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Dance/Movement Therapy for Competitive Dancers: A Community Engagement Project

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Dance/Movement Therapy

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Abstract

Young dancers often struggle to portray emotions and connect to meaningful choreography on a deep level. From September to April of this year, I have been applying dance/movement therapy theories and techniques to a competition dance class hoping to improve each dancer's ability to emotionally execute a piece and improve the studios scores. I have worked toward meeting the adolescent pro-social needs through restructuring a dance class and encouraging self-esteem to be built through arts-based experientials. I did this by using several methods from dance/movement therapy theorists and applying them to a dance class that meets once a week for one hour. In addition to the dance/movement therapy theories, I used Laban Movement Analysis and the Bartenieff fundamentals to improve self-awareness. The dancers in this class are Caucasian, females between the ages of 9 and 18. The dancers explored their emotional connection to this dance through drawing, journaling, body explorations and improvisations led by prompts. I learned that dance movement therapy can easily be applied to a dance class and will improve the dancer's connection to a piece tremendously. At the studio's first dance competition of the season, all three judges commented on the dancer's emotions, story-telling and commitment to the message, indicating that dance/movement therapy theories and techniques can help improve the dancer's emotional execution.

Key words: dance/movement therapy, competitive dancers, young dancers

Dance Movement Therapy for Competitive Dancers

Introduction

Dance classes for adolescents are often structured in a very specific way. They start with a warm up led by the instructor, then transition to doing larger steps across the floor and in the center of the room, followed by learning choreography. Occasionally a ballet class will have a reverence to end the class, but other styles of dance just end without any type of closing ritual. I have spent this year looking at how dance/movement therapy theories and techniques can be applied to studio dance classes. By applying these techniques, I was looking to see if a shift in class structure would impact stage presence, emotional execution, self-awareness and overall well-being. This opportunity allowed dancers to take their dance training further and apply variety to their experiences in dance class, by incorporating elements through art and movement that contributed more meaning, to the piece I choreographed for the competition season this year.

I teach multiple dance classes to girls between the ages of 9 and 18 several times a week, from September through June. Over the course of the year, I have restructured one class to provide the opportunity to build a stronger group dynamic and incorporate their emotions and needs into their dance experience. The class I am working with is the competition team, which focuses on improving technique and flexibility in order to receive higher scores at upcoming regional and national competitions. Dance competition scores are typically based on technique, stage presence, choreography, execution and difficulty. Focusing on these parts while incorporating a therapeutic element was challenging at times. The dancers trust me to provide a routine for them that will do well at the competitions and allow them to feel accomplished after receiving feedback from the judges. Keeping the performance elements that judges are looking for in mind helped me to shape my experientials in a way that would improve their dancing

through body awareness and improve their emotional execution through self-awareness. I start my classes by stretching in a circle, this idea comes from Marian Chace's theory of including circles as a way to hold the space in a therapeutic way (Levy, 1988, p.23). Following our stretch, I then transition to the theme development portion of class. This is where I would incorporate several methods that I have learned throughout my years at Lesley University. The class explored the Bartenieff Fundamentals, Basic Effort qualities from Laban Movement Analysis and participated in several dance/movement therapy experientials. Following the experientials, the class then reviewed choreography and ended with a brief closure. The closure typically involved dancers naming what they were taking away from class that day.

I had the dancers journal and make art throughout the process to see what came up for them. We often had discussions regarding the idea of what makes us beautiful and what contributions we want to make to the world as a person. The piece we worked on was inspired by working toward self-love and identifying it in all areas of one's life. I wanted the dancers to understand who they are as a person and how they impact the world by being true to themselves. I planned to have dancers discover this through experientials and offering alternative ways of self-expression to the dancers. I carefully planned out the songs that were playing while we stretched or did the experientials and played inspiring and empowering music. I explained to the girls that I wanted them to listen to the lyrics and connect to what they were hearing. I challenged them to identify the feelings and express those emotions with their bodies. Several of these dancers have had difficulties displaying emotions on stage during previous performances, and I was looking to see if they were able to identify how to do so throughout this process.

I spent several months creating a more inclusive and group-focused class structure, hoping to improve technique and performance. I believe that by improving their emotional, body

and self-awareness they will develop stronger skills in dance and become better individuals. DMT has a wide range of tools that can improve what one knows about their body and I strongly believe that these tools can benefit all dancers because I experienced it first-hand throughout my education. As a dancer, I found that after I left my studio and went to college I was exposed to several elements in the dance world that I was completely unaware of. College dance tends to have a strong focus on modern dance which can closely relate to Laban Movement Analysis or the Bartenieff Fundamentals, which both provide a stronger anatomical understand leading to increased body awareness. Throughout my college education I noticed my technique improved tremendously due to my increased body awareness. I feel that this is important to teach to dancers at a younger age because it will help them become well rounded dancers and educated about the way their bodies work.

As I have gone through the process of restructuring a dance class, I have focused on several specific areas throughout my research that led me to my decision making. I looked for articles that discussed and explored competitive dance, emotions and dance, dance therapy theories and anatomy for dancers. The anatomy piece came from wanting dancers to explore Rudolf Laban and Irmgard Bartenieff techniques. Throughout my training in both my undergraduate and graduate studies I found both of those movement techniques easier to understand by applying what was learned in my anatomy courses. There has not been much research done with studio-based dancers and these techniques, but I was able to find some similar work done with professional or college dancers (Hayes, 2004).

Literature Review

There was a study done that explored factors influencing girl's continued participation in competitive dance. I found this article very useful because we have spent a lot time exploring

why the dancers come back and continue to participate in our team every year. The study interviewed dancers before and after their competition season and observed them at a dance competition. Throughout the process of working with and observing these dancers, the researcher found that the participants continue to dance for the opportunity to participate and enjoy the dance experience, as well as being in a supportive environment at their dance studio (Shannon, 2016). By interacting in a physical activity every week, these dancers are experiencing fewer depressive symptoms, higher self-esteem and greater life satisfaction (Shannon, 2016). This is because they are receiving social interactions they desire as well as developing friendships and engaging in social events (Shannon, 2016). These findings relate to the dancers I am working with because they too have mentioned dancing for all the same reasons and have shared that information in group discussions. I have also personally noticed increased self-esteem within each of them. This can be seen by the ways they carry their bodies, walk and talk. In my own observations, I have noticed that dancers with higher self-esteem take up more space when talking or moving freely by using hand gestures and expanding with their limbs. Dancers with low self-esteem often keep their limbs close to them when asked to move freely and don't move as much but will choose to take time between movements and look around to see what others are doing. Throughout the process of my research I noticed some quieter dancers starting to take up more space and become more comfortable moving their bodies freely through the exploration of building stronger connections within the group of dancers. Something that came up while the dancers were observed at a competition was performance anxiety. This is something that I try to avoid with my dancers by trying my best to make them feel prepared and comfortable with the piece to perform it with no fear at all, however this is a feeling that people experience in a variety of ways and is not something I can prevent. Performance anxiety can be

worked through in several ways, and I tried to do this through my experientials by having the group express their feelings about the piece and sharing this piece with an audience. Harriet Wadeson, an art therapist, explains that performance fear can be understood through exploring meaning rather than producing meaning (Wadeson, 1995, p.57). This exploration can come from a therapeutic language, working together, having conversation and supporting the people you are working with (Wadeson, 1995, p.57). I explored this with the group by providing support for whatever emotions came up in our process. Another common topic that came up in Shannon's studies was the dancer's relationship to each other and constantly mentioned their "dance family" (Shannon, 2016). The girls I teach refer to their "dance family" frequently. When they use this term, they are talking about their teammates, teachers, studio directors and parents that are involved in their dance experience. The "dance family" is an important piece of a competition team and recognizing these connections is an important part in creating strong and meaningful pieces.

Several researchers, like Shannon, have found that dance increases a positive mood. A study was conducted that had twenty-three dancers complete the Brunel University Mood Scale before and after two dance classes, this assessed their anger, confusion, depression, fatigue and tension and vigor (Lane, Hewston, Redding, Whyte, 2003). The study was based off the fact that mood enhancement is maximized when exercise is of light to moderate intensity and involves the absence of interpersonal connection (Lane et al., 2003). This particular study compared mood enhancement after two different styles of modern dance. The piece that I found useful was that mood scores increased after both dance classes. This information was useful to me because understanding how mood can increase after a regular dance class was important in my process of restructuring my dance classes. Recognizing the relationship between emotions and dance had

been an important part of my research. Since the piece I am worked on was meant to be performed, I feel that the relationship between the dancer and the audience was important to explore. Emotions are communicated through speech processing and voice quality but can also be communicated non-verbally (Van Dyck, Vansteenkiste, Lenior, Ledsffre, Leman, 2014). By expressing things non-verbally, we use embodied cognition to perceive and understand the emotional state of a person and their body (Van Dyck et al., 2014). Embodied cognition is a big part of choreographing and performing. Both the dancers and the choreographer must understand and work through the message being presented in order to project and connect with the audience. By doing so performers will build relationships with audience members through dance. In a study that measured if viewers could recognize emotions through free dance movement, it was explained that happier movements tend to be faster, more accelerated, expanding and impulsive (Van Dyck et al., 2014). The most useful piece of information from this study, for me, was that it was found that observers generally focus on movements of the chest when decoding emotional information from free dance movement (Van Dyck et al., 2014). By keeping these movement qualities in mind, I was able to choreograph in a way that explored portraying emotions through the body, hoping to increase the dancer's emotional execution.

In addition to exploring choreographic elements, I also explored basic movement qualities with my class to explore how a different approach to dance impacted their performance quality. I did this by exploring Irmgard Bartenieff's Basic Six body connections. The Bartenieff Fundamentals provide awareness of a clearer feeling of oneself in relation to others, by integrating body feeling with emotional feeling and expression (Levy, 1988, p. 117). The basic six body connections that were explored are breathing, core-distal connection, head-tail connection, upper-lower connection, body-half connection and cross-lateral connection (Berardi,

2004). By exploring body connections, dancers are becoming more aware of total body opening and closing and understanding movement patterning that also encourages personal expression (Berardi, 2004). The basic six not only gave them a stronger understanding that allowed exploration of differentiating body parts, but allowed my dancers to integrate their whole selves through total body connectivity, breath support, grounding and development progression, which confirmed both what Berardi wrote about and what I explained to them throughout the process (Berardi, 2004). In addition to exploring the basic six, I introduced the eight effort qualities from Laban Movement Analysis to my dancers. We explored direct and indirect space, slow and quick time, light and strong weight and free and bound flow (Dell, 1977, p.114). By providing the opportunity for dancers to explore their movement qualities in a different way, they will gain a stronger awareness of their bodies. Through my own training I have noticed improvements within my technique and body awareness that I feel have greatly influenced my dancing. In addition to my own experiences, Cadence Whittier uses Laban Movement Analysis and incorporates it into ballet classes that she teaches. Throughout her process she found that integrating Laban Movement Analysis and classical ballet creates a unique classroom culture that allows dancers to perceive and talk about their technique and expressive capabilities as artists and individuals (Whittier, 2006). Whittier explains that she restructured ballet classes to create a foundation for developing individuality, this included five expressive approaches: dynamic and rhythmic sounding, imagery and metaphor, reflective responses to movement, movement experimentation and creation of movement exercises (Whittier, 2006). Whittier found that by integrating this foundation with LMA provided the opportunity for dancers to further understand their movement qualities and express their capabilities as artists and as individuals (Whittier, 2006).

Through the process of teaching dancers about their anatomy through these body connections, I hoped they would gain a stronger understanding of self. By applying dance/movement therapy theories and techniques to my class, I worked to include self-discovery and worked with body image, allowing dancers to develop a sense of what their body looks, feels and moves like while dancing. Self-discovery can happen in our work through tactile stimulation, movement reflecting, and breathing (Chaiklin & Wengrower, 2016, p.80). The first step toward redefining the body image is joint articulation, identification of body parts, and constructive use of muscles (Chaiklin & Wengrower, 2016, p.80). By educating dancers about how their bodies move, they are able to visualize and correct what is happening within themselves to better execute technique and choreography.

Dancers are often given the task of remembering several dances at once. Based on my own experience I have heard several people say to myself and these dancers that they don't understand how we are able to do it. Blaser and Hökelmann explain that knowledge regarding dance can be recalled through explicit memory and can be enhanced through sensory elements and emotional memory (Hökelmann and Blaser, 2009). In neuropsychology, conscious reproduction of an event such as dance is known as representation or imagination and neural patterns (Hökelmann and Blaser, 2009). The imagination manifests itself in cognitive process through neural connections which, through dance, is explored within the temporal, spatial and dynamic structure of the dancer's brain (Hökelmann and Blaser, 2009). However, when a dancer is experiencing this for several dances this can lead to fatigue due to a high demand from choreographers (Hökelmann and Blaser, 2009). I spent time working on avoiding fatigue by providing space for the dancers to make this piece their own. This was done by making careful chorographic choices. Himmat Kaur Victoria explains that as a dancer she feels a deep need to

share her human experience through choreography and as a dance/movement therapist understands that choreography and performance are often not used in the therapeutic process in American dance/movement therapy (Victoria, 2012). She created a choreo-therapeutic model that used elements from DMT, psychodynamic psychology and choreographic terms and techniques (Victoria, 2012). By doing this she created a process that allowed her clients to share their stories and feel that they have something to show for their hard work. To avoid my dancers feeling fatigued throughout the process I used Victoria's model to allow the dancers to feel more connected to the choreography and that it was some of their own. Victoria's model uses externalization, transformations, and reinternalisation to create an emotionally motivated dance to be performed (Victoria, 2012). The externalization phase is a place of listening and finding unique movement through improvisation by allowing individuals to reflect on the essence of what they have been moved by (Victoria, 2012). I incorporated this by having dancers improve to the music we were using for this piece or through improving to several prompts related to the topic of who they are as individuals and who we are as a team. The transformation phase provides the opportunity for the individual or group to connect to the movements on a deeper level after choreography is finished; this connection happens through constructing the configuration, dialoging with the piece and transitioning the arrangement (Victoria, 2012). The steps in the transformation phase helped me to identify a structure for my experientials. The re-internalisation phase happens when the piece is performed or being witnessed and the individual or group may go through a process of re-internalising or integrating the previous phases (Victoria, 2012). I found the re-internalisation phase to be crucial to my research because the dancers got to perform. I got to be the witness of this process that we were all working on together. This phase allowed us to bring everything together and reflect on the process. In

addition to that, it provided us the opportunity to notice a difference in relationships to a piece that dancers have a stronger emotional connection. Victoria explains that several dance/movement therapy theorists, such as Marian Chace, Blanche Evan, Mary Whitehouse, Trudi Schoop and Alma Hawkins were dancers, performers, choreographers and teachers before creating the field (Victoria, 2012). Meaning that naturally they took information from what they had learned in their careers as dancers and applied it to their work in creating each of their theories in their therapeutic work. For me it made sense to take things from the theorists and bring them back to a dance class, creating a circle and balance of dance and therapy.

I was able to restructure my dance class by looking at the DMT theorists who identified as dancers and performers and piece together parts of their theories to create a therapeutic dance curriculum. I looked at Marian Chace's technique to create the structure of my class. The Chace technique typically consists of three parts: the warm up, theme development and closure (Levy, 1988, p.23). This technique uses mirroring, circles, communal movement, discussion and group development; which were all present in this particular class each week (Levy, 1988, p.23). Blanche Evan's structure started with a more physical warmup, which is useful in a dance class to prevent injury; the physical warm up allows for release of tension (Levy, 1988, p.33). In addition to a physical warm up Evan used "Evan's system of functional technique", improvisation/enactment and verbalization of thoughts and feelings (Levy, 1988, p.32). The Evan system of functional technique uses exercises to retrain muscles to move in ways that shift posture, coordination, placement of body parts and one's rhythm to a more natural flow (Levy, 1988, p.34). I found that what her system was working toward were similar goals to myself bringing Laban Movement Analysis and Bartenieff Fundamentals into the class. Mary Whitehouse's groups were shaped differently. In addition to several interventions specific to her

technique, she focused on the therapeutic relationship between herself and her clients. This was the foundation of her work, and she felt that a therapist also needs to be a teacher, mediator and a leader (Levy, 1988, p.57). By trusting her intuition and observing barriers that each individual had, Mary Whitehouse was able to form strong relationships that led to beneficial treatment. (Levy, 1988, p.57). Building a relationship with my class was not a hard task to do because I have been teaching this group of dancers multiple classes a week for three years. What I found challenging was introducing myself in a new role and shifting my class expectations by bringing in experientials that allowed the dancers to share a different part of themselves. The group expressed interest in my education throughout the process and expressed that they were excited to be working with me. I believe that because we had a strong relationship prior to this process that we were able to trust each other and work together to understand the development of our piece. Trudi Schoop felt that proper body use could improve self-esteem by building the body image through increased self-awareness and therapeutic movement explorations (Levy, 1988, p.63). Schoop spent a lot of time educating her clients similar to the way a dance teacher educates students. In addition to her educational approach she used rhythm and repetition, the inner fantasy and spontaneous movement improvisation and planned movement formulation (Levy,1988, p.64). Schoop's idea of repetition stood out to me because dancers spend an entire year working on one dance, constantly repeating the same movements. The final theorist that came from a background of dancing and performing is Alma Hawkins. Hawkins integrated imagery and elements of dance and creativity into healing based on the needs of the individual (Levy, 1988, p.76). I used imagery with the girls when we got closer to performing the piece. I had them visualize themselves performing the piece and feeling the energy from the emotions we had spent the entire process talking about. In addition to that I had them draw their emotions to

express how the dance felt to them in a different way than moving or talking about it. Each of the DMT theorists had provided the field with unique ways to do our work; since I have started my studies in this field I have felt grateful to have such strong theories and methods to take apart and put back together to provide what a specific group may need. I found each of these theories helpful as I restructured my class and worked through the process.

Research on dance/movement therapy with young dancers has been hard to come across, but I have found some similar studies that I will use to help structure my process. Jill Hayes did a related study with college dancers, who participated in several dance/movement therapy groups. Data was collected from group notes, paintings, reflections and process recordings. Throughout the research process themes of self-awareness, self-confidence and relationships came up. Hayes and the dancers were able to find that the students were able to develop a new found confidence in their movement and were able to trust the creative process (Hayes, 2004).

Creating a dance class that had therapeutic elements consisted of finding new ways to teach. I wanted this class to feel different than their typical dance class. I explored “in class motivators” by adding variety in class, making the class meaningful, encouraging dancers to set goals, and by being sensitive to the dancer’s motivation (Taylor and Taylor, 1995, p.33). Throughout the motivation process it is important to listen to the individual’s words and work toward eliminating negative thoughts. Competitive dance can often become a negative environment because dancers are constantly comparing themselves to others affecting their self-esteem and love for the art. Taylor and Taylor explain the importance of changing negative thought patterns in dancers by having the dancer look at what they have control over and how they can gain control of challenging situations (Taylor & Taylor, 1995, p.59). By having the dancers understand what they have control over they are able to reflect on themselves and find

areas to improve that can better themselves, leading to the opportunity to eliminate negative thoughts (Taylor & Taylor, 1995, p. 59). Incorporating experientials into a dance class that encourage positivity and self-esteem building helped dancers become more confident in themselves and their performance ability.

Methods

The dancers I have been working with are between the ages of 9 and 18. These dancers have been dancing for several years on our competition team. All dancers are female, Caucasians whose families fall into the middle or upper middle socioeconomic class. These dancers take several classes a week and express interest and engage in multiple styles. The style used for this project was lyrical dance. Dance teachers across the industry define lyrical dance as a dance style that combines elements of jazz and ballet to tell the story of the lyrics being used in the song. Lyrical dance is often a slower style that uses several flowing and graceful movements. These dancers were given the choice to participate in this class or not. 15 dancers signed up to take the class. We met once a week from September-May for one hour. The dance we created was performed five times. Once at a recital, three times at regional competitions and once at a national competition. At the beginning of the year I explained to the class that I was in my last year of school for dance/movement therapy and would like to work with them to complete my capstone project. All dancers agreed to engage and participate in project.

Throughout the year, dancers engaged in several experientials that challenged them to think about their relationship to the dance and to one another. I collected and recorded information by journaling about what had happened after each class and having several discussions throughout the year to understand what they were noticing within themselves throughout the process. In addition to what the dancers reported I carefully observed them each

week and used my observations to collect information and enrich the choreography to create a stronger story.

Throughout the process I organized the information by comparing their thoughts and self-observations to my own and looked for overlapping themes between our thoughts. Several similarities came up but I was also surprised by the differences.

At the beginning of the year I spent a lot of time thinking about which pieces of dance/movement therapy could benefit or be appropriate to incorporate into a dance class. I looked through several materials that have been introduced to me throughout the years and started putting together what met the needs for this particular project. One thing I began to include was a quote of the week. This quote started by being one that I selected but as time went on the dancers started to send them to me and I would share their quotes as well. The quote of the week allowed us to have a ritual and I related it to a goal that would relate to the class. This way everyone would have the same focus that we were working toward each week. Having rituals is important both in therapy and in class because it provides structure which allows participants to know what is expected of them and allows them to prepare for what could happen. Incorporating consistency into the structure of the class allows dancers to prepare for a performance, allowing them to feel more confident before going on stage (Taylor and Taylor, 1995, p.63). In our very first class I had them lay down and listen to their song and then had them identify how they related to the lyrics and what it meant to them as an individual and as a member of the team. The song the girls danced to was "I Lived" by One Republic. This song uses a lot of imagery and metaphors in the lyrics. The dancers have been asked to improv to their song when they relate to lyrics. Using this imagery as a guide for improvisational movement came from DMT theorist, Alma Hawkins (Levy, 1988, p.76). Hawkins used imagery to allow clients to allow "inner

sensing” in the creative process by allowing self-directed responses (Levy, 1988, p.76). Although Hawkins used actual images and I had the dancers react to the images that they imagined based on the lyrics, I feel that they were able to react in a similar way and move based on their personal response to the lyrics. Most dancers related to when the song says “I owned every second that this world could give, I saw so many places, the things that I did. Yeah, with every broken bone I swear I lived.” The dancers used several large movements while improving and expanded through their limbs as well as through their breath. We also explored the connection within the group through improvisational experientials. I had the dancers get in groups of three and “talk behind each other’s backs.” During this experiential, dancers were asked to talk about the girls they were paired with in a positive way and shared whatever positive thoughts came to mind. This provided the opportunity to expand self-confidence and build stronger bonds within the group. This meet the pro-social needs of adolescent development by giving the dancers an opportunity to be complimented. Competitive dance allows adolescent girls to engage in physical activity and interacting with peers (Shannon, 2016). Physical activity releases endorphins in the brains which improve the mood and helps build self-esteem (Shannon, 2016). I had the dancers give each other positive feedback and compliments during several experientials so they could build up each other’s self-esteem and build a stronger group dynamic through improved relationships.

During class we had several discussions that allowed the group to connect to the story but also share their own opinions. We discussed their relationships while performing and how they connect to each other, judges, teachers, families and strangers in the audience. Dancers also explored and discussed why they do competition dance and why they come back to competition every year. These discussions were inspired by Charlene Shannon’s work with competitive

dancers (Shannon, 2016). The dancers that she worked with often mentioned several different relationships dancers explore while performing and I found it useful to explore those connections with my dancers because when asked to reflect on a variety of topics my dancers constantly mentioned the support of their family, friends and teachers. I also explored audience relationships by asking the girls how they knew what emotions they felt while watching dances in the past. This allowed the dancers to reflect on what has stood out to them and apply it to themselves. I explained to the class that dancers use nonverbal communication to express emotions, meaning and stories. Audience members recognize happy movements as faster, more accelerated, greater distance between joints of the upper limbs and the center of the body, and more impulsive (Van Dyck et al., 2014). Another thing that observers look for meaning in nonverbal communication is the movement of the chest, the way a dancer moves their chest can provide a lot of meaning about the dance (Van Dyck et al., 2014). I had the dancers rehearse with these in mind hoping they would recognize what nonverbal communication felt like within their own bodies.

In addition to understanding emotions, I incorporated experientials that allowed the dancers to understand their anatomy and movement qualities in a different way. I introduced the Bartenieff Fundamentals and Laban Movement Analysis to them. We started with the Bartenieff Fundamentals. I explained to the class that these exercises would allow them to feel movement within their bodies in a different way and would inform them of connections within themselves that provided the opportunity for dancers to become more in tune with their bodies. I led the class through movement exercises that allowed them to feel each of Bartenieff's basic six body connections. The basic six body connections that were explored are breathing, core-distal connection, head-tail connection, upper-lower connection, body-half connection and cross-lateral

connection (Berardi, 2004). Once we explored all six I had the dancers do their dance and then asked them to identify one place in the dance where they felt one of the connections. All dancers were able to identify the connections within their bodies while dancing and expressed that they wanted to name more than just one. I also explained to them what Laban Movement Analysis is and how can be used to improve their dancing. I explained that there are several pieces that can be used to understand movement. We focused on the effort qualities and explored direct and indirect space, slow and quick time, light and strong weight and free and bound flow (Dell, 1977, p.114). I guided the group through all four efforts and explored both ends of each one. I asked the group to identify which ones they felt they preferred and had noticed within themselves and then we explored where there are different effort qualities in the choreography. I found that explaining things in Laban terms helped the dancers understand the choreography on a deeper level. For example, if dancers had difficulty executing an arm movement I could tell them that their arm should rise in a sharp, quick, direct movement and that helped them because they had felt those things in their own bodies and identified in their own lives.

Occasionally I would lead the class through a body scan. I would use a body scan when the group came in with high energy and was unable to focus. This would allow the dancers to come together to relax, focus and increase body awareness. When leading the class through a body scan I would have dancers lie down and bring their attention to their feet and then slowly work up their bodies relaxing one part at a time, often referred to as progressive muscle relaxation. Following the body scan the class would then stretch together before dancing. I also had the group journal throughout the process and record what was happening for them, their thoughts and emotions. This allowed the group to process their own thoughts before sharing and hearing others. Journaling before our discussions allowed them to share more individualized

opinions and provided the opportunity for privacy if something came up that they did not want to share.

I introduced the component of art to the group and explained how art can help express things in a different way than words and movement can. I provided oil pastels and paper and asked dancers to create an image of that it felt like to perform this dance on stage. I asked if they felt a different relationship to this dance than their other dances because of the additional work we have done. There was some resistance toward this experiential and dancers expressed that they are “not good at drawing.” This feeling relates to the performance fear that can often happen before dancers go on stage which is explained by Harriet Wadeson (Wadeson, 1995, p.57). The performance fear often happens with clients in the expressive therapies field when first introduced to art that they are unfamiliar with (Wadeson, 1995, p.57). I can relate to this feeling because I experienced this same fear when asked to draw at the beginning of my time at Lesley University. I explained that it was about the process of taking their emotions and externally expressing them and noticing what came up for them. This experience made the dancers braver because it provided them with a new opportunity to express what they were feeling and challenged them by doing it in an unfamiliar way.

As we got closer to the first competition of the season I started using guided imagery and having the girls “visualize” their performance. I would play the music and ask them to close their eyes or relax their gaze and picture themselves performing the routine to the best of their ability, feeling every movement and telling a story with their bodies. Right before the girls went on stage, I gathered them together and had them take three deep breaths to center themselves. Then I asked them to take a minute to reflect on all the work we have done and to channel that energy into their performance.

Results

My observations

Throughout the process I noticed the dancers becoming very passionate and connected to this dance as evidenced by their excitement and curiosity toward my research. Each week they were able to bring new ideas and were so willing to participate in each experiential. I was constantly surprised by what came up and the thoughts they shared. I saw a big difference in how the group approached the class and showed up each week excited to see what experiential we would be doing that day. The group showed interest in my writing and would constantly ask questions about my process. Their curiosity was reflected through their honest participation. The structure of the class allowed the group to adjust to a new ritual that allowed them to know what was coming next but provided the opportunity for growth and exploration of their self-understanding.

While observing the group I noticed changes in their connection to the movements as we explored our bodies moving in different ways through the Bartenieff Fundamentals and Laban Movement Analysis as evidenced by the way dancers would reach through their whole body, taking up more space or places they would find to incorporate more breath within the choreography. They were able to identify these movement analysis tools within their own body and apply it to how they dance. The dancers always offered their individualized opinions during group discussion. Whenever I asked a question there was always at least one dancer that reflected on the group or “dance family” coming together to create something special. The term “dance family” is often used in competition dance to describe the team but also the people who have helped them through difficult times which has strengthen their bond (Shannon, 2016). When they talk about this dance, they often use we statements and really connect the story to a

group. The girls gained a lot of self-esteem from being in a positive environment and I hoped through this process they would find some individuality in their self-expression. When the dancers answered questions by sharing something about the group, I would honor that answer but challenge them by reflecting back and asking what they were getting out of an experiential for themselves. I was constantly amazed by their ability to think about their dance team going through this process instead of just making it an individualized experience. They often mentioned the strength and happiness they feel when dancing together. The connections and relationships that the dancers have with one another is really special and shows when they are dancing together. When working with this group of dancers you can recognize the bond through the group's energy not only in this dance but when they watch each other perform other dances or provided constant support for each other outside of the studio.

When asked to journal what came up for them while listening carefully to the lyrics of the song, the dancers were able to reflect on moments they have been proud of themselves in their lives and obstacles they have overcome. The dancers shared these challenges in a group discussion and provided support for one another by carefully listening to their peers. A common theme surfaced of how proud the girls are to be on our studio's dance team and how much they love this team because of the opportunities it provides for them. The class explained that they feel supported by one another and feel that the people they dance with are their closest friends. The group reflected on studio accomplishments and awards they have received by working together. Dancers also shared their own personal accomplishments both in and out of the studio. Several discussed ideas of gaining strength and confidence through moments in their lives where they have felt proud of themselves. They also shared thoughts on being true to who they are and living their best life. This conversation helped me understand what the girls were gaining from

this experience and what they were dancing about. This discussion and similar ones showed me that they were understanding and applying what they had learned through the experientials.

Choreography

Creating choreography for this group was a challenging task. I took a different approach to my choreographic process and made careful choices to portray the emotions I wanted the dancers to feel and express within their story. I also wanted to create something that they could feel and others would feel through watching. This is one of the reasons we spent time exploring relationships while performing. How could they project emotions so the audience would feel the same way?

The choices I made as the choreographer were impacted by the group's reflection through experientials. I would take the words, thoughts and ideas and recreate them into movement. I also listened very closely to the lyrics of the song and challenged the group by having their bodies reflect the words being said. When the group engaged in several experientials where they were instructed to improv after hearing a prompt that related to the theme of our dance, I would carefully observe their improv and use their movement to inspire which choreographic choices I made. By doing this I hoped they would be able to easily relate to the choreography, tell the story and make it their own. My goal when creating this dance was not only for the group to understand what they each have to offer for the world but for the audience to feel it as well.

Overall Results

Seeing this dance on stage allowed each piece of our hard work to come to life. I was thrilled to be sitting in the audience during the group's performance. During rehearsal I often stood in the group while they danced to feel the energy and would place myself in different places throughout the studio allowing myself to feel the group's energy from each angle. Sitting

in the audience at the first completion of our season, I was overjoyed to feel that energy shine even brighter from a distance. The dance placed 5th place overall in the intermediate large group category. All three judges commented on the group's energy and connection to the story. They made several comments about their beautiful storytelling and how they really believed the dancers throughout the performance. This meant that the judges had received what I hoped for. They could feel the dancer's emotions through their movements and felt the connection through each dancer and the group.

The following class I asked the dancers to take time to reflect what it felt like to perform this dance on stage. I provided paper and oil pastels and asked them to draw their experience. The group came together to share and discuss their creations. The dancers all created very bright colorful images and shared a lot about the joy they felt when performing this piece. Dancers included several words in their images such as empowered, strong, beautiful and connected. Several girls also drew emojis, which are small images typically sent in text messages, to express what are feeling. This is how adolescents express themselves and is something that their generation grew up with and associate emotions with. They drew a variety of smiley faces and hearts. They shared that they feel the dance is really special and performing it on stage is something they will remember. I also asked them what they learned throughout this process during our discussion. They commented on a new understanding of their anatomy and different connections in their body. Dancers also discussed that they feel that this process has allowed them to all feel special, be themselves and understand what they have to offer to this world as individuals.

Discussion

During this past year I have restructured a dance class by applying dance/movement therapy theories and techniques hoping to provide the opportunity for dancers to find a stronger emotional connection to their performance quality. Throughout the process I had dancers engage in several experientials that allowed them to explore and understand their anatomy as well as who they are as individuals. I was able to see the dancers understand how to portray different emotions and relate to the dance on a deeper level. At our studio's first competition of the season all three judges commented on the dancers' emotional execution and energy while performing. In addition to what stood out to the judges, I was able to feel the emotions and energy of their performance as an audience member. The dancers were able to reflect on their performance and identify what was special about this dance.

This work has provided a chance for dancers to understand who they are on a deeper level. By educating young dancers on their anatomy they were able to understand what was happening in their bodies and apply corrections in a different way. Dancers can greatly benefit from learning more about Laban Movement Analysis and the Bartenieff Fundamentals because those tools provide a foundation for developing greater self-awareness. Adding these tools to the dancer's technical training could help improve their technique because both the Bartenieff Fundamentals and Laban Movement Analysis provide greater self-awareness that can help dancers understand and visualize how to execute a skill. This could be useful in several dance classes because it provides a new language that dancers can understand once they experience something within their own body. Dancers often put themselves in very competitive environments and are constantly comparing themselves to other dancers in an effort to improve themselves. If dancers are given opportunities to understand themselves and develop their own

identities in more dance classes, it will improve their self-esteem and performance qualities. Building the groups self-esteem through experientials that encourage them to build each other up allows the opportunity for dancers to gain positive relationships. This meets the pro-social needs of adolescent development in a positive way. Making this a positive experience for the dancers provided the opportunity for them to discover a deeper passion for dancing and for being part of the dance team.

For others interested in exploring this topic I recommend incorporating new ways to improve emotional awareness to dance classes in small portions. It is important to keep in mind that it is a dance class and not a therapy group. Both a therapy group and a dance class have very specific goals that the groups are working towards, I carefully overlapped some goals but held the dance class goals at a higher level because we were focused on receiving a high score from the judges. This particular group of dancers came in expecting to work hard on a competition dance. Although we worked in a different way than they are used to, I had to ensure that their needs were still being met to be ready to perform well on stage. Offering the group chances to express themselves and time for them to share what is going on for them provided the opportunity for them to connect to the story and make it their own. Having a clear structure and clear goals can also greatly benefit this work. Once the dancers adapted to our ritual they had a greater understanding of what was expected and what we were working toward. More research could be done on how techniques like LMA and the Bartenieff Fundamentals can impact adolescent dancers. How could a stronger understanding of the body at this age increase self-esteem in adolescents going through puberty? Several dancers often stop dancing in their adolescent years because they are uncomfortable with their bodies and don't want to spend time being in front of a mirror focusing on their bodies. If dancers are given the opportunity to further

understand their bodies and appreciate them from a younger age maybe they would be more likely to feel comfortable dancing while their body is changing. There could also be more research done on competition dance and how it impacts adolescent development. What are the positive and negative impacts of being on a competitive dance team from a young age? Dance can often be a very competitive environment that can have a negative impact on young dancers. By providing more opportunities for dancers to build self-esteem and self-awareness dancers will gain strength and become well-rounded dancers.

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**Expressive Therapies Division
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Student's Name: Melanie Ryder

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: Meg Chang EdD, BC-DMT