CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF
ADULTS BEGINNING A DANCE PROGRAM

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Science
in Kinesiology

By

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ABSTRACT

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF

ADULTS BEGINNING A DANCE PROGRAM

By

Susan Kathleen McManus

Master of Science in Kinesiology,

Dance Science

There is limited research on dancers who begin to dance in their late teens and beyond. Most existing studies focus on the health benefits of dance, problems within dance education, and the marginalization of dance in society. However, they do not offer a complete picture of the adult dancer. As the average age of professional dancers declines, it becomes increasingly important to look at those factors that encourage or discourage dancing into middle age and beyond. By examining these topics a framework can be created from which the adult dancer can be effectively studied.
INTRODUCTION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF ADULTS BEGINNING A DANCE PROGRAM

The emphasis on youth in the dance world both informs and directs dance research. This has lead to a void in the literature regarding many aspects of dancers who begin to dance over the age of 18 years old. This lack of research means that reviewing the existing literature can only create a vague picture of who chooses to dance, why, and for how long. Main segments of dance research that can help build this profile are those focusing on the physical benefits of dance, the marginalization of dance in society and education, the aesthetic concept of dance, as well as the focus on youth in American society as a whole, and how these factors influence performance. All of these factors must be reviewed to see if and how they impact people who begin dancing in their twenties, thirties, forties, and beyond. Fundamental questions then become; how can people be encouraged to begin and keep dancing? How can the place of dance and dance education be promoted so that it does not continue to undermine itself? If there are factors that hinder or exclude certain portions of the population, they must be examined to determine whether or not they have merit. If it is determined that they do not, then the ways in which research is conducted, dance education is formatted, classes are taught, and dance is promoted must all be restructured.

Dance-related studies fall into several categories: physical benefits, aesthetics, education, and marginalization. Each category has its own unique and valid points, and will be addressed separately before examining how they all relate to each other and what implications these relationships have on dance performance and how dance is perceived.
Physical Benefits

Benefits of physical activity are well known (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008). Many dance related studies attempt to validate dance by seeking positive correlations between dance programs and improvements in strength, bone density, stability (Zhang, Ishikawa-Takata, Yamazaki, Morita, & Ohta, 2008), flexibility and even cognition. As a form of physical activity, dance has social, mental, and physical benefits for people of all ages. Some of the basic research shows increases in bone density, strength, and balance, but their populations are so specific that it is difficult to make generalizations based on their findings. Many of the studies focus on young/adolescent female ballet dancers (Steinberg, et al., 2006; To, Phil, Wong, & Lam, 2005; Yannakoulia, Keramopoulos, & Matalas, 2004). Studies of ballet dancers are more prevalent than those on dancers of other forms due to the following factors: much of what is taught follows guidelines, ballet companies are often in one area for extended lengths of time, and the body types found in elite ballet dancers are more similar to each other than those found in other areas of dance. Some studies made distinctions between professionals and non-exercisers and again found positive correlations between health benefits and those participants who danced the most (Steinberg et al., 2006; To et al., 2005). If there are positive correlations between dance and health benefits for people of all ages, then age should not be seen as a prohibiting factor in choosing to dance.

Dance has also been compared to sport in an attempt to convey its value. This comparison may have a positive impact on certain groups that are not well represented in the dance world. In particular, men may have an easier time accepting dance if they
focus on the physical benefits that can be achieved. However, emphasizing physical prowess may not increase the value of dance for other groups. For example, female dancers are not generally regarded as athletes, and many dancers do not want to think of themselves simply as technicians (Adams, 2005). Sports magazines rarely (if ever) showcase dancers, and dance magazines are not placed in the same section as sport magazines in bookstores. If the physical benefits are being shown in research, why is this not enough to encourage dance participation on a larger scale?

Emotional benefits of dance are discussed in the literature as well. Many people who dance describe a profound state of flow that motivates them to keep dancing (Lazaroff, 2001). Along with this is the feeling of accomplishment that dancers experience when they learn and master new movements, rhythms, and combinations. These feelings can have a positive impact on other aspects of their lives. Risk-taking that dance sometimes encourages can help people to take risks in their work and daily activities (Follett & Degen, 2001). All of these feelings are so powerful that they should be available to anyone who is interested, not just a select portion of the population.

**Aesthetics**

Dance is considered by many to be based on the aesthetic or visual (Lazaroff, 2001). It has been suggested that this very fundamental concept of dance prevents many people from dancing, inhibits programs from getting funding, and from society taking the physical benefits seriously. The image of a dancer to the American mind tends to be a “young person with great technical training” (Oliver & Hearn, 2008, p. 6). Research regarding the impact of this image on the adult dancer is lacking. How do society’s
perceptions of what a dancer should look like impact the roles created for older dancers? As professional dancers age they are often offered character roles instead of the leading roles they once occupied. This can be very difficult to handle. A dancer in Wainwright and Turner’s (2006) study describes how dance is a job for the young, while another talks about the shock of having to suddenly take minor roles just to be on stage. Many older dancers may not wish to dance these types of roles, but there is little research discussing this issue. When this lack of research is added to the fact that many scientists are apprehensive to discuss dance at all since what it does, why people like it, and why it should exist is not easily quantifiable; a vicious cycle is created that prevents even more research from being promoted.

Adams (2005) suggests that many aspects of dance such as flexibility, grace, and emotion are perceived as feminine traits. Adams continues to show how these traits cause many men to fear dancing and sometimes even watching dance. While many men may fear being viewed as effeminate, other segments of the population may shy away from dance due to feeling too fat, too old, too short, too tall, or other appearance-based reasons. There is a great deal of research on dance and body image, but it does not touch on how these aesthetically based notions impact the older dancer in particular. One article discusses the alarming mandate in India that prevents dancers over the age of 45 from being classified as solo performers (Bharadvaj, 2003). One reason given for this is that international audiences want to see certain body types that are not believed to exist in individuals over a certain age. This particular article is not a research article, but points to prejudices that are enforced by our society’s focus on youth. The youth industry in
America makes billions of dollars every year (Calasanti, 2007). A glance through any fashion magazine echoes how important youth is, and how inextricably linked to beauty it is.

One study examined the attitudes of secondary school students regarding dance as an aesthetic activity (Sanderson, 2001). It determined that dance attitudes are set young, and that in order to positively impact them dance teachers must be more vigilant in developing aesthetic awareness (Sanderson) in their students. This study employed what they referred to as “Likert-type” (Sanderson) scales that were given to 1668 boys and girls between the ages of 11 and 16 in England. While the size of the population is commendable, measuring a very subjective idea (attitudes towards an aesthetic) with such a quantitative method is flawed. Observations, journals, and open-ended questions would have given more insightful information about dance attitudes. The conclusion drawn that the best way to promote positive attitudes towards dance is to focus more on the aesthetic, is also flawed. It is this focus on the aesthetic that may keep some segments of the population from feeling welcome or comfortable in the dance world.

Dance Education and Training

Much of the dance education research chooses to focus on the emotional/spiritual/artistic implications of dancing as opposed to the health benefits. Reviewing the literature gives a sense that you can have one or the other, but not both. One article went so far as to suggest that the study of dance is almost invalid if it does not include the history of dance and a link to some aspect of the human condition (Carr, 1984). It placed so much emphasis on meaning as an integral portion of
teaching/creating dance that one may think that dance would be BEST portrayed by someone who has not only trained their body for years, but also experienced enough in their lives that they have something important to convey. While this gives an interesting boost to those who want to encourage dance in the older population, it does not represent the reality of what happens in the dance world. However, the lack of research on the adult dance student makes it difficult to describe what really does happen in the dance world without relying on personal experience and assumptions.

The next major theme touched upon in the literature discusses the problems with those who teach dance. Emphasis is placed on the “apathy and ineffectualness of the student teachers” (Carr, 1984, p. 75). This theme of problems with young, inexperienced teachers and uneducated school systems is referred to over and over again in the literature. Part of this problem is due to the fact that most states have no certification or licensure processes for dance teachers (Bonbright, 1999). In K-12 schools that are lucky enough to have dance in their curriculum, the focus is primarily on performance as opposed to the learning process of dance itself (Risner, 2007). Dimondstein (1985) argues that dance has such inherent value that it does not need to be defended as a physical skill, romantic idea, or basis for improving learning in other arenas. It is simply, and beautifully, its own category. Dimondstein also suggests melding all of these ideas together, and that, in the end, it is the quality with which dance is taught that will ultimately make all the difference. This may be considered a more than optimistic view, but the emphasis on effective teaching is an important one. The fact that dance teachers are not generally required to have any specific training and that there is no standard
certification is alarming. Even more alarming is the low pay offered to dance educators. It is difficult to require additional training in technique or pedagogy for people who cannot even make a living from the profession. Most dance teachers must have second jobs in order to survive (Risner, 2007). A significant study by Wainwright and Turner (2006) interviewed dancers from the Royal Ballet. Many of them had retired from performing and had become dance teachers. Some of the teachers could not believe that they were getting paid to teach because they enjoyed it so much. Others claimed it was rewarding, yet they would watch their students and see in them those things of which they were no longer capable. This points to a strange dichotomy. On one hand there are some dance teachers with little experience or education, and on the other we have expertly trained dancers who can only stay in the world of dance by becoming teachers or administrators. Is this really due to the ageing of the body? Could differences in training and performance expectations allow dancers to perform longer without injuring themselves? Would a greater variety of roles for older dancers persuade them to keep performing?

Dance education is further hindered by the lack of research in the field. Many of the studies in dance actively call for more research, and a way to effectively spread the outcomes of that research to dance educators across the country and the world (Bonbright, 1999; Koff, 1998; Risner, 2007). Research that has been done is so specific to certain dance forms that it may not benefit teachers of other forms. Recreational dancers in various stages of motor development will have different needs than elite dancers in any field. Modern, hip-hop, or tap dance teachers that must rely on research
done on professional ballet dancers must make adjustments and assumptions as to how the information will translate to their student population. Greater variety in skill level, age, and body type in these classes may make this a very difficult and possibly risky activity (Koff, 1998). Ballroom dancers, hip-hop dancers, cloggers and tap dancers of all skill levels will surely have a variety of concerns specific to their art forms. This is an even greater issue when we recall that the majority of these teachers are not certified and may not be aware of current dance research, or qualified to adapt it to their students.

**Marginalization**

Even though dance has been around in some form or another for millions of years, it still holds a marginalized place in our society (Risner, 2007). There is often a sense that art forms such as dance are unnecessary since they do not produce something that can be easily quantified. Performances are often used to show that dance has validity. Few universities are expected to prove that math classes have validity, but dance classes without a performance are almost unheard of. While many people enjoy seeing a dance performance, they may not see the inherent value in the educational process or development of a dancer. It is partially the aesthetic nature of dance that leads to its marginalization in society and education. This aesthetic view is further compounded by our society’s fixation on looking young (Calasanti, 2007). While performance groups comprised of dancers over the age of 50 do exist, they are the great exception rather than the rule. We cannot expect a society to fully encourage something that appears to include such a narrow portion of the population. Part of this misconception comes from the fact that the educational benefits of dance are not “well documented, understood, or valued
much outside the dance and arts education community” (Bonbright, 1999, p. 36). To discover more about these benefits and promote dance for people of all ages, more research must be done.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

All of the facets of dance that have been discussed come together to show a field that lacks direction, standards, and sense of self. The best way to combat these shortcomings is to continue research that will show the many different contributions of dance as an art and science. Instead of trying so hard to separate whether or not dance should be considered as one more than the other, it should be enjoyed and promoted that it is both. There are few fields that may reap the benefits of both worlds, and it should be embraced. One way to do this is to encourage the pursuit of knowledge by dance teachers. When teachers are more educated, they can begin a cycle of change that will train the next generation of dancer in a more enlightened manner. When we value our teachers more, we may be inclined to pay them more so that they do not need to have several jobs to make a living. This is not something that can be changed overnight, but it will not change at all if it is ignored.

It is important to note that none of the articles reviewed mentioned small, local studios. All studies focused on public schools, universities, or sample groups at community centers. Since many people begin or continue their dance training at these smaller schools, it is an area that should be studied. Many of these locations are performance-based, which should be investigated to see whether or not this helps, hurts,
or has no effect on enrollment of older dancers. We can then find out why or why not, and determine the best way to encourage and train them.

As dancer’s retirement ages become lower and lower, it is imperative that we explore how age impacts dancers and what stigmas may be attached to them. Studios and dance classes should be observed to see if incidences of ageism exist, either overtly or on a more subtle level. Interviews with dancers that have either started dancing or have continued dancing after the age at which many have already retired (20’s-30’s) may give some interesting insight into ways of keeping people dancing longer, and encouraging others to begin at any age. Adult dancers should not be excluded from research simply because they are not an easy population to study. There is much to be learned about their attitudes, physiology, and training. This research could inform all aspects of dance science and education with a decidedly personal feeling for a field that suffers from such an identity crisis.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to collect rich descriptions of the experiences and perceptions of individuals who chose to begin taking dance classes on a regular basis over the age of 18. Collecting these descriptions should give dancers and dance educators a clearer picture of what factors contribute to an adult beginning a dance program, what challenges they may face, the best ways to train them, and how they view themselves as dancers.
THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Questions explored in this study were: why people choose to begin and continue dancing later than what is considered “normal” in the dance world, and whether or not they had experienced any prejudices related to this choice.

PROCEDURES/METHODS

Characteristics of Qualitative Research/Research Strategy

Qualitative research seeks to give a multi-faceted description of individuals and their stories. The phenomenological approach utilized in this study was used to investigate the shared experiences of five individuals who chose to begin dancing over the age of 18. While there have been some quantitative studies regarding this group, there is little description in the literature of how they truly feel about their place in the dance world. This study gave this group a chance to have their voices heard by the dance community.

This study used phenomenology to understand the participants’ first-hand accounts of their experiences as adult dancers. Phenomenology seeks to find meaning from that which is experienced. It is derived from the work of philosophers such as Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and can be described as, “different forms of experience just as we experience them, from the perspective of the subject living through or performing them” (Smith, 2011). An individual’s story will give rich and descriptive data regarding the world they inhabit and how their perception of the world informs their decisions. In this particular case the participants were describing their
experiences as individuals who chose to begin dancing between 18 and 70 years of age. Very personal descriptions given by these participants gave an in-depth view of the adult dancer.

As a teacher, researcher, and student of dance I have many preconceptions regarding adult dancers. I was fortunate enough to discover a passion for dance that has never diminished. That passion was not discovered until I was a student at a local community college and I enrolled in a beginning ballet class. Beginning my journey in dance as an adult afforded me what I perceive as many disadvantages as well as advantages. I would love to say that I had a natural propensity for ballet, and that my body molded to it immediately. That was not the case. I was fortunate enough to have never been overweight, but I had also never been particularly athletic, had hated my physical education classes through junior and senior high school, and had poorly arched feet, short legs, and very tight muscles. Yet, I kept going to class. I loved working hard at something and seeing improvement. I was raised to value academics over the arts. How can you make a living painting or dancing? It was never even a consideration. Still, I had loved gymnastics when I took it in first and second grade, but I quit by third grade due to the impending amount of homework that was coming. I had retired from physical activity. I was 7 years old; and I was retired. I was preparing for the real world where sports and entertainment had no particular value. Somewhere deep inside I knew that this would not make me happy. It wasn’t until my first year of college that I decided I should try something I might actually enjoy.
When I was 20 years old I decided that I wanted to do something “for myself”, so I enrolled in a beginning ballet class. I loved it. It was harder than I ever could have expected, and I loved it. I felt exhilarated to have finally found something that spoke to me so deeply. I had never felt that way with any other physical activity, yet the academic in me was embarrassed at this newfound passion. I quietly started with one ballet class, then another. Then I decided to look for a local studio to continue my training. There I added jazz, Broadway, and tap dancing to my joys. I never had any idea that it was possible to seriously study dance if you had not begun as a child. I had so much to learn and was dancing in classes where 10 year olds had already been dancing for 7 years. I had no idea what I was doing. There were many nights that I thought I should quit; that I would never call myself a dancer. Many of my teachers used to say things such as “well it’s not like you’re going to be a professional”, and “you don’t even want to be a ballerina, do you?” “Of course not” was my reply, but secretly a part of me wanted to yell, “So what if I do? How do I do it? Help me!” If I ever complained of being overwhelmed, stressed, or too busy in life- people around me would tell me to just stop dancing. As if it were so simple. It sunk in one day when a friend asked why I liked dancing so much and the only words that came to my mind were, “It just makes me feel like a better person.”

Beginning any new skill as an adult is difficult. It is embarrassing, humbling, and in the case of dance- physically demanding. I began to wonder if other people felt the same way. I also wondered if I could have some sort of future in dance. This led me to the very difficult, and slightly impractical, decision to get my master’s degree in Dance
Science. I chose to do this study to see why other individuals had chosen dance later in life, and what struggles (if any) they had faced. What enrichment had it given their lives? What could be done to encourage others?

I am also currently a dance teacher that focuses on teaching beginning adults, so I want to continue to find ways to encourage my students and get even more adults dancing. I love teaching this very specific group, and find that my background has helped me immensely. I remember what it was like to feel completely confused by terms and movements that seemed so simple to those that have danced since childhood. I remember having to convince myself that I will get better. I try to incorporate all of these experiences into making myself a better teacher. It is this desire to become a better teacher, dancer and researcher that I chose to do this study. While my background is very specific and had the ability to impact my study- I am also genuinely intrigued to see the reality of what has impacted other dancers. It is for this reason that I chose to interview my subjects and allow them to tell THEIR stories at their own pace. I found my subjects to be very eager to share their experiences and the many things that make us similar as well as quite unique.

Participants

To be included in this study, participants were required to have begun dancing over the age of 18. This was to gain the perspective of those who choose to begin taking dance classes as adults in the hopes of seeing what factors may have encouraged or discouraged participation. At the time they were interviewed all participants were between the ages of 40 and 70 years old and were still dancing. They were also required
to be willing and able to be interviewed for at least one hour at a time in English. Since dance requires a great deal of practice and continued skill acquisition, participants were required to have taken a minimum of two dance classes per week, and have done so for at least three years. In order to help limit variables- all participants selected were female. The individuals selected varied in terms of years dancing, type of dance preferred, as well as body type. All dancers have attended classes at small local dance studios. Due to the in depth nature of the study, five participants were chosen from those that were eligible. Eligibility was determined by a preliminary survey.

Risks/Benefits

All participants completed informed consent forms before participating so that they were aware of their rights. Risks to participants were expected to be minimal. Emotional distress, boredom, or embarrassment during interviews may have occurred due to the personal nature of some of their stories. Great care was taken by the researcher to promote a comfortable atmosphere. Participants were encouraged to provide as much information as possible through the use of open-ended, non-leading questions. Participants were informed that they could refuse to answer a question or withdraw from the study at any time if desired to avoid distress or embarrassment.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was obtained through individual interviews conducted at times convenient to the participants between January and March 2010. A quiet dance studio and office were used for four out of the five interviews. One interview was conducted by telephone. Each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes in length and was recorded on the Olympus WS-400 S
Digital Voice Recorder. Interview questions were reviewed by the committee to ensure the interview process was accurate, valid, and free of bias. After the interviews, the recordings were transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word. Transcripts were then coded for common themes and reviewed with a faculty advisor for validation.

After all interviews were transcribed verbatim, they were analyzed according to Creswell’s framework for “Data Analysis and Representation” (Creswell, 2007). Following this framework all interviews were read through multiple times to become familiar with the data. Notes were then made in the margins and recurring ideas and key words were highlighted to form initial codes. These codes were then used to determine the seven main theme clusters that emerged throughout all of the interviews.

Several strategies were employed in order to attain methodological rigor according to Creswell’s guidelines for “Designing a Qualitative Study”. First was the expression of potential bias on the part of the researcher. This served to make the reader aware of my history and what impact it may have had on collection and analysis of data. Secondly, the questions and methods used were reviewed by committee prior to the study to ensure that they were valid and free from bias.

Thirdly, was the saturation of data. Participants were allowed to share their experiences until the discussion hit a point of saturation where no new information was being presented. Finally, there was member checking. In order to ensure accurate analysis of the data- clarification of statements was sometimes necessary. This was done by simply asking the participant, “could you talk a little bit more about this?” or “could you describe that in a bit more detail?”
RESULTS

Participants

The participants in my study all began dancing as adults, and danced at local studios, but they also had differences worth noting.

Participant 1: Began taking jazz and tap classes in her fifties and was in her sixties when she was interviewed. Her daughter began dancing in her teens and she became increasingly interested in trying out the form for herself. As a mother of two and the director of a preschool, she expressed the desire to escape stress and to socialize as major contributing factors in her decision to begin taking dance classes. She is now almost 70 years old and continues to take two to three tap and jazz classes per week.

Participant 2: Also began dancing after being involved in her daughter’s dance classes. She had always had the dream of being a ballerina, but had been overweight for most of her life. Even after losing a significant amount of weight by dieting, she discussed the embarrassment she felt from her body before she began to take dance classes. She started taking ballet, tap, and jazz classes in her forties, and became very proud of her musicality, flexibility, and the balance she gained from dancing.

Participant 3: The third participant was born and raised in China, and had only been dancing for three years when she was interviewed. She was taking several ballet classes each week, and had attended an adult dance camp over the summer. As a forty-year-old mother of a highly gifted child, and a doctor, she was very clear about her expectations from dance. She wanted to learn it all- and the right way. Her focus was on ballet, which
she felt she had some degree of natural propensity for due to her flexibility and well
arched feet.

*Participant 4:* The most experienced dancer of the study. She began dancing when she
was 18 years old, and was in her fifties when she was interviewed for this study. She was
a professional dancer and is still a professional teacher of dance and kinesiology. She
was able to give a unique perspective regarding what allowed her to become a dancer as
an adult, and the major impact it has had on her life.

*Participant 5:* “Never wanted to dance. Never wanted to exercise.” This participant made
it very clear that it was never her idea to dance, and that she really had no intention of
enjoying it. She had battled with cancer, and several different types of surgery that left
her so weak she could not even hold up her own head. Her doctors recommended ballet
to help strengthen her core, and she finally acquiesced. She interviewed many teachers
who did not want to train an adult, and finally found someone willing to give her some
private lessons. After taking private lessons she felt as though she would finally be able
to join a group class. She remarked on the many physical improvements that she has
gained by dancing, and now considers herself a dancer.

**Themes**

Seven significant themes emerged from the 270 statements pulled out of the five
interviews. Samples of these statements and their assigned meaning can be seen in Table
1. These formulated meanings were then grouped into clusters to create the seven
significant themes that can be seen in Table 2.
Table 1  Selected Examples of Significant Statements and Assigned Meanings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significant Statement</th>
<th>Assigned Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All of a sudden I saw older people on the stage. In the other studio there was no one past 16 that ever was on that stage.</td>
<td>Often only children and adolescents are seen participating in dance/performing. (Age related)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There’s pride, and I feel accomplished because I do see myself getting better over the years.</td>
<td>For some, there is a correlation between positive emotional well being from personal growth and their dancing. (Personal growth)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The tap I find very fun, it’s like something that makes you laugh.</td>
<td>Fun is a factor for many people in dancing/deciding/continuing to dance. (Fun factor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For me, it’s dependent upon who the teacher is.</td>
<td>Teaching style can have an impact upon whether or not an individual stays with a dance class. (Teacher/Method of Teaching)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There has to be music that moves me.</td>
<td>Music choice can have an impact upon attendance. (Music/Musicality)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I still get frustrated with- with my inability to do it.</td>
<td>There are many frustrations for the adult dancer. (Frustrations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It wasn’t easy, but I could feel the muscle toning, the strength in my neck.</td>
<td>There are physical benefits to dance training. (Physicality/Physical Improvement)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2   theme clusters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Related</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No knowledge of classes for adults</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited availability of classes for adults</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling old (physically and/or mentally)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Growth</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Took a long time to feel competent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Something clicks and it is all worthwhile</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of pride</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poise</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress relief from work</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fun Factor</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When class is fun- it is encouraging</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leave feeling good about yourself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural enjoyment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher/Method of Teaching</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor instruction – teachers don’t explain, go too fast</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good teachers – explain, repeat, understand specific needs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher should be knowledgeable about body</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Music/Musicality</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some types of music are enjoyable, some are “jarring”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music chosen for class influences participation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music must “speak” to the individual</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frustrations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hard to enter room with others who have been dancing for years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being the worst is hard</td>
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<td>------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not knowing the names of steps</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feeling awkward</td>
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<td>Registration difficulties</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intimidating</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hard to be in front of mirrors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Panic attacks from recitals</td>
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**Physical Improvement**

<table>
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<th>Helps avoid injury</th>
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<tr>
<td>Improved muscle tone and muscular strength</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased balance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased flexibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ability to get off/reduce medications</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased endurance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feel energized</td>
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<td>Stress relief</td>
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*Theme 1: Age related.* All of the participants mentioned their age at some point during the interview. Out of these 35 mentions, four out of the five participants touched upon the idea that while they started dancing as adults they found that over time they were able to do many of the things that younger dancers were able to do, and that in the long run the age did not matter as much as some other factors. The one individual who did not specifically discuss this improvement was Participant 4. It is worth noting that she was also the only person interviewed who had already had a career as a professional dancer.
Statements such as “Dancing- it doesn’t matter what age,” and “it doesn’t really make a difference,” were common. One participant who was enrolled in classes that had adolescent and pre-adolescent dancers put it well, “even the little girl(s) they can’t do splits, they can’t do lots of things that I can do, they cannot.” Another participant made an observation regarding their experience as an adult beginning a new dance form in her thirties, “I didn’t care that I looked ridiculous. That was really important, because as a younger dancer, um, your ego gets so involved with not wanting to look stupid in class, and I knew I looked stupid, and I didn’t care.”

Theme 2: Personal Growth. All of the participants discussed how dancing made them feel and had helped them personally. They stated significant personal improvements that would be impossible to quantify; yet spoke to the very profound impact dance can have upon an individual. One participant has been dancing for forty years and has now been a dance teacher for many years. She describes her dance experience this way, “You are just carried away emotionally.” She went on to describe a response she received from one of her dance students, “I can’t believe what I learned about life, and about myself.” A 60 year-old participant that has had significant health problems described her personal journey this way, “I became less afraid, more open, more embracing, became more confident,” “I learned tolerance, saw passion,” “it’s like having clean air, I’m happy, I’m at peace.”

Theme 3: Fun Factor. All participants referred to the positive feelings that they achieved from dancing. Four out of five also discussed “fun” as being one of the important factors in choosing a teacher, dance style, or continuing to attend class. The most seasoned
dancer of the five participants expressed her desire for enjoyment in a dance class. “I don’t need to be doing class. I do class because I enjoy it, and if I’m not going to enjoy it, I don’t want to be there.” She also revisits what got her dancing forty years ago, “I basically did it because of her encouragement (a dance teacher), and because I needed some exercise, and dance seemed like a fun way to do it… but from that point on I never stopped.” She went on to describe an interesting phenomenon that the other participants may or may not have experienced, “what you have to achieve to be satisfied with yourself (at the advanced level) is so over the top that it starts to be not fun again.”

The dancers with less professional experience referred to the stress relief and positive feelings that dance class allowed them. A Chinese native that was not allowed to take dance as a child has found a passion for it in her fifties. “It’s like the best therapy. We all have so much stress in this country, we’re all so much stressed, all kind of different stress…when I go into the ballet studio, my mind, my body, my whole mind in different world. Nothing else to bother me. Just dance, and music. At least I have that time as my own world. It’s beautiful, very beauty. Just feels great.”

It was common for the participants to compare their dancing to gyms, or other forms of physical activity that they had either tried, or in some cases- had been afraid to try. “I’m not sure if you go to a gym, other than just getting hot and sweaty in a gym, that you have that same sort of ‘club-like’ feel. I don’t know how to describe it, but I just feel like it’s more interesting, more fun.” They went on to describe the atmosphere that encourages them to keep going back to class, “There’s a lot of fun involved, there’s a lot of joking around. When people do something wrong…everybody encourages you, I think
it’s a really important thing about dancing. Nobody says, ‘that was stupid’, ‘you can’t do that’. Everybody says, ‘oh well, just try it again, you can do it, just keep trying’ and that’s really helpful to people. And I think everybody could use that in their daily life. I mean, people don’t get enough encouragement to do, uh, things they want to do.”

Theme 4: Teacher/Teaching Method. The impact of the teacher was emphasized greatly by all of those interviewed. Statements described poor teaching practices, positive class atmospheres, the importance of clear corrections, and a mismatch of expectations to reality. Several of the participants mentioned the difficulty of starting ballet classes in particular due to the very specific French terms used in class. “I think was first of all learning terminology. Because that was a big thing at the beginning, and some of the teachers don’t really explain the terminology. They just kind of show you, this is what it means, but it’s not really explained, so learning the terminology helped a lot.” One woman was so concerned about becoming a “hindrance to a group class” that she took private lessons first to “understand the rules and protocol.” Another woman had to be very upfront with her first ballet teachers, “when I started I remember that summer they were saying like, ‘Okay, we do a pas de bourree,’ and I’m like- ‘wait a minute- what’s that?’ And she’s like ‘kick, ball change,’ and I’m like ‘wait a minute- we have to break it down more than that. What foot moves? Where, and when?’ I mean, I was so not- I had no instruction, and I mean I had to break it down. I had to say to them, ‘Let me put it to you this way- can you type? How many words a minute can you type? Well I can type a hundred and twenty words a minute and I don’t have to think about it, or hunt and peck.
It’s so fast it’s like not even thinking. Well that’s the way dance is for you, so you have to think of me as a hunt and pecker- as just starting.”

Participants discussed the classes that they tried and did not stick with, “where the teacher was too advanced for me, and I could not keep up. I did not feel on par. They would go too fast, even in the exercise it would be stuff that I couldn’t even attempt.” “Some of the classes there was like way too much of the things that I couldn’t do. And they couldn’t, I couldn’t, and I was too embarrassed to ask for an accommodation.” For this individual this became too much for them and they became “depressed” and “very self deprecating.” There is a stark contrast between this and the feelings they had for another teacher who “teaches in a way that doesn’t make me feel overwhelmed.” This dancer felt that this teacher had good “knowledge about the body and movement” and was able to explain things in a manner that made them easier to understand.

One woman in her fifties has focused primarily upon ballet and has started taking classes from several different teachers because “everyone teaching differently. So I want to learn different style from the way one teacher teach.” She is very specific about what she likes from each teacher, “balance,” “corrections,” and “strong barre.” She was particularly unhappy with one instructor who did not offer many technical corrections. “She doesn’t do a lot of correction. I respect her, but sometimes I’m not too happy about it because she doesn’t do corrections. I’m not that old yet- I can do those things! And other people can do it, but I don’t want to tell her.”

The only participant that has danced professionally and now teaches dance describes the type of classes she looks for, “First of all the atmosphere has to be
respectful, and collaborative, and concentrated, and still not the competitive tension that exists in a lot of classes. Secondly, the teacher has to be knowledgeable and invested in correcting people in a way that is harmonious with my ideas of the body. I can’t go into class and just ignore teachers asking people to do things that are dangerous or harmful.”

She goes on to describe the flow of her ideal class, “It has to be simple enough that I’m not stressing constantly about sequencing, but challenging. But a lot of people think challenging means faster, more complex, and to me- that’s not what I mean.” She illustrates this concept in terms of the frappe exercise, “I want to be able to really feel the briskness of the attack, and that moment of hesitation. So I have to be able to kind of fulfill what the movement is, and that means that the structure of the exercise has to be a certain way.”

**Theme 5: Music/Musicality.** Although all participants did not mention it in great detail, the choice of music in certain dance styles and dance classes was mentioned by all of the dancers. Some dancers chose certain styles of dance due to the music played (or not played), and all had definite ideas about what they preferred. Statements such as, “there has to be music that moves me” were common. Not all participants prefer ballet as a dance style, but all who took class mentioned the beauty of the classical music used. One participant went so far as to say, “If I’m doing a ballet class, I want classical music.” The dancer that has decided to focus on ballet training repeatedly mentioned music in relation to her dancing, “I just enjoy every minute of the music and the dance,” “I always love the classical music. It just, um, take me to different worlds.”
The sixty year-old woman that has kept her emphasis mainly on tap and jazz talks about being from the “rock and roll era” and the impact that the music and movies of that time period had on her, “I love all the movies of Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly and all of those. You know, just watching them a couple of times and then, ‘oh, that’s something that I can do’...and recognizing the things that they were doing that I can do now made me feel really good.”

Other dancers discussed some of the negatives related to dance. “I looked at tap and different genres, the music was too loud. I couldn’t stay focused.” One dancer who claims to have “no musicality” mentioned that it took her a couple of years to become more comfortable and that she is still “working on” her ability to hear music and apply it to her dancing.

**Theme 6: Frustrations.** As with any acquired skill there are moments of absolute frustration. The participants in this study had a great variety of different frustrations that they have had to overcome. Some of the most descriptive statements were in regard to the first time they attended a group dance class. “The very first class, it was fun, but because it was like a challenge, but it was also frustrating because I didn’t know any of the names of the steps we were doing, and so the teacher would, you know, ‘you do a ball change’, and I thought- I don’t know what a ball change is. So it was very frustrating in a way, but it left me feeling this was something that it would be fun to pursue- to keep trying at.”

One of the dancers had struggled with her weight for most of her adult life and described a variety of frustrations that led her to choose dance instead of working out at a gym. “If you can overcome the way you look in front of other people, you still have to
find a parking space, you can’t get in, and the classes are full, and I’m not a morning person.” She goes on to discuss how she was “getting old and crotchety” and taking many prescription anti-inflammatories before she decided to try dancing. A similar story comes from another participant who had many health issues that had left her so weak that it was “a lot of work to hold up” her head. She claims that she “never had interest in being athletic or exercising.” At her doctor’s suggestion she tried ballet classes. She expressed the doubt that was in her mind for many of those first classes, “What am I doing here? Will I ever get it?”

A few participants expressed their frustration and outright fear of performing in front of an audience. One dancer still refuses to participate in even the small recitals held at her dance studio, while another described the very strong negative reaction to her first rehearsals and show. She described the rehearsal at the studio as “hell,” and gave an in depth description of her first dress rehearsal at a large theater, “I had a panic attack. I had a real panic attack. I didn’t think I’d ever have one in my life. I didn’t know what it was…but I had trouble breathing, and I was nervous and hyper, and I was so hyper that I didn’t know what was wrong with me, but I was truly panicked.” “I made it through, but it was so difficult. After it was over I was up the entire night.” “It was debilitating. So I gave myself permission. I said, ‘you don’t have to do it if you don’t want to do it, and if you want to do it, then you can’t act like this because this is awful. This is ridiculous.’”

**Theme 7: Physical observations/physical improvement.** The effect of dance upon physical attributes was the most prevalent theme. There were 76 mentions of how dance had positively impacted the physicality of the participants. All mentioned that dance was
their chosen form of exercise, citing improvements in “the body shape and muscle,” “flexibility,” “balance,” “endurance,” “neck and abdominal strength,” and a decreased dependency on certain prescription medications. One dancer credits her dance training with avoiding a very serious accident while doing laundry at home, “I kicked or tripped on a portable saw… but I held the laundry basket myself, and I didn’t fall, and I was so freaked out, but I was so proud that, I mean, my heart was palpitating ‘cuz I was so frightened. But I was so impressed. It’s been the training.” The dancer that joined ballet classes at the request of her physician summed up her experience saying, “Ballet saved my life!”

While many of the instances noted about the physical being were in regard to improving physical abilities; there were also many concerning how they felt they did or did not match up with a certain physical type. The positive statements centered on the individual’s natural physical abilities that they felt gave them an edge in their dance classes. Even though she began in her fifties, one participant remarked that, “My body is very flexible. All the ballet classes and teachers before, in the beginning, they all comment very nice and like my body because it very flexible.” She continued by saying, “I have beautiful feet- thanks God- my parents gave me beautiful feet.” Another dancer discussed how she found her body type to feel much more at home in a modern class that she found to be, “one of the rare dance forms that is actually suited to the tight body. Let’s put it that way. You don’t look better doing it when you’re tight, but the tight body welcomes it.”
Discussion

The individuals that participated in this study expressed their experiences as adult dancers. These experiences became the phenomenon itself. Their descriptions of their encounters gave a rich picture of what encourages and discourages an adult beginning to dance. While each participant may have had different initial reasons for choosing to dance, all participants found it to be a very enriching part of their lives and for similar reasons.

As the literature suggested, physical improvements weigh heavily upon an individual’s decision to dance or keep dancing. All participants expressed the great benefits that physical activity had on them. These improvements were not calculated in this study- yet real world implications such as losing weight, helping to maintain an active life style, and avoiding injury were clearly expressed.

The ability to move past physical and mental roadblocks and note improvements also emerged as an important aspect that encouraged them to keep dancing. These improvements served as intrinsic motivation for all of the dancers to continue the pursuit of dance throughout their lives. The ability to note progress and have a strong sense of personal gratification cannot be overlooked. Each dancer made it clear that they wanted me to know that dance had allowed them to do things (physically, socially, emotionally) that they had never thought possible and had no outlet for in other aspects of their life. One dancer put it best when asked if there was anything else she would like to add, “Just try it.”
All of the dancers in this study have taken class at small local studios. These are small, enclosed spaces with barres running around two or three of the four walls, and a wall or two of mirrors. Only 8-10 adults can comfortably fit into a studio of this size, and each dancer finds a spot that suits them best. Some prefer a spot by the teacher, some prefer to be a near a mirror- some away from it. If the ceilings are low, or the floor is too small, too warped, too rectangular- that will limit the experiences offered. It is important to envision the environment that lends itself to this specific group of dancers. It is small. It is communal. It is quiet. In surroundings such as these the ability/attitude of the other dancers and teacher can have a great impact.

Implications for Dance Teachers

Dance teachers would do well to have open conversations with their adult dancers. This could be in the form of discussion, or perhaps surveys or forms when new students arrive. The variety of expectations that each dancer brings with them to class has a great impact upon the most effective ways to train them. Follow up conversations or surveys would also be helpful to make sure the changing needs of each dancer continue to be met. Teachers should keep themselves apprised of issues that may be unique to the older dancer and understand that their own biases may cause them to teach in a way that discourages improvement, attendance, and participation in general. Some of the items to keep in mind that may be unique to those beginning dance later in life are those of repetition, repetition, repetition, pleasant/encouraging atmosphere, music choices that speak to the group present- not just the teacher, patience, definition of terms and new movements, and clear corrections that allow dancers a chance to improve at any age.
Dance educators should also be educated in the art of pedagogy. As one participant put it, “the best dancers do not always make the best teachers.” There are most certainly other factors to be aware of that may not have been touched upon in this study, but these can serve as a sort of jumping off point from which we can begin to regard our adult dancers as valuable members of the dance society as a whole.

*Future Research*

There are many areas in which further research could be done in this arena. Interviews with dance teachers would provide an interesting comparison between the student’s fears and expectations and what teachers believe and hope to convey to their adult dancers. Interviews with those that stop dancing at various points in their lives would also provide important data to see if there is something that could or should be done to prevent this. Studies focusing on the performance-based aspect of some studios/classes would shed some light on whether or not dance recitals and shows have a positive, negative, or no impact upon the adult dancer. The reasons people stop dancing could be used to shed light on how to encourage others to keep dancing.

The people in this study have shown the positive impact that dancing has had upon their lives. They got stronger, mentally and physically. They were able to learn things they never thought were possible. Some were able to live out childhood dreams that had never come to fruition. Others found a vocation that has allowed them travel the world and impact hundreds of other lives. Each participant made the choice to begin dancing, but perhaps the part of this study that is the most important is why each one continued. I set out to see if there was ageism in dance. There may be people who have
an ideal dancer type in their heads, but if you speak with those who have done it, those who have lived it, you realize that it truly doesn’t matter. Whether they want to improve their fitness, escape the kids for an hour, be the ballerina they always dreamt of being, or just move with the music- they can dance. With the proper encouragement and attention, every single dancer in this study has found a place where they can be and do what they want.

As teachers and researchers of physical activity, we would be remiss in our duties if we did not recognize dance as a viable activity for those who wish to begin- at any age. My own dance background led me to make assumptions regarding dance. Since I had felt that I was too old to start dancing, or have a career related to it- I expected others to feel the same way. What I found instead were people enriching their lives through dance. Before I began dancing I had many preconceived notions regarding what dancers do, as well as their appearance. When I tell people that I dance, or teach dance to adults, they often tell me why they would never be able to do it. Not flexible enough, too old, too tall, too short, too heavy, and so on. So what? What is it about dance that makes us focus on the end product as opposed to the process? The process is beautiful. It is a process that can begin at any age, with any body type. It is an amazing journey that can offer so much. When I began taking classes I wanted to do it all, but felt limited. If I had been braver, or had one teacher that had encouraged me early on- I might have fought harder to pursue more training. If we are brave enough to try new things, it is amazing what we can accomplish. The women in this study were brave. They did not let body image or stereotypes keep them from trying something new. Speaking with them reminded me to
encourage others to dance, and to implore dance teachers to educate and train themselves to be not just choreographers and dancers; but mentors and researchers who can have a profound impact upon their students. I believe in the power of dance. I believe in its power to transform the body and mind, and fulfill us throughout our life’s journey.

Each individual in this study regaled me with their story, their lives as dancers. In keeping with Smith’s description of phenomenology they truly gave us their perspective of dance as they had lived and performed it. While their words have shown the great physical, mental and social advantages that dance has allowed them; it is almost not enough. To see their faces light up when describing their “a-ha” moments, to see their feet arch and bodies sway as they spoke about their first classes, to hear the frustrations that they each had to overcome to get where they are- was inspiring. Each one of them reminds me why I dance, why I teach, and why we should continue to find the best ways to bring this beautifully athletic art form to even more segments of the population.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

How long have you been dancing?
How often do you dance each week? (Days/hours)
Do you now, or have you ever participated in any other physical activities?
Did you ever quit dancing? If so, why? Why did you come back?
What style(s) of dance do you study?
Why did you decide to pursue this style/these styles?
Why did you begin taking dance classes? Why did you continue?
What would you consider to be the attributes of a dancer?
Describe how you feel before, during, and after dancing.
Do your classes require you to perform in front of an audience?
If so, how do you feel about the performances?
Do you have any favorite dancers, companies, or dance movies? Why or why not?
Do you learn about dance from sources other than the classes you take? If so, what? If not, why not?
Could you give a brief description of a typical dance class that you take?
Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experiences as a dancer?