

Parental Perspectives on Their Sons' Motivation to Dance

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Introduction

Despite media exposure of the benefits of male Western theatrical and commercial dance participation numbers remain small and males under 18 years of age remain in the minority compared to females (Risner et al., 2018). Research in the UK and elsewhere suggests dance is seen as a feminine activity which is not suitable for males (Polasek and Roper 2011). Boys who participate in dance are often considered effeminate and their sexuality may be questioned (Risner 2014), which can lead to verbal, emotional and physical bullying (Polasek and Roper 2011; Risner 2014).

To fully understand experiences of adolescent male dancers, an intersectionality framework should be employed, thus interweaving social identity categories to understand experiences and behaviors of individuals and groups. Such social categories can include gender, sexuality, masculinity and age—all categories that apply to adolescent male dancers—which can create beneficial opportunities but may also result in persecution (Sheilds 2008). Intersections of age and gender remain especially powerful for male adolescent dancers as they experience heightened societal expectations around gender performance (Kågesten et al. 2016), leading to a greater affiliation with stereotypical gender roles. For boys this may mean performance of typical masculine behaviors such as shows of strength, emotional toughness, and displays of heterosexual prowess (Strough et al. 2007). Any boy's transgression from heteronormative behavior can lead to bullying, regardless of the individual's actual or perceived sexuality (McCormack and Anderson 2010). Such bullying often takes the form of homophobic slurs, since an association with homosexuality is considered to reflect a masculinity lacking in power (Pascoe, 2005). From this perspective, boys who dance have transgressed boundaries of

stereotypical masculinity and hence experience bullying in relation to their perceived homosexuality, regardless of their actual sexuality (Risner 2014). Whether a boy identifies with the LGBTQ community or as heterosexual, this type of bullying can be especially distressing and has been associated with increased suicidal ideation (Poteat et al. 2011).

Arguably, stereotyping of male dancers and subsequent risk of bullying may be the most challenging aspect of male dance participation, calling into question why some boys feel sufficiently motivated to engage, despite potential negative experiences. Dance psychologists have explored many aspects of dancer personality and environments that facilitate motivation for dance (Aujla et al. 2014; Nordin-Bates et al. 2011), yet research samples tend to be predominantly female. One of the few exceptions is dance sociologist, Doug Risner (2009) who considered US adolescent and young adult male dancers' motivations to dance, finding that they expressed predominantly intrinsic motivation, the motivation to engage in an activity for the innate pleasure experienced from it (Hancox et al, 2015). *How* these boys manage to maintain intrinsic motivation when they may be consistently bullied outside of the dance studio requires ongoing exploration. Bullying research highlights the importance of protective factors, such as a positive school climate, supportive parenting, and constructive peer relationships, to prevent bullying (Zych et al. 2019) and research on male dancers endorses such findings (Risner 2014). Therefore, the protective factor of parental or caregiver support may enable boys to dance, and so viewing boys in dance through a parental lens provides a new perspective in understanding young males who dance.

Research in dance established the importance of intrinsic motivation for healthy dance participation (e.g. Hancox et al. 2015) while intersections of age and gender for male adolescent dancers, alongside the social context, may impact levels of intrinsic motivation for dance. Intrinsic motivation in education has been found to decline in early adolescence but increase at around 15 to 17 years of age (Gillet et al. 2012). The relationship between age and intrinsic motivation, is mediated by teacher autonomy support, and, to a lesser extent, mother autonomy support, where autonomy support is the provision of guidance and promotion of agency and individuality, in this case to adolescents by teachers and mothers. Interestingly, once teacher and mother support for the adolescent boy's autonomy are accounted for, such autonomy support from the father does not play a role (Gillet et al. 2012). Thus, absence of general support from

fathers for male dancers (Risner 2009; 2014) may be less critical in relation to enabling self-determination in male dancers as long as mothers and teachers can provide such autonomous support. At the same time, lack of male familial support for boys' dancing remains an important research endeavor (see Risner and Andersen in this volume). Currently, however, it is not clear if fluctuations in dance education mirror those of academic education, although evidence suggests dance teachers may alter their teaching style to provide more challenge and autonomy, for male students in the dance studio (Clegg et al. 2018). In the context of dance education, boys are more intrinsically motivated, not only by autonomy support, but also by increased cognitive complexity (Shen et al. 2003), suggesting parallels between boys in dance and boys in academic education in relation to autonomy support and intrinsic motivation. Psychology based research has found that males experience more motivation by intrinsic factors than females when it comes to exercise (Egli et al. 2011) and male dancers' motivations to dance appear to be intrinsically focused, such as dancing for pure enjoyment (Risner 2009). Thus, males-especially those in their mid to late teens-may potentially possess high intrinsic motivation in the context of the dance studio, which may be facilitated by both teacher and parent support.

Of increasing importance to understanding dancers' motivation and engagement in dance, is the role of resilience (Pickard and Bailey 2009) which can provide a buffering effect on challenging life events. High levels of resilience in individuals who have been bullied has been associated with positive outcomes such as better mental health, higher academic achievement and reduced behavioral problems (Bowes et al. 2010; Sapouna and Wolke 2013). Given the prevalence of bullying towards male dancers, increased resilience may enable their perseverance in dance. Moreover, resilience seems likely to be a characteristic reflective of masculinity due to its associations with other masculine traits such as assertiveness (Anastácio 2016). Thus, adolescent males may be unconsciously motivated to display resilience to conform to societal gender norms. However, resilience has been found to increase with age (Portzyk et al. 2010) thus the intersection of a young age and male gender may mean expression of resilience is more complex for adolescent boys.

Dancing is a costly investment, and a young dancer must rely on family members, particularly parents, to both facilitate and support their pursuit of dance training. Research in sport has identified that parents play a key role in childhood leisure pursuits (e.g. Knight 2019). In contrast, the parental role in guiding dance participation has received far less attention. Parents

and caregivers are likely to be responsible for practical support, such as travel arrangements and financing, as well as emotional guidance and encouragement. Therefore, high levels of commitment are required not only by the child, but also the parent or caregiver. Some research has indicated that while dancing girls perceive both their parents to be highly supportive in relation to their dance, boys, although rating their mother in the top three most supportive individuals, found their peers more supportive than their fathers (Risner 2014). However, such research asked the child rather than hearing directly from parents themselves about their perceptions of parenting a male dancer.

Social support, the presence of supportive and rewarding relationships, may act as a protective factor to adverse experiences including bullying in adolescence (Konishi and Hymel 2009; Risner 2014) and dance injury (Patterson et al. 1998). Recent research has highlighted social support as being key to boys who dance, in providing autonomy and a connection to others in the dance environment. In particular, teachers often emphasize the importance of retaining boys, by actively encouraging boys' autonomy and inclusion (Clegg et al. 2018). However, the role of the parent in providing social support has demonstrated mixed findings. Research with a predominantly female sample showed parental support and generosity encourages heightened commitment to dance programs (Aujla et al. 2014). Although the parent or caregiver is pivotal in a male's decision to participate in and pursue dance, some research has evidenced that boys do not perceive as much support from parents as do girls (Risner 2002). In fact, for boys, some parents or caregivers might actively discourage dance participation. In empirical research that asked boys to report why they believe other boys drop-out from dance, 59 percent of boys selected the response '*Because parents are not supportive*' (Risner 2014). Thus, boys may perceive their parents' apparent lack of support as a barrier to dance engagement.

Parents and caregivers serve as key role models in their child's early years, and appear likely to be fundamental in decisions made pre-adolescence, with involvement peaking in early adolescence (Knight et al. 2017). For boys in dance, mothers have been reported as most supportive, with fathers often struggling, at least initially, to be as supportive given the effeminate stereotype of male dancers (Risner 2009, 2014). However, both male and female dance students experience fathers as less supportive than mothers (Polasek and Roper, 2011), although for some boys who dance seriously, fathers may be highly supportive (Clegg et al.

2019). Further still, 14 to 16-year-old males cited their fathers and brother as being the *least* supportive person of their dance participation (Risner 2014), corroborated by narratives of fathers who had never been to see their son's performances. Fathers who associate dance with femininity and homosexuality (Polasek and Roper 2011) may experience concerns around their dancing son's sexuality due to unconscious beliefs that their son's masculinity reflects their own (Lehikoinen 2006). Parents uncomfortable with a son's dance participation may use strategies of masculinizing dance, by emphasizing sporting qualities of strength and power (Risner 2007). Dance teachers may further collude with this 'make it macho' strategy by ensuring boys in their class present and repeatedly reproduce heteronormative masculinity when dancing to prevent alienation of parents who may have concerns around effeminization of their sons (Clegg et al. 2018).

The research literature brings into question why some boys continue to dance despite the very real potential or actual experience of being bullied, coupled with lower perceived parental support. Currently, published literature tends to focus on male professional dancers, vocational dance students or high school students taking a dance course as part of the school curriculum. Very little research has considered specifically the experience of boys who attend mainstream schools and chose to attend weekend and after school dance classes. Furthermore, parents play key roles in enabling boys to dance and yet their experiences and perceptions have not generally been considered in the academic literature. Understanding parental perspectives and hearing stories of parents who *do* facilitate their son's dance participation, provide crucial knowledge about the relationship between parental motivation for their son's dancing, and what it means to be a parent of a boy in dance. Therefore, the aims of this qualitative analysis seek to develop an understanding of parents' motivations to support their sons in dance and to gain insight into the experiences of being a parent of a boy who dances. Thus, this research extends findings from Risner's (2009) book, *Stigma and Perseverance in the Lives of Boys Who Dance*, which considered the motivations of young male dancers, by considering the data on motivation and social support from the parental or caregiver perspective.

Methodology & Analysis

Method

Data was collected at a boys' day of dance, hosted by a UK performing arts school which focuses on ballet, contemporary, jazz and commercial dance. The day of dance targeted boys considering a career as a professional dancer who currently participated in after school and weekend dance training at their local dance schools. The day offered boys and their parents an opportunity to explore studying full time in a performing arts school, including seeing inside a vocational school and participating in dance classes. Parents ($n=32$), 32 to 58 years of age ($M=45.53$), completed an open-ended qualitative questionnaire by providing responses about their experiences and feelings of parenting a boy who dances. Their sons ($n=28$) were aged 10 to 15 years ($M=12.47$), with between one and 10 years of dance experience. Boys were asked to respond to the question "*Do you want to be a professional dancer?*". Their responses were "Yes" (79%), "Maybe" (7%), and "No" (14%). In this chapter, we present data from 16 parents (12 mothers and four fathers).

Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis (Neuendorf, 2019). The aim of the analysis was to develop inductive themes broadly representing the participants' experiences of being the parent of a boy who dances. Seven key themes emerged from the participants' experiences; a difficult career choice for my son, affective experiences of dance parents, hopes for my son's future, my son's intrinsic motivation, balancing family life demands, judgement and bullying concerns, and my son benefits from dance participation.

Analysis

A Difficult Career Choice for My Son

The most common theme that emerged from participants' experiences as a parent of a son in dance focused upon parental concerns about psychological and physical wellbeing and career instability. Importantly, none of the experiences discussed were either explicitly stated, or inductively coded, to relate specifically or solely to male dance participation. Instead, comments appeared in relation to general concerns around these topics, which would be pertinent for

females. Career instability and injury remain inherent within the profession (Chirban and Rowan 2016) and can determine the career trajectory of all dancers, thereby transcending gender.

Within the various concerns parents conveyed about dance careers, psychological wellbeing appeared most commonly. For example, Carol stated, “It’s a tough industry, you have to be SO resilient.” Alongside the need for mental toughness, parents expressed that their sons lacked belief in themselves, with one parent describing her son as “incredibly self-conscious” (Angela). Similarly, Diana said of her son, “He lacks self-confidence even though he’s very good.” As well as being concerned about their sons’ psychological health, a couple of parents highlighted fears over physical wellbeing, such as the possibility of an “injury and having to retrain” (Emily). Alongside health concerns, some mothers showed awareness of the inherent challenges of being successful in dance, as Fiona highlighted, “Well my concern is that the industry is so tough.” Others also acknowledged there were few job opportunities, and even when there were opportunities, “It’s a short career” (Carol). Angela’s words capture and clearly summarize this theme, when she stated that, were her son to become a dancer, “I would be worried of injuries, lack of jobs, his mental health.”

Affective Experiences of Dance Parents

The theme of affective experiences or emotional responses emerged from inductively coding (a process for searching participants’ narrative text to identify concepts and find relations between them) across all questionnaire responses. Every parent provided comments illustrating emotions they experienced about parenting a boy in dance. By far the most prevalent response demonstrated “Complete joy!” (Georgina) about being the parent of a boy in dance, summarized also in Helen’s words:

I love it! It has been so amazing to watch his progression over the years and to watch his talent flourish. I am inspired by his dedication and motivation and would do anything to help his dreams come true. Dance is such an incredible art form, and it is a joy to see my son feel so passionate about it.

Many mothers predicted the happiness they would feel to see their sons succeeding in the future. For example, Iris commented to see her son become a professional would make her “Happy, as this is what he wants.” Coupled with this happiness also came an immense source of “Pride, because of all the commitment it takes” (June), with some emphasizing the specific pride a

mother of a boy in dance holds, “Two sons that dance and I’m very proud of them both” (Karen). For Angela, having a son who pursued a career in dance would be a greater impetus “I’d be incredibly proud if he were to choose to be a dancer.” While several fathers expressed equal pleasure in having a son who danced, “Absolutely love it. He has something to enjoy doing and is happy, so I’m happy too” (Dean). For some fathers, it took a little getting used to: “It now feels completely normal for me to have a son who dances. After taking five daughters to dance lessons, it seemed a little unusual at first, my son was the only boy in the school” (Andrew). Experiences like these may not be exclusive to dancing boys’ dads. Fiona noted initially her feelings were unrelated to her son’s gender, in that it was, “Absolutely no different to having a daughter who dances.” However, she then went on to express her concern that her son was the only male, “The only disadvantage is that he is usually the only male, so I feel bad for him but he seems fine about it.”

Hopes for My Son’s Future

Most participants prioritized wishes for their sons’ happiness, health, and success in dance or another career. A minority of parents prioritized hopes for their son to be specifically successful in dance. Wishes for happiness occurred repeatedly, as Bill commented, “I have no problems with dance, so long as he is happy.” Others reiterated that their son’s happiness took precedence over pursuing a dance career, stating they wanted their son to be “Happy and fulfilled” (Helen) “...in whatever he chooses to do” (Angela). Iris reiterated, “If they don’t like something they stop with no consequences, they have to be happy.” In addition to desire for her son’s happiness in dance, Iris also valued his health, commenting, “I hope that he is psychologically, physically and emotionally strong.”

While some parents stated they wanted happiness regardless of career choice, like Angela, and Georgina who wrote she hoped for her son to find a “fulfilling and successful career in whatever path he chooses” only two parents (6%) expressed hopes for professional careers in dance for their sons. June commented, “I would like to see him on the West End,” while Fiona wanted to see her son “Make a career out of his passion.”

My Son’s Intrinsic Motivation

Throughout the responses, parents described their sons' passion for, and love of dance, as well as why they believed boys continued training. Parents talked of a direct expression of intrinsic interest from their sons, for example Carol commented, "He was always dancing around the house, so I asked if he wanted lessons and he said yes." As Iris describes, her son's persistence eventually enabled him to achieve his intrinsic goals, "He stood outside the dance studio at school even in pouring rain and copied the girls until he was asked in to do ballet."

Intrinsic motivation was sometimes described to be relevant to dance only, with parents explaining they had also introduced their son to sport. Fiona commented:

We used to send him to football (because that is what one usually does when they have a boy don't they?!). However, on the pitch he used to do the splits and high kicks rather than kick the ball and he always expressed the wish to dance.

June discussed how her son's love of dance supplanted his interest in stereotypical, gender-normative male activities, such as "swimming and martial arts," and that his intrinsic motivation grew naturally over time: "At first it was a way for him to burn extra energy but it soon became more important than all the other activities he took part in." Diana reflected on her surprise at her son's persistence:

Ever since toddler age, he'd dance in front of the TV. He would always dress up, act and perform. Rather than growing out of it, this continued until around age seven, and he has grown to be a dancer interested in all disciplines.

Angela enrolled her son in dance classes for convenience; however, he discovered his own interest and love of dance, as she explains,

We didn't anticipate him continuing on in dance lessons for the next seven years! After a couple of years, he seemed to really enjoy it, so we asked him if he'd like to do a modern class too.... He began to show a real love for it a couple of years ago and has taken on quite a few additional classes.

In her final words, Angela summarizes her son's love and enjoyment of dance, which appears integral to healthy, intrinsic motivation. Therefore, it seems important to reconsider how males in dance engage because of their own internalized drive and enthusiasm, rather than due to any external force. Of note is the emphasis on intrinsic drives for dance being commensurate with those of female dance students (Risner 2009). However, the function of intrinsic motivation to

maintain engagement in dance may be of primary importance in males due to sociocultural messages discouraging males in dance (Risner 2009)

Balancing Family Life Demands

Parents described how they negotiated family life while parenting a son in dance. For parents with other children, balancing family life became particularly difficult, and most took a practical approach to making it work, as Helen explains: “My time is divided equally between them”. Some mothers recognized the significance of having an engaged partner: “We’ve managed okay so far. It’s mainly logistics, both having to be somewhere at the same time” (Carol). Iris noted that having children pursuing different interests and hobbies demands additional time for both parents, describing life as, “Hectic! Three kids all at elite level in at least three main things but we manage to accommodate with no compromise”.

For other parents, their commitment to supporting their son’s dancing emanated from circumstances associated with their other children. An example of these situations came from parents who have another child old enough to look after themselves, as Lorraine conveyed, “I work closely with my husband to ensure they both have good opportunities. A five-year age gap helps as my daughter can be more independent.” Fiona reflected on how supporting her son was facilitated by his sisters being away from the family home, “Luckily my daughters are grown up now so I can concentrate on just my son.” Those with younger children shared their gratefulness that their children shared the same interests, as Helen noted, “Luckily my daughter seems to be following in her brother’s footsteps, so therefore our whole week is spent at the dance school and my time is divided equally between them.” Older siblings, grandparents and friends also enabled boys to attend dance classes by caring for younger siblings as well as driving the boys to classes. However, time was not the only issue in facilitating boys’ dancing as costs were often cited as a significant constraint, not only for their current dance study but also in relation to costs of attending vocational school.

Judgement and Bullying Concerns

Parents spoke of concerns about their sons’ dance participation, most predominantly, how their son might be received by other males. Concerns ranged in severity from Lorraine’s

statement, “Perceptions in secondary school (ignorant comments from the ill-informed)” to Carol’s about “Teasing and low-level bullying” and Bill, who wrote, “I worry that he will be bullied at secondary school next year.” Echoing Bill’s comments, Angela reflected:

I’m proud of my son continuing to dance, I know he’s incredibly self-conscious and even embarrassed of his hobby in front of his non-dancing male peers. I wonder whether beginning secondary school will be a turning point for him in deciding whether he will continue to dance.

Such comments reflect increasing teasing over time and as directly reflected in comments offered by Chris, “He gets teased at school, even by friends. It’s gotten worse as he worked his way up. Getting into the Royal Ballet Associates Scheme, for example, generated a whole new round of teasing and put-downs.” However, for some boys bullying occurred earlier in primary school but these experiences, coupled with support from adults in the boy’s life, increased resilience:

In his primary school, he was bullied for a few years for being a ballet dancer. He dealt with the situation with support from us as well as the school. If anything, he’s learnt from such a bad experience was that it made him even more determined to do the main passion in his life. (Mary).

Parents openly reported incidences where their sons were impacted by perceived or actual stigmatization, as Diana stated, “He needs to stop worrying about people that disapprove of male dancers.” Lorraine commented she worked diligently to support her son, “It doesn’t allow me to be complacent as I constantly work on helping him to have a positive identity and to be resilient to potential comments that may undermine his choices.”

Furthermore, parents acknowledged not only were other children a threat to their sons, but other adults also made judgments. Carol captured such sentiment when she wrote, “Adults generally say ‘How amazing’ it must be so easy being a boy dancer with all those girls. SIGH.” Diana explained she also needed to be resilient:

It can be difficult sometimes, as others don’t understand why my son dances, especially in anything other than street dance. However, this used to bother him and me as a mum, but now age 13 as a fantastic dancer, I don’t care what others think now.

School staff can also create environments of non-acceptance of boys who dance while not actively denigrating dance:

It's frustrating! His secondary school places huge value on sport (esp. Rugby) and his achievements in dance are not always recognised. Although they support him in terms of days out to attend events, it's not really taken seriously in school. (Mary)

Despite these experiences, a sense of hope for change prevailed, "Although it has become more acceptable for boys to dance it is also brave" (June). Finally, Fiona stated that she hoped for much more social change for her son and for dance participation to become a normalized activity for males, "Luckily times are changing but for the taboo of boys dancing to be totally eliminated."

My Son Benefits from Dance Participation

While much of the content analysis revealed parents held many concerns about the challenges of boys in dance, they also recognized extrinsic social and psychological benefits of dance participation. Angela commented on benefits regarded as exclusive to males and the opportunities or special treatment boys receive, "Being the only boy in his class, he tends to get special roles in the dance shows/festivals etc.!" Other parents commented on psychological benefits of dance participation for any young person, regardless of gender, which Helen captures clearly when she states, "Dance has given my son so many valuable life lessons including the ability to express himself, an amazing work ethic and discipline, the ability to accept failure and keep going (i.e. resilience), the list is vast...".

Another parent, Carol, identified psychological benefits, explaining that she supported her son's participation in dance because, "It gives him good work ethic, he has found something that makes him happy that not everyone does and he's good at it." Lorraine, too, identified how dance participation came with many social benefits for her son, "His dance school provides a community of like minded children from a variety of backgrounds which I find enriching for him. Very different from the interests and demographics of his school friends."

Not only were there perceived benefits for the child, but this was also the case for some parents themselves, who recognized they too had gained psychologically and emotionally by supporting their son in dance. Lorraine said of her son's dance participation, "It is educational and eye opening." Carol also derived pleasure from the uniqueness of it, "I like it that he does something that's not usual." Summarizing the experience of being a parent of a boy in dance,

Helen said, “I think that boys with a passion for dance are a very special breed and I feel honored to be a parent of one.” Thus, parents and caregivers perceived benefits directly for their sons and indirectly for themselves from their son’s dance participation.

Discussion of Findings

The purpose of the present study explored experiences of parents and caregivers who have a boy who dances. The analysis of rich qualitative data forms a complex picture of the relationship between boys and their parents. Relationships indicate parents’ perspectives in this sample generally provided autonomous support for their sons and were sensitive to their sons’ needs as a male dancer. The importance of resilience, as identified by parents, provides the most common theme related to their concerns about the need for their sons to possess high psychological resilience for remaining in dance. Concerns such as these may be justified since both male and female dancers have been found to have low resilience levels (Arbinaga 2018). High levels of resilience also importantly contribute to managing the potential bullying described by the parents that often occurs in school, which affirms previous research (Risner 2009). Schools often reflect a culture of oppression surrounding gender and sexuality whereby heterosexual discourse is valorized to the detriment of other sexuality narratives (McCormack and Anderson 2010). Therefore, intersections of being young, and perceived as gay (regardless of actual sexuality) position boys who dance as possessing low status and power within school systems, thus requiring additional resources of resilience to survive. Perceived social support, from both those in the field of expertise as well as family and friends has been described as important to developing and maintaining resilience (Sarkar and Fletcher 2014) and therefore, may be key to male adolescent dancers’ retention in dance. Thus, positive responses from boys’ parents in our study indicate how such responses may enhance their child’s resilience. Dance teachers can impact resilience through the development of a climate that focuses on self-improvement, rather than comparison with others, recognizes effort, and considers mistakes as an important aspect of learning, also known as a mastery or task-involving motivational climate (Tudor et al. 2020; Vitali et al. 2015). Dance schools can also implement resilience programs, such as the cognitive behavioral program used to develop resilience in musicians (Osborne 2013), although research is required to evaluate the effectiveness of such programs for dancers. These findings jointly support the need for dance schools alongside parents to focus on the development of coping

skills to equip young males for the realities of societal and institutional responses to male dancers.

A further concern of parents centered on the toughness of the dance industry in relation to gaining successful employment and the undue stress this can cause. While currently an accepted tenet of the dance world, despite male dancers remaining in a minority, males retain a privileged gender position (Risner 2014; Wright 2013). Initial privileging of male dancers may emerge from the intersection of being male, and therefore scarce and hence highly valued within the dance studio, and their perceived sexuality, which leads to marginalization outside the dance studio, thus eliciting feelings of concern from dance teachers. Categorizations and experiences like these might also be informed by the dance teacher's gender, as female teachers may perform socially constructed, traditional feminine attributes of nurturing (Clegg et al. 2016). From such, the field may be led to inadvertently privileging boys within their dance classes. Entitlement of male dancers may then be perceived as the norm by both male and female dance students. Once in the professional dance world, such advantages lead to men occupying the majority of senior positions (Meglin and Brookes 2012). However, since it appears male numbers in dance are increasing (Risner et al. 2018) such entitlement may feel less pertinent for today's male dance students.

In contrast to previous literature, there appeared to be no explicit mention of association with femininity and homosexuality by these parents. However, parents' implicit awareness of the lack of acceptability for boys dancing and the taboo of male dancers alludes to perceived effeminization of male dancers and association with non-heterosexuality. While this may indicate a change in the experiences of boys in dance, it is also possible that the parents themselves felt uncomfortable addressing this taboo. Boys who dance garner close scrutinization by both adults and peers in relation to their sexual orientation (Kane 2006). Parents in this study experienced such scrutiny, and they recognized that adolescent male dancers lack social status and power (Gardiner 2002) making it hard for the boys to challenge adults who make assumptions about their sexuality. Parents may find themselves responsible for challenging such intrusions. The parents in this study may be attempting to maintain boundaries around their son's sexuality, causing reluctance to engage in a narrative that challenges traditional heteronormative discourses of male sexuality (Kane 2006). Such behavior may lead boys and their parents to

avoid the topic of their sexuality and masculinity in part to prevent further evaluation, or because parents actively attempt to construct a hegemonic masculinity for their sons. In doing so, parents avoid mentioning anything that may feed into stereotypical conceptions of male dancers. Interestingly, when other adults outside of the male dance world attempted to engage in a ‘make it macho’ strategy (Fisher 2007), to promote heteronormative assumptions about male dancers, the parents did not perceive it as supportive. Instead, parents focused on building their sons’ resilience, which through parental support is thought to be achievable (Sarkar and Fletcher 2014).

Complexities and contradictions remain and continue. For example, despite currently supporting their son’s choice to dance, some parents initially valorized more traditionally male activities, such as football, evidently conforming to normative assumptions regarding appropriate activities and expressions of masculinity. This led to some boys demonstrating considerable persistence in their desire to dance before being enrolled in classes. Their persistence at times involved dancing publicly and positioning themselves as ‘other’ within their peer group. Some parents also showed awareness of this ‘othering’ when initially taking their sons to dance classes where they were the only male in the class. When dancing, it could be argued that the intersection of their son’s gender and perceived expressions of femininity within dance may elicit feelings of uncomfortableness in parents, especially in their initial experiences of having a son who dances. However, it is of note, that parents of both genders appeared to feel uncomfortable with the ‘othering’ of their sons. Although the quote from the father focuses on the unusualness of having a son who dances, the mother positions her concern around her son feeling socially isolated. Analyzing these complexities adds to, and in some instances, refutes previous literature that tends to focus on fathers’ struggles with their son’s relationship with dance and assumptions that mothers experience little conflict.

Parents’ descriptions suggest their sons experience high intrinsic motivation to dance, as well as having a need to express themselves through dance. Embracing their identity as dancers, even in situations, such as on a sports field, which may make them vulnerable to bullying. Here, boys appeared to valorize dance over more traditional male activities. However, boys may not view sport and dance as oppositional, as these two activities have traditionally been positioned, but instead may consider both dance and sports as representing ‘sporty masculinity’ (Watson and

Rodley 2015). Therefore, their embodiment of dance on the sports field could represent their intrinsic motivation for dance without representing a rejection of their sporting identity. Parents appeared to validate both identities and spoke of their support of, and pride in their sons' male dance participation, indicating that parents provided a high degree of autonomy support (Harwood and Knight 2015). Such positive parental support may increase their son's enjoyment of dance, as found in a study on physical activity (Shen et al. 2018), and hence, nurture more intrinsic motivation. Thus, these parents appear to be offering an optimal form of motivation for their sons. Nevertheless, while parents talked about their sons' love for, and joy they gained from dance, some parents identified concerns around their son's lack of confidence in dance, which may indicate lower self-esteem resulting in more esteem-based motivations to dance.

As some dance literature suggests, parents must juggle the demands of dance life. Parents discussed challenges they faced in balancing their various children's activities. These findings coincide with research on talented children in sports, where parents described attempts to prevent inequalities of time and attention between siblings (Harwood et al. 2010). Despite challenges, parents in this study voiced how they managed to 'make it work,' suggesting a high level of organization in managing conflicting family interests and obligations. However, while parents may be juggling their children's commitments, young dancers may not be aware of the sacrifice parents make to enable their dance activities (Aujla et al, 2014). In fact, along with time constraints, parents' financial concerns were frequently mentioned. Parents of lower socioeconomic status likely struggle to provide opportunities for their sons' dance goals. Many of the parents in the study expressed concern that they would not be able to afford to send their son to vocational school, without help from a scholarship, due to the considerable expense (vocational dance schools in the UK cost between £20,000 and £30,000 per year). However, vocational dance schools can provide a safe space for males allowing them to explore, rather than be challenged on, their gender and sexuality (Christofidou 2018) and protect them from derision and bullying experienced within the non-dance world. The intersection of social class and gender may mean some boys may become less motivated to dance as they are unable to escape the frequent taunts within the non-dance world.

Although our findings offer valuable and richer insight into parents' lived experience of raising a dancing boy, a bias in sampling exists – one could fairly argue that parents who brought

their sons to the dance open day are those who provide most support. From an intersectionality perspective, ethnicity plays a role in understanding lived experiences of boys who dance (Pascoe 2005; Watson 2018) but this study did not collect this information. Risner's (2009) work suggests there may be dissimilar levels of support for male dancers across ethnic groups. Therefore, future research would benefit from considering the interrelationship between gender, age, masculinity, sexuality, socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity for adolescent male dancers.

This study complements Risner's (2009) findings by highlighting the pride, hopes and concerns experienced by supportive dance parents by viewing the motivations and experiences of male dancers through the parental lens. The study's findings capture the impact of the interrelationship between age, gender, sexuality and socioeconomic status for adolescent male dancers. The assumptions about non-heterosexuality of male dancers suggests, regardless of actual sexual identity, society often considers there to be only one possible sexuality for boys who dance. Adolescent males who dance may be regarded as young, male, non-heterosexuals, which positions them as lacking in status and power in relation to their non-dancing, presumed heterosexual, peers. To empower these young men, parents in this study attempted to develop their son's resilience and to valorize their son's choice of career. Each of these boys were considering study at a vocational school of dance. Such schools may provide a refuge from bullying because they dance and may facilitate boys' performance and exploration of different masculinity expressions. Despite high financial costs associated with sending their sons to vocational school, parents were willing to make such sacrifices. Therefore, further research into the impacts of socio-economic status on boys' dance engagement appears warranted. Thus, this work demonstrates the importance of autonomous support for boys in dance. Proud parents, both mothers and fathers, invested in their dancing sons by facilitating their career navigation and resilience.

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