

We've got the power - Dance teacher's views on autonomy and person-environment fit



MAS THESIS 2020, MAS DANCE SCIENCE,
INSTITUTE OF SPORT SCIENCE, UNIVERSITY OF BERN

Introduction

The controlling, authoritarian teaching style, which dance genres such as ballet are infamous for (Chua, 2017; Morris, 2003; Nordin-Bates, 2013; Van Rossum, 2004), have been hotly debated since the headlines of serious misconduct at the Wiener Staatsoper (Henley, 2019) and the Staatliche Ballettschule Berlin (Weickmann, 2020). While some might argue that the image and acceptance of the authoritarian, relentless, controlling teacher might be unjust (Chua 2017; Van Rossum, 2004), these stories about strict and destructive teaching methods in tough, competitive environments are not a recently uncovered phenomena in the wake of «#metoo». Rather, such stories seem to be an unpleasant reminder that the authoritarian, tacit, top-down apprenticeship tradition characterised by skewed power relations might, after all, not be a thing of the past (Chua, 2017; Haraldsen, 2019, Morris, 2003; Nordin-Bates 2013; Van Rossum, 2004).

Recent findings have confirmed that dance teachers, often having been successful performers themselves, are seen as powerful authorities with «a gatekeeper position» who become important people with whom to develop and nurture a relationship (Haraldsen, 2019). While some dancers reported to have received positive support and understanding from their educators, others have described fear of showing insecurity, incompetence, weakness or disappointing teachers and, consequently, inhibit their social position and their chances of developing (Haraldsen, 2019). Thus, students might



Born in Basel, Switzerland, Michelle has an MA in theatre, arts and sciences from the University in Oslo, Norway and an MAS in Dance Science from the University in Bern, Switzerland. From 2022-2026 she is pursuing a Phd in Sport/ Dance psychology at the University of Birmingham in collaboration with Elmhurst Ballet School (UK). She has been working as a research assistant (since 2020 to present) and guest lecturer in dance psychology (since 2021 to present) at Oslo National Academy of the Arts in Norway. Currently a member of the IADMS dance educator's committee, Michelle is working closely with an international network of dancers and dance educators alike. Her main research interests include mental health and resilience in dance, stressors and coping strategies in dance as well as autonomy in dance education.

still attempt to normalise their experience of controlling conditions and accept a limited degree of autonomy, not only to get connected to the teachers but because of their connections to the teachers (Haraldsen, 2019; Kimball, 2007; Morris 2003; Nordin-Bates 2013; Nordin-Bates 2019; Quested & Duda, 2010; Quested & Duda, 2011; Van Rossum, 2004).

Through the lens of Self Determination Theory, this thesis investigates what views dance teachers have on autonomy and autonomy support such as providing personal choice, rationale and valuing individuality. It also examines dance teachers experiences and outlook on person-environment fit and its relation to autonomy.

Summary

By means of semi-structured interviews, five teachers within classical ballet and one educator in character dance at a high striving, ballet school in Oslo participated in this study. Data analysis has shown that teachers appeared to be autonomy supportive. When and how autonomy was provided was impacted by whether a teacher either adhered to ballet ideals, such as respecting strict rules and the teacher's authority, or challenged its premise. Teachers showed awareness of the importance to value individuality, give rationale, constructive feedback and provide choice. However, perhaps due to a latent fear of autonomy support inducing chaos in class and because of imposed control from above, there seemed to be a tendency to apply ballet tradition as a justification to limit support autonomy. While teachers responded negatively to certain controlling measures, participants still seemed to exert some control by means of demands and leadership. Ballet ideals, such as to constantly push oneself in order to develop and please teachers, heavily impacted what kind of demands were imposed on the students and which sanctions a PE-misfit or unfulfilled expectations issued. The students' utter and wholehearted commitment has been implicitly and explicitly expected in order for the student to be perceived and viewed as a potential match to become a professional dancer.

Data analysis of person-environment fit has also shown that teachers described to prepare the student for a career within a traditional, tough environment with specific rules and ideals. Unsurprisingly, ballet ideals and tradition thus impacted perceptions of whether a student was deemed a fit or misfit for the school's environment or the ballet world in general. The participants identified characteristic traits, such as tolerating prolonged gratification and focusing over time, as common features for successful students. However, the teachers also reported that students seemed eager to please but that a potential misfit induced fear and pressure to being deemed unfit to become a professional dancer. This indicated that students might push themselves to conform and voluntarily thwart their autonomy in order to «fit» the set ideals and expectations within the environment. Interestingly, it appears that also teacher's PE-fits were heavily influenced by their prior exposure to traditional ballet ideals. For example, it seemed that those participants that have been previously exposed to traditional and strict training regimes appeared to struggle with the absence of homogenous practice and the requirement that teachers find their own approach within the set guidelines. Thus, some teachers reported the need to adapt to the school's environment which was

described to be inspired by sports research and applied practices, valuing a positive climate and being highly influenced by the teachers. Yet, like students, they still seemed to adjust their potential «misfits» by adapting their own beliefs, opinions, values and behaviours in order to be validated by others in the environment. This indicates that potential homogeneity in a ballet environment might not solely derive from the same people being attracted to similar environments. Rather, this might point to that people within certain environments strive to conform and thus thwart their autonomy in order to «fit in».

Conclusion

In conclusion this study still presents a number of questions. Would, for example, the students validate the teacher's perception of being autonomy supportive? Are people consciously conforming and thus thwarting their autonomy in order to fit into a ballet environment? And how can we deal with the fact that people who have the power to induce change still seem to overlook that dance teachers might be appointed due to their merits as professional dancers while they lack of ability to handle the power they are given in teaching positions? Even though these questions remain unanswered within this thesis, they do allow stimulating thought for future dance research.

Bibliography

Chua J. (2017). The influences of an exemplary ballet teacher on students' motivation: 'The Finnish Way'. *Research in Dance Education*, 18 (1), 3–22.

Haraldsen H.M. (2019). Thriving, striving, or just surviving?: A study of motivational processes among elite junior performers from sports and performing arts. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <https://nih.brage.unit.no/nih-xmlui/handle/11250/2634164>

Henley J. (2019). Vienna State Opera's ballet academy hit by abuse scandal. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/10/vienna-stateopera-investigation-abuse-students-ballet-academy>

Kimball A.C. (2007). «You signed the line»: Collegiate student-athletes' perceptions of autonomy. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 8, 818–835.

Morris G. (2003). Problems with Ballet: steps, style and training. *Research in Dance Education*, 4 (1), DOI: 10.1080/1464789032000064808. 36. 37. 38. 39. 40. 41.

Nordin-Bates S.M. (2013). Ballet: Dancing under the Weight of Pre-Conceived Ideas? in Brown, D. D., & Vos, M. (Eds), *Ballet, why and how? On the role of classical ballet in dance education*, Artez Press.

Nordin-Bates S.M. (2019). Striving for Perfection or for Creativity? A Dancer's Dilemma. *Journal of Dance Education*, 20 (1), 23-34. DOI: 10.1080/15290824.2018.1546050.

Quested E. and Duda J.L. (2011). Perceived autonomy support, motivation regulations and the self-evaluative tendencies of student dancers. *Journal of Dance Medicine and Science*, vol.15, no. 1, 3-14. 43.

Quested E. and Duda J.L. (2010). Exploring the social-environmental determinants of well- and ill-being in dancers: a test of Basic Needs Theory. *Journal of sport & exercise psychology*, 32 (1), 39-60.

Van Rossum J. (2004). The Dance Teacher: The Ideal Case and Daily Reality. *Journal for the education of the gifted*, 28 (1).

Weickmann D. (2020) Ungesunde Rivalität. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Retrieved from: <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/staatlichen-ballettschule-berlin-stabel-seyfert1.4802726>