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Dancing beyond exercise

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Abstract: Although physical inactivity contributes substantially to the so-called obesity epidemic, public health programs have had limited success in increasing activity. Dancing is a form of physical activity widely practised by all cultures and age groups which may offer many health benefits. Community-based dance classes in urban settings may have a role in health promotion programs. However, little is known about the motivations or experiences of people participating in dance classes or the outcomes of such participation.

We undertook a qualitative study of 10 people aged 14-25 years attending community-based dance classes. One-to-one, semi-structured interviews addressed motivations, the nature of the class experience, impact on body image and other implications for health and well-being. The interviews were transcribed and analysed according to standard techniques of thematic analysis.

The data have shown that dance class participants' experiences of 'the physical' are embedded in social, community/cultural or other values; participants respect their older teachers and they value physical expertise or knowledge that is gained over the long term; participation develops a sense of confidence and provides opportunities for transcendent experiences. These data support the conclusion that encouragement of dance class participation may offer an important strategy for health promotion as long as dance classes are not promoted in narrowly-conceived 'exercise' terms. By helping to foster a concept of physical activity that is life-long and non-individualistic, and where expertise increases rather than decreases with age, it may provide a resource for initiatives designed to address the problem of overweight.

Evidence suggests that lack of physical activity in young people may be a major indicator of poor health outcomes, including obesity (Salmon et al, 2006, Power et al, 1997), diabetes and depression (Allgower et al, 2001). These poor health outcomes of youthful inactivity may also develop later in life (Baumann and Owen 1999, Power et al, 1997). It is widely agreed that there is an urgent need for young people to engage in physical activity and various public health and clinical strategies have been tried or proposed (Baur, Lobstein & Uauy 2004). Advertising and health education campaigns promoting physical activity have tended to focus on sport and other physical fitness regimes (Headley 2004) but almost no attention has been given to the preventive and therapeutic possibilities of participation in recreational dance activities in Australia. Our study sought to identify the reasons why young people attend dance classes and focused on their motivations and experiences.

Methods

We undertook semi-structured, in-depth interviews of an 'open sample' of young people attending a variety of community-based recreational dance classes. Studios offering different

kinds of dance classes were identified using the *Yellow Pages* and information from the organisation Ausdance Victoria. Teachers were approached as to the possibility of allowing recruitment to take place by means of verbal announcements prior to classes and displayed notices. The study focused on participation in dance classes that takes place outside the institutional frameworks (school, work or university) that usually structure the lives of people of this age group. Attendance at the classes was thus 'voluntary,' although the role of young participants' parents or family in 'promoting' attendance was not explicitly investigated.

The data from the interviews and focus groups were transcribed and analyzed according to established techniques (Patton 2002). Data analysis was conducted using four key steps in order to connect themes both within and across participants' transcripts: (i) researchers immersed themselves in the data – reading and re-reading the transcripts in order to start thinking about the similarities between transcripts; (ii) codes were applied to blocks of text in order to sort and group the data; (iii) categories were created to help to link codes together; and (iv) themes were identified to provide explanation and meaning to the categories generated.

The project received approval from the Human Ethics Review Committee at Deakin University.

Results

Ten participants were recruited and interviewed. They ranged in age between 14 and 26 years, with the average age being 19. The dance classes were all conducted by teachers whose dance teaching was the basis of a small business and were usually held in the evenings or on weekends in rented halls or commercial properties in urban and suburban Melbourne. The dance styles represented included tango dancing, Greek dance, ballet, hip-hop, ballroom dancing, belly-dancing and flamenco. The study participants included men and women who were still at school, university students, a primary school teacher, an unemployed young woman living at home, and a physiotherapist. Observation of classes took place at each location although the observed class was not always one in which the participant was dancing. Participants were interviewed about their motivations for attending dance classes, their experiences of the classes, and the perceived impact of the classes on their body image, health and overall well-being.

Through analysis of the transcripts five major themes emerged as ways in which participants subjectively appeared to derive meaning from the dance class experience. These themes are summarised as follows:

1. Dance classes foster respect for physical activity and expertise acquired over the long term.
2. Dance class participants gain self-confidence with respect both to their bodily experiences and social relationships.
3. Dance classes increase respect between older and younger people in a physical activity context.
4. Dance classes are sites for exploring or maintaining social, community/cultural, recreational or intersubjective values.
5. Dance class participation can involve experiences of self, body and world that lie beyond the everyday.

Each of the themes is discussed briefly below. They reveal important aspects of dance class participation which will require further investigation in larger studies.

1. Dance class participation encourages respect for physical activity and expertise acquired in the long term

Participants regarded the older age and experience of their dance teacher positively (see also below, theme 3). They saw this as a sign that they, too, could continue to dance throughout their lives. One participant said that:

I just (had) a feeling I can get better, because she (the teacher) is sixty eight, almost seventy and she is still brilliant and looks fit and you know, she can continue going for another twenty years. (17 year old Flamenco dance student. Female)

Participants from the Greek dance classes also had a sense that they were continuing on the traditions of their parents' or grandparents' culture for others:

[D]ancing feels great because, when we go to weddings or a christening, other people don't get up to dance because they don't know how to dance. And I'm like up there doing every single dance, because I know 'em all. (14 year old. Male)

Participants had the sense that both the dance style in which they were involved and their own participation in it were ongoing:

[T]here's always something more to learn...and just to know if you put the effort in what you can achieve. ..it does make you think that it's never-ending, which is kind of a nice thing because there's always something new to learn or adapt to what you already know. (25 year old Tango dancer. Female)

Participants also gained a sense of where they have come from (what the younger or beginner students are having difficulties with that they have now mastered) and where they are heading (what the teacher or older students can do that they will be able to do at some stage.) A student of flamenco dance said:

I can see myself continuing with this throughout my life and maybe stopping for a while and coming back, so this can be a lifelong thing I'll enjoy. You kind of feel proud because you know that you've come a long way and you can do a higher class. You feel proud because you're the person they're aspiring to be, and, yes, there is a lot of pride in continuing and learning more and more. (17 year old Flamenco dancer. Female)

One young Greek dancer said that what she liked about dancing was 'being able to have an experience that has evolved'. (18 year old. Female)

2. Dance class participants gain self-confidence with respect both to their bodily experiences and social relationships

All of the participants felt that their dancing makes them feel good about themselves whether because it 'lifted their spirits and energies'; made them feel 'proud' to be doing something for their community or culture and gave them an interest in other cultures. They also commented that they felt that dancing was good for their posture and self-esteem and gave them a sense of participating in something that has ongoingness and depth.

Several participants stated that it made them more comfortable with others and with intimacy. On this last point, one young woman commented:

I guess it's not such a shock if someone kisses you on the cheek or gives you a hug, from people you don't know very well. You're sort of more used to having some sort of contact with people in that way. (25 year old Tango dancer. Female)

A young student of social dance who was still at school said that,

Different dances have different moods so, like for example the Rumba you have to sort of pretend that you are in love, it's a whole story that you create on the floor, it's not just the dancing you do and like we have a lot of things like I guess where you have to imagine, you've got to work well with your partner and to be able to read them. (17 year old. Female)

3. Dance classes promote respect between older and younger people in a physical activity context

Participants expressed their feelings of respect and affection for their often considerably older teachers:

[He is] the best person I've ever met in my life. (17 year old ex-ballet student. Female)

They also expressed appreciation for the attention the teacher paid them in the dance classes:

He's fantastic – not that I've really had anything to compare it to. But he's very supportive and willing to go over things or watch you. (25 year old Tango student. Female)

One fifteen year old attending Greek dance classes when asked to say something about her teacher said:

Like, you have this respect for them, not only because they're older than you but because they've taught you so much.

Older students were also valued,

...in that particular class it was amazing because there were women who were well into their forties and had had children and they just rolled up their tops and let it all hang out. (25 year old belly dancing student. Female.)

Dance class participation can also be a means of connecting with an older relative or grandparent or simply another member of the extended family:

My Grandpa is Cypriot and I just love the style of dances that they do. (21 year old. Female)

One young student of Greek folk dance said of the performances he was involved in:

[I]t's mainly the kind of older age people that appreciate it more. (15 year old. Male)

Participants also mentioned their cousins, mothers, and grandparents as people who had encouraged them to attend dance classes.

4. Dance classes are sites for exploring or maintaining social, community/cultural, recreational or intersubjective values

Subjects interviewed for this study tended not to talk about their dance class participation in strictly physical terms. They expressed positive feelings about dance because it gave them a sense of achievement and connection, and sometimes because other people liked what they did:

I don't know... the feel of the music when we put everything we've done in a class to music, it just felt like we'd really learnt or something we've done is now, you know, what other people kind of would watch and enjoy. (17 year old Flamenco student. Female)

Dancing also brought them in touch with a culture different from their own or with their family's culture. It enabled them to meet new people or do something with their friends. They often spoke of the 'friendly atmosphere' in their dance classes. One respondent was impressed that:

people go out of their way to do something that...you hear all these bad news stories on the TV and people think that people are rude and now don't really care about others...to know that this group of people turn up each week for no other reason than to dance with others and learn something. (25 year old Tango student. Female)

Participants attending ballet classes were most likely to mention their bodies. They mentioned the importance of ballet for their ‘posture’ and one mentioned its benefit for a ‘flat tummy’ and ‘toned calves.’

Another way in which the physicality of dance was thematised was that dance classes were spoken of as being related to and compatible with sport – ‘it helps you with your sport as well’ (14 year old Greek dancer. Male) or were compared favourably with sport in terms of being non-competitive:

I don’t like competitive sport, and I don’t really like solo sport – just going to the gym is a bit lonely and isolating. So it’s a nice combination of something that’s not competitive but still physical activity. (25 year old Tango student. Female)

5. Dance class participation can involve experiences of self, body and world that lie outside the everyday

While participants, as already discussed, tended not to talk in terms of ‘the body’ or of body parts, they frequently mentioned ‘energy’ and its increase or ‘release’ and the feelings associated with this increase or release, such as ‘happiness’, ‘joy’ (22 year old hip hop student). One Greek dancer said,

I can just come here and let it all out... it makes me feel like I am in a different place or it’s like a separate world for me, sort of. (15 year old. Female)

By contrast, for one participant, ballet was more demanding and involved hard mental work:

[I]t’s just so much thinking and understanding and you have to think of everything that you’re doing and, like, pull it apart, (17 year old. Female)

while the student of belly dancing noted that,

before you start the class you don’t realise that you have internal stomach muscles that you have to have control over...so I think it means you are aware of your body, and part of your body.

But she also said that,

...what it teaches me is to turn my mind off because sometimes when I'm mentally trying really hard to concentrate on every single move is when I stuff up, and when I just turn my mind off and my body just gets it, so it teaches you to let go..

Discussion

This study has shown that participation in community dance classes can enhance respect for physical activity and improve confidence with respect both to physical activity and social relationships. It is also associated with increased respect between age groups and a greater sense of community solidarity, as well as contributing meaning to other aspects of personal and social experience.

Recreational dance classes offer an accessible physical activity opportunity in the community that is inherently intersubjective and relational. Friendships are formed or maintained and extended through dance class participation; relatives often share the pride or interest of the young dancers; and intimacy is 'rehearsed' in a semi-public, structured and playful situation. In addition, the older teacher can be a significant figure for the young dance class participant. That this respect is felt in a physical activity setting is noteworthy since in most other contexts – including in professional 'art' dance settings - physical prowess is associated almost exclusively with youth.

Among our participants dancing was not perceived as strictly physical or in terms of an objectifiable or biomechanical body that is in need of additional discipline or management. Participants did not 'objectify' themselves or their bodies and hardly ever used a language of 'the body' per se. In other words, dance classes did not appear to be a source of strictly physical knowledge or physical experiences 'that can be brandished' but, rather, these remained part of 'something that one is'. (Bourdieu 1990:73) Even though the dance classes that the participants attended demanded a certain reflexive distance regarding their bodies and the qualities, features, and moves of the dance style (since the dance was not being learned 'at mother's knee'), nevertheless the reflexivity demonstrated in the language of the participants was not one of 'the body' itself but rather involved reflections upon community, culture and relationships of various kinds. While reasons cited for attending dance classes in the first instance may sometimes have included a perceived need for physical activity either on the part of the participant or her/his family members, the physical *experience* of dancing for participants was embedded in other phenomena and values.

Health promotion strategies in relation to physical activity may benefit significantly from a wider examination of experiences of dance class participation. A conception of physical activity drawn from people's experiences of participation in dance classes may be an important alternative to (medical or scientific) conceptions of the body that are biomechanical, individualistic and positivistic and that misunderstand the very need that people have to 'live' their bodies rather than to address them as objects of yet another level of (self-)management. Other researchers have observed resistance to programmes that emphasize physical activity. For example, Connor (2000) has noted that folk dance is appealing to older citizens precisely because it is not seen in the first instance as physical activity – but is instead 'social' or for 'relaxation'. Exercise programs based solely on physiological benefits often fail to motivate people to activity and they may make comments such as: 'I've exercised enough in my life' or 'I'm too old now', or they may see no relevance in improving their range of movement, stamina, or flexibility. Similarly young people are often unlikely to heed exhortations to 'keep fit' or to exercise more.

The study suffers from several limitations. The field of community dance is very extensive and covers a wide range of cultures and dance styles. The small sample studied is not claimed to be representative in either a demographic or statistical sense and the small numbers mean that it is not possible to say whether thematic saturation was reached and if there might be other themes that have not yet been identified. It would clearly be of interest to extend this study to include participants from a larger number of cultures, age groups and dance styles. In addition, because no comparison has been undertaken between those who do and do not participate in dance classes it is possible that some of the features identified reflect the nature of the people who undertake dance classes rather the consequences of doing so. To address this issue further study would be required in the form of an extended qualitative analysis of both dance participants and non-participants and a quantitative survey of attitudes and experiences relating to the issues raised here between matched population samples.

Responses to dance class participation suggest a need to recognise that for individuals there are indeed bodily energies that need to be used, that these have cultural significance, and that the social aspect of 'the physical' is paramount. This study did not enable us to draw conclusions regarding the health benefits of dance class participation. However, our findings suggest that in terms of health promotion strategies there may be a need to rethink on what grounds physical activity may be made attractive to the community.

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