come along, because there's nobody else to bring the child at that time. But more often than not, they're not involved in that learning process with the child. The mums might sit there and take notes or film them. Dads mostly just sit there and play on their phones... (Freya, 41)

In relation to fathers being "frightened", it may be that the perceived feminine milieu of the dance studio challenges men's masculinity. For some men, any degree of engagement in the dance world is construed as being effeminate. Actual exposure to the dance world can, however, change attitudes fundamentally, demonstrating the strong work ethic required and an appreciation of the physical demands of dancing (Polasek and Roper 2011). Further research on gender differences in parental support is needed, but it has been identified that lack of parental support can lead to reduced engagement and retention of boys in dance (Risner 2009). Some participants tried to address perceived lack of parental support by providing social support themselves:

But I think you can tell that when you're, when you work with children you're a sort of secondary supportive adult to them. And if they have the first supportive adult, the parents, encouraging and supporting them, pushing them to do what they love, your job is quite easy. If you have the ones who maybe come on their own, who you get the feeling that it's not something that they, the parents maybe get how much they love it. Although they support them by paying for it. They're maybe not as keen on it. Then your role is a bit... You need to give a bit more of your role as the teacher and fill up that support (Avril, 27).

Esme noted the importance of building a relationship with parents in engaging teenage boys in

dance:

And I think also dance for boys in my school wasn't really there until I got there. Erm, and [pause] and so for their parents as well, I think it was something really positive to see their sons doing and being quite good at and getting positive feedback. So I think quite early on I made quite a, a strong relationship with their parents, so that they supported them to take dance as a, as an option. Erm, and yeah, now they always come to see them. We performed in, we've just had our dance show and we performed in sort of public dance platforms in the area and erm, yeah, they're always really well supported by their family and friends as well, which is nice, so. (Esme, 29)

Boys, in particular, have identified dance teachers as an important source of support (Risner 2009) with boys being twice as likely as are girls to describe their dance teacher as a key source of support and help (Risner 2014). Although dance teachers may not be trained to identify signs of distress, or effectively to support their students' emotional and psychological needs, within this study, the younger participants in particular appeared to consider pastoral care as a vital part of their role in retaining boys in dance (Owton et al. 2016).

Improving the Dancing Boy's Milieu

Participants identified as problematic the lack of male peer support for boys, who often found themselves isolated in the dance studio:

It's one boy in a group of twenty other girls. And that's where it's difficult for those boys to stick with what they're doing, because they don't have that: oh but it's alright, because Ben goes as well. You know that, they don't have that support from their peers. And I think that's probably more the problem with keeping them is more that they are isolated than the fact that they are... outside pressures upon them, the way that they're perceived. (Freya, 41)

Commensurate with Michael Gard and Robert Meyenn's (2000) findings, Heidi (31) noted that dance can be less appealing to boys as they prefer more team-based activities:

[it] is difficult primarily because they, boys as they grow up, grow up with other boys. So the natural thought process for most is to do something which is a team-based sport that they can do with other boys. So my

brothers, they went to football and they were part of a football team... And it's that team element that often in a dance class, they don't always experience, because in a dance class you do things either a line at a time or one at a time and it's about how you're getting on, rather than that collective spirit.

For Heidi, dance can be perceived as lacking “esprit de corps”, or the “collective spirit”, rather than actual physical contact, although synchronous movement in time to music has been found to be associated with pro-social behavior (Behrends et al. 2012; Reddish et al. 2013) suggesting that engaging in dance can promote this collective spirit. Shared intentionality, when interacting with synchronous movement, has also been found to enhance cooperation (Reddish et al. 2013). In many dance classes, especially ballet, an authoritarian approach to dance pedagogy is often taken, with children encouraged to be passive and remain focused on the teacher's directions (Clegg et al. 2017). This can restrict feelings of intersubjectivity with other dance students and thus hinder the development of a collective spirit. However, it has been found that a more creative and empowering dance pedagogy is often employed by teachers when boys are present (Clegg et al. 2017) and so teachers may themselves impact on the potential to create the collective spirit that Heidi describes.

In Carolyn Hebert's (2017) study the boys in a boys-only jazz class identified an experience of 'brotherhood' or community spirit that they implied would not be present in a mixed-gender class. It has been proposed that a further way to encourage male participation is to provide boys-only dance classes (Li 2011), and Freya (41) argued that boys benefit from such classes as '... they feel a little bit more connected, as a team'. Laura and Avril further highlight how these reduce boys' feelings of gender isolation and embarrassment about being the “only boy”; for example:

They [boys] definitely get the immediate feeling that they are among peers [in boys only classes] and they are not embarrassed or self-conscious of being the only boy. They get the feeling that they're among friends. And it reinforces the idea that they know in their head that boys like to dance, because look, there's another ten boys who like to dance. So they're not strange. (Avril, 27)

Esme (29), too, considered that boys could feel shy and nervous when dancing in front of girls, and

so single-gender classes were a 'hook' to attract them:

Erm, and there was also a lot, not a lot, but a good handful of boys, that when I mentioned coming to a dance club, they asked if the girls were going to be there, er, but not in a, not in a way that they were hoping they'd be there, in a way that I think they'd feel quite shy if they were. And so erm, [pause] I guess it was in a way, I felt like it was, it was a hook for them, that they knew that the boys were just going to be on their own, erm and that they didn't have to [pause] I was going to say worry about the girls, but I don't think they would have worried, I just think it made them a little bit more nervous.

Analogously, Zihao Li (2011) found that boys can feel uncomfortable dancing with large numbers of experienced female dancers, generating feelings of stress and anxiety. To reduce such discomfort and retain boys in dance, Li (2011) suggests holding boys-only classes, particularly for adolescent male dancers, who often experience a lack of confidence in the earliest stages of their acceptance of being a dancer. Nevertheless, while Hebert's (2017) findings support the notion that boys prefer to dance in classes with their equals in dance ability, which often means dancing in single-sex classes, the boys also identified that boys-only classes may not be challenging enough and lacked diversity in the gendered expressions of dance. These contrasting opinions led the boys to propose the option of both single-sex and mixed-gender classes being available (Hebert 2017).

Many participants also talked about privileging boys within the dance studio to help retain boys; for example, Caitlin and Freya both tailored their class specifically so that the boys' strengths were highlighted:

...I would make sure with the boys in the class, that we have given enough attention to those steps that I know they find more interesting. Erm, in a modern class, when they have specific exercises for boys and for girls, then again, it just makes the boys feel a bit special sometimes, that they have their own thing (Freya, 41)

Privileging boys in public shows was also noted as helping to attract boys to dance, and could be used to challenge negative stereotypes, including among parents:

If they [boys] are particularly good I will give them a solo. If they're just generally good then they're very happy not to be picked out, to be a part of the general corps de ballet, if you like, the general group. Yes, but if they are good then they need to be picked out. Plus, plus if I've done that, then the skeptical parent in the audience might think: ooh well, he looks alright, perhaps I should agree to my son coming. You know I always try to have these thoughts of what you might be showing. (Claire, 62)

Rewarding boys with extra praise and encouragement above and beyond what was accorded to the girls was also noted as a form of male privileging:

I think, I think it's nice to do that in a way, because in a way I think sometimes the boys do deserve that little bit more credit than the girls. Erm, because I would imagine that the boys had a harder time to get to that point than the girls have. [...] And I think if they're there then they obviously want to do it. So they deserve that, that little bit of extra credit and encouragement. I think that's probably a better word: encouragement (Laura, 39)

Despite such overt privileging of boys in the dance class, the female teachers did not perceive this as problematic for the girls in mixed-gender classes. In fact, Avril (27) considered that girls often colluded with such privileging: 'I think in mixed-gender classes, the boy's often the star. The girls love the boy. I know I did, you know because you rarely get the chance to dance with a boy'. Nevertheless, the female dance teachers in this study did identify some problems with the privileging of adult males in the dance performers' and dance teachers' worlds, which situated adult women as disadvantaged in terms of job opportunities and recognition (Clegg et al. 2016). The privileging of boys over girls in the dance studio may give boys the confidence to attain higher positions in the adult dance world and create expectations that make acceptable such gender disparities (Stinson 2005). Female dance teachers may also conform to gender stereotypes to present as caring and nurturing. Further, this may be especially focused on nurturing boys in an effort to attract and retain them. Thus the interplay of the dance teacher's gender with the gender of her students may produce a complex dynamic that encourages males to enter and remain in the dance world, but the unintended consequence of which is the acceptance of male privilege, potentially to the detriment of female dancers.

One way to eradicate the use of male privilege to attract and retain boys is to alter gendered

preconceptions of dance. The majority of participants identified that regular timetabled dance for all genders in primary schools would help establish dance as a gender-neutral activity; for example:

I've always thought that dance should be taught in primary schools. Not just, I don't mean just ballet, but dance, like you know all sorts of dance. There should be a class so that it's, it's the norm for boys to dance. And then they don't feel that, you know, that they're different or get bullied at school, because they do go to a dance school.... But I've always thought: to do dance, it is a sport, when you're young and then I think that would encourage more boys to then, you know, go on to dance...and into classes without there being any stigma. (Melanie, 71)

Anne highlighted the importance of the specific dance genre(s) offered in making dance accessible to both boys and girls:

I never do things like ballet, ever. So I'd never go in and say: let's do ballet, with a load of year 5 boys and girls [ages 9-10 years] that have never danced before. I'll do stuff to pop music...I try and make it not of girly things. So I'll use music that's in the charts, because that will get them all up and going. And yeah, a lot of girls don't like dancing either and would turn their nose up at ballet, so. I just try and make it accessible and as fun as possible. So it's not: oh God, we're having to learn a dance. It's yeah, okay, we're having a good time, we're listening to nice music and it's enjoyable to get them all involved. (Anne, 29)

For some children, ballet may represent an unfamiliar world far beyond their everyday social milieu, and their own musical and dance experiences. Awareness of differences in relation to their own gender, class and ethnicity, in comparison to norms within the world of ballet, may further reduce their ability to identify and therefore engage with such a dance genre (Pickard 2012). Furthermore, ballet requires developing considerable technical expertise that some dancers consider a 'chore' and thus a cause for disengagement with the genre (Walker et al. 2012). A number of participants noted employing different pedagogic styles when teaching in different contexts, for example in primary schools in contrast to private schools. Freya, for instance, highlighted her greater focus on creativity and fun in the primary school setting.

Participants also, however, reported their concerns regarding the ability of teachers not trained in dance to be able to deliver high-quality dance programs (Clegg et al. 2016), and other research has

found that schoolteachers are often ill-prepared, and may have internalized some of the stereotypical gender norms associated with dance (Kalyn et al. 2015). A program that challenges teachers both to dance and to learn how to teach dance can have a positive impact on the quality of dance taught (Kalyn et al. 2015); many of our participants described a lack of support for teachers in this domain, so that professional dance teachers were brought in to provide dance lessons. While an appropriate solution, such reliance on stretched school funds meant that participants were often not employed on a regular basis. Thus, dance classes are often sporadic and taught by unqualified teachers.

Although providing dance in primary schools may gradually impact on societal conceptions of males in dance, a more direct and overt method is engaging the public with male dancers through visual media such as films and television. Freya, Anne, Melanie and Heidi all spoke about the “Billy Elliot Effect” and how the film stimulated an acceptance of boys’ dancing.

I think just dancing has become more acceptable. Billy Elliot started that trend. It was a huge hit and it did show that it was acceptable for boys. Erm, that's not to say that they didn't exist before and you know that it might not have happened anyway. (Freya, 41)

More widely, however, although there was some expectation from the media that the film would, through its construction of boys in ballet being “cool”, lead to large numbers of boys joining ballet classes, there is little evidence this has actually occurred (Ashley 2009). Boys continue to focus on more masculine dance genres, such as street dance and tap (Ashley 2009). “Billy Elliot” may have broken down some barriers in relation to boys in dance, more generally it has not challenged social constructions of effeminacy often attached to ballet, or perceptions of masculine and feminine dance genres. This is interesting given that the dancing displayed in the film and musical has strong masculine elements, including aggressive moves and powerful leaps and turns, and, at times, Billy's moves are more athletic than balletic (Rodosthenous 2007). Thus despite engaging in a “make it macho” strategy, to reduce the feminization of ballet and encourage boys to dance (Fisher 2007), “Billy

Elliot” does not appear to have “defeminized” ballet for boys.

The television program, ‘Strictly Come Dancing’, a competitive ballroom dancing show in the UK, was also highlighted by participants as a means to ease the acceptance of boys in dance. Avril (27) felt that such a show provided boys, and their fathers, with positive role models in the dance world:

And with Strictly Come Dancing, where you have males, [...] that the children look up to, makes people more aware that boys dance and it’s not anything to be embarrassed about. And that has actually done wonders for just for awareness that, you know, boys can dance. That was not something that a lot of, well especially dads, were very sort of [aware of]... Because they weren’t encouraged to do it.

Anne (29), however, felt the impact of “Strictly Come Dancing” on engaging boys in dance was counteracted by the ‘flamboyant’ behavior of some male celebrities, with Anne appearing to equate “flamboyant” behavior with effeminacy. Interestingly, “Strictly” also presents the gender complexities of dance. On one hand, the inclusion of a large number of male sport celebrities, and discussions around their dance ability, showcases strength, stamina and athleticism, which plays into the “make it macho strategy” and emphasizes the masculine requirements of dance (Richardson 2016). Furthermore, although male ballroom dancers often perform what could be considered both masculine and feminine moves, the pairing of a male with a female who performs hyper-femininity, can help counter the putative feminization of male dancers (Richardson 2016). On the other hand, the relatively large number of openly gay male celebrities, judges and professional dancers on the show may reinforce stereotypes about an inevitable nexus of male dancers and homosexuality and/or effeminacy. Thus, although improvements within the dance studio and education can be implemented to engage boys in dance, the use of media to break down social stigma around male dancers is more ambiguous in its efficacy.

CONCLUSION

The female dance teachers within this study all identified as problematic the lack of boys in dance

and expressed the need to improve their recruitment and retention. Stereotypical constructions of male dancers as being effeminate and, by association, homosexual, were considered the primary barriers to boys' engagement with dancing, particularly ballet, and led to bullying outside of dance.

Participants in this study identified a number of ways to enhance recruitment and retention of boys in dance. Parental support was considered key and, if lacking, the female teachers attempted to provide that social support, and/or engage parents within the dance world. Risner (2014) found that boys did identify their dance teacher as an important source of support but he expressed concerns about dance teachers having the skills to fulfill such a pastoral role "...boys may depend on their favorite teachers for advice, mentoring, and counsel well beyond teachers' current understanding – both in terms of need and support" (Risner 2014, 194). Nevertheless, in our earlier work (Owton et al. 2016), we found that female teachers considered they did possess the relevant skills, and considered such tasks to be part of their job.

Privileging of boys in the dance studio was considered a further way to enhance boys' involvement in ballet. Participants described tailoring the dance class specifically to engage the boys, showcasing the boys within any choreography, and giving more overt praise to the boys. Although the dance teachers did not feel that such privileging disadvantaged the girls, we do not know the girls' own views (interviewing dance students was not part of the current research design). Recent research, although not directly focusing on privileging boys, found that few female dancers recalled positive memories of the boys in their classes and appeared to find the boys behavior alien and distracting (Bond 2017). More concerning is that it is possible that such male privileging could lead to a sense of entitlement in the boys, which subsequently generates more opportunities for males in the dance performers' world (Stinson 2005). Future research could usefully explore the experiences and perceptions of female dance students and female professional dancers in relation to the male privileging that potentially occurs both within the dance studio as well as in the professional dance world. Although it is important for dance teachers to engage in behaviors that enable boys to dance, we argue that this should not be to the

detriment of the girls. There is clear evidence from across the United States (Larson, 2017, Van Dyke, 2017) that despite the considerably higher proportion of females compared to males who enter the dance world once at a professional level males gain increased opportunities for such positions as choreographer and are more valued, through monetary rewards, than their female peers. Gender equality within the dance world is key both to breaking down prejudice for boys/men and enabling girls/women to gain higher positions commensurate with their male counterparts.

Participants also recognized the importance of creating a dance environment that welcomed and valued boys, alongside the need to challenge and change attitudes within wider society. Normalizing dance for boys within compulsory education was suggested by interviewees, who considered that the integration of dance within the mainstream primary school curriculum from an early age would, over time, reduce negative gender stereotypes regarding boys in dance. The financial implications of this mainstreaming highlights the need for schools, and those who determine the curriculum and funding of schools, to value the performing arts and invest financially in providing high-quality dance teaching. Such investment can be offset when acknowledging the substantial benefits of dance, which include improving physical health and increasing self-esteem (Connolly et al. 2011), aiding cognitive development, and enhancing self-discipline and sense of self (Giguere 2011). A further method for improving the social milieu for dancing boys, which participants identified, was the use of visual media, such as the film “Billy Elliot” and the UK television program “Strictly Come Dancing”, to challenge stereotypical views of male dancers. The teachers in this study believed that these had encouraged boys to dance and reduced prejudice, although there is little independent research to support this. The film, and to some extent the television program, have focused on the “make it macho” strategy and conformed to heteronormative conceptualizations of masculinity. This then reduces expressions of varied forms of masculinity and so may be no more freeing for boys who wish to dance than for boys experiencing current perceptions.

While this paper provides important findings regarding the recruitment and retention of boys in

dance, it should be noted that this is from the perceptions of female dance teachers and not the boys themselves. Future research is required that engages boys who dance in discussions of what attracted them to, and enabled them to stay in dance. Relatedly, research is needed to investigate perceptions of boys who 'drop out' of dance to ascertain their reasons for disengagement.

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