Yale College
Education Studies Program

Learning Dance: Reflections on the Relationship Between Intensive Dance Training and General Education for Pre-Professional Dance Students

NORA FAVERZANI

Yale College, New Haven Connecticut

Abstract:

This study investigates how different combinations of general education and intensive dance training impact students' perception of their education, career, dancing, and self. Through interviews with dancers who concurrently pursued an academic education, I compare their perceptions of general education and dance education. I investigate their self-reported engagement in general education, ability to succeed in class, social belonging, and self-drawn connections between their two types of education. The study includes former pre-professional dance students from many genres of dance who attended one of two primary categories of general education: traditional school (public or private) and performing arts school. I interviewed six dancers from diverse backgrounds about their experiences. I use these interviews as evidence to explore the relationship between these two educational experiences. Additionally, my research compares the experiences of dancers whose dance training and general education were conducted in entirely separate environments, to the experiences of dancers whose dance training and general educational were interwoven. The study also examines the complicated nature of college and career decisions for this subset of students.

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how different combinations of general education and intensive dance training impact students' perception of their education, career, dancing, and self. Through interviews with dancers who concurrently pursued an academic education, I compare their perceptions of general education and dance education. I investigate their self-reported engagement in general education, ability to succeed in class, social belonging, and self-drawn connections between their two types of education. The study includes former pre-professional dance students from many genres of dance who attended one of two primary categories of general education: traditional school (public or private) and performing arts school. I interviewed six dancers from diverse backgrounds about their experiences. I use these interviews as evidence to explore the relationship between these two educational experiences. Additionally, my research compares the experiences of dancers whose dance training and general education were conducted in entirely separate environments, to the experiences of dancers whose dance training and general educational were interwoven. The study also examines the complicated nature of college and career decisions for this subset of students.

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INTRODUCTION

      Growing up, I danced every day. On weekdays after school, I would go to the studio for at least three hours to train in jazz, contemporary, hip-hop, ballet, and technique. I would often eat dinner and do my homework at the studio. I spent every day staring at myself in the mirror and nit-picking the moves. On performance weekends, I would travel anywhere from 2-10 hours to compete and audition. On non-performance weekends, I learned and rehearsed group dances, solos, and duos in preparation for the next competition. I rarely had a day off from dance. In many ways, dance was my "second school."

      My inspiration for this project comes from the complicated relationship between dance and academics that I experienced in my own life. In some ways, dance has aided and shaped my academic experience for the better, such as helping me visualize motion in physics, or remember signs for ASL. However, my rigorous dance training also often posed challenges for my academic success—taking me out of school for many days a year, pulling my focus from schoolwork, and requiring all my physical and mental energy every evening during typical homework hours. Though it is true that any rigorous athletic pursuit demands time and energy, I observed the relationship between my general education and my dance career to be more complicated than the relationship between school and extracurriculars for my peers in more "traditional" sports. Dance and school were constantly intertwined in a complex way. Over the years, many of my peers who were similarly trying to pursue academics and dance simultaneously were forced to choose one when the balance became unsustainable. When faced with the same decision in my junior year of high school, I chose academics.

      Famous ballet dancer Miko Fogarty made this decision on the world stage. After winning the Gold Medal at the Moscow International Ballet Competition and being featured in the award-

winning ballet documentary "First Position," Miko began her professional career with the

Birmingham Royal Ballet in England at the age of 17. Just months later, she made the difficult

decision to quit professional ballet and pursue a career in science and medicine. This new path

was both inspired by dance and its use of the body and aided by the "wisdom, focus, and

discipline" dancing gave her.[1] In her TEDx talk, she speaks about how her passion, skills, and

hours of laborious training help her in her academic life. This educational overlap is important to

understanding how dance benefits young people both inside and outside of their field as they

navigate critical career decisions.

My capstone investigates the way pre-professional dance students perceive the

interactions between their two spheres of learning and illuminates some general themes. Pre-

professional dancers train up to 30 hours per week,[2] which is about the same as the average

weekly hours spent in school for a student in the U.S..[3] Given the rigor of this commitment,

dance training impacts every aspect of a dancer's life. As a result, general education and dance

training in combination dominate these students' day-to-day experience.

Dance is one of the most physically demanding careers in the world, and professional

dancers typically retire in their mid-thirties.[4] As a result, dancers must be approaching their peak

performance by high school. Most dancers, therefore, have a kind of "second life" after

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[1] *A Ballerina's Second Act | Miko Fogarty | TEDxBerkeley*, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Q-KcrLGnco.

[2] "Inside the High-Drama World of Youth Competition Dance - The New York Times," accessed October 31, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/21/magazine/inside-the-high-drama-world-of-youth-competition-dance.html.

[3] "State Education Practices (SEP)," (National Center for Education Statistics), accessed October 31, 2022, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/tab5_14.asp.

[4] Roncaglia, Irina. "Retirement as a Career Transition in Ballet Dancers," *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance* 6, no. 3 (November 29, 2006): 181–93. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10775-006-9106-0.

retirement.[5] This second life, or second career, often remains in the dance world, with many former professional dancers becoming choreographers, dance teachers, or company directors.

However, some dancers, like Fogarty, shift gears into a completely new industry. Precious Adams, a former soloist for the English National Ballet, recently finished her first year of a degree in computer science. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Adams stated that her academic pursuits have made her sharper in dance rehearsals and she appreciates feeling prepared for a future career outside of ballet.[6] As Adams' experience demonstrates, academic and dance-related choices in middle school, high school, and beyond can have significant effects on dancers' careers long-term.

Dance continues to grow as a topic in pop culture. With series like *Dance Moms*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, and *Dancing with the Stars,* pre-professional and professional dance found a spotlight in American reality television. Now with the popularity of dances on TikTok, Instagram, and other social media platforms, dance remains popular. A 2011 study of U.S. adolescents found dance to be a prevalent form of physical activity, especially amongst girls, for whom it ranked among the top three most reported activities[7]. That said, a relatively small subset of these adolescent dancers go on to pursue rigorous pre-professional training into adulthood. Investigating this subset of dancers, however, allows us to explore the relationship between dance training and academic success—a relationship that warrants further investigation from researchers in the field of education.

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[5] Muzaffar, Maroosha, "'A Dancer Dies Twice': The Unique, Sad Challenge of Retiring From Ballet," The Atlantic, March 7, 2014, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainm

[6] "Precious Adams on Balancing Ballet and Computer Science: 'You Don't Want to Be 45 with Zero Credentials' | Ballet | The Guardian," accessed December 13, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2022/nov/08/precious-adams-on-balancing-ballet-and-computer-science-you-dont-want-to-be-45-with-zero-credentials.

[7] Jennifer R. O'Neill, Russell R. Pate, and Angela D. Liese, "Descriptive Epidemiology of Dance Participation in Adolescents," *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 82, no. 3 (September 2011): 373–80, https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2011.10599769.

With this project, I sought to help high school-aged, pre-professional dancers reflect on how their general education is meaningfully supported by their dance training, allowing them to continue to thrive in dance and/or academics after high school. This capstone research helps create a qualitative understanding of the dance/school relationship, which may lead to more collaboration and assistive resources for teachers working with pre-professional dancers. My project considers how different combinations of general education and intensive dance training impact students' perception of their education, career, dancing, and self. In short, I investigate how these young dancers think about and make decisions regarding their dance training and general education.

BACKGROUND

Defining Dance

Because of their similar athletic nature and the abundance of research on sports training for adolescents, this capstone draws some parallels to intensive sports training. However, dance, though athletic and physical, is an art form with training entirely distinct from that of a conventional sport. The approaches to practicing, teaching, and learning dance are often different from sports, and research has shown that the motivation for dancing and participating in sports are sometimes different.[8] Thus, it is necessary to define dance and show its unique artistic nature, which cannot be grouped entirely with sports. This paper defines dance as an art form that uses movement as its medium. This definition remains intentionally broad to capture the vast span of dance as a concept.[9] In this paper, dance training will be considered any combination of

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[8] Anne Ingram, "Dance and Sport," *International Review of Sport Sociology* 13, no. 1 (March 1, 1978): 85–97, https://doi.org/10.1177/101269027801300107.

[9] "Do You Wanna Dance?," accessed December 5, 2022, https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/media-and-interactives/media/dance/do-you-wanna-dance/.; Scott, Gregory, "Banes

exercises or movements taught in a class or self-study setting that correlates to improvement in a known genre of dance, improvisation abilities, performance quality, or choreography. The definition of "intensive" or "pre-professional" training as used in this capstone is outlined below in the methodology section.

In the U.S., it is common for professional dancers to begin dancing at around six years old.[10] In an interview with *Backstage* magazine, a studio owner and dance teacher for a Los Angeles-based intensive dance studio emphasized that seven or eight years old is "not too late" for a dancer to begin training.[11] Even though professional dancers can start training at any age, this statement is a testament to the culture of intensity from an early age surrounding dance training in the U.S. for those potentially seeking a pre-professional or professional track. For example, ballet dancers are expected to be of or near professional caliber by the age of 16.[12] For any child, the six to ten-year-old age range is a fundamental time for the development of many cognitive and social skills, including problem-solving and expressing oneself through more complex communication.[13] Dance is a mode of creative expression that also requires focus and dedication, so it may influence the development of these skills at this critical age. Though this paper will not look directly at this age category or these skills, it is important to notice the deep and complex relationship between the developing self, including many essential cognitive skills, and dance training for intensive dancers. The dancers in this study, ages 18-25, are at the peak of

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and Carroll on Defining Dance," *Dance Research Journal* 29, no. 1 (ed 1997): 7–22, https://doi.org/10.2307/1478234.

[10] David S. Weiss, Selina Shah, and Raoul J. Burchette, "A Profile of the Demographics and Training Characteristics of Professional Modern Dancers," *Journal of Dance Medicine & Science: Official Publication of the International Association for Dance Medicine & Science* 12, no. 2 (2008): 41–46.

[11] "Dance Training for Children and Teens," March 23, 201. https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/dance-training-children-teens-62408/.

[12] "The Age Equation," Dance Spirit, October 6, 2012, https://dancespirit.com/the-age-equation/.

[13] "Cognitive and Social Skills to Expect From 6 to 8 Years," https://www.apa.org, accessed December 4, 2022, https://www.apa.org/act/resources/fact-sheets/development-10-years.

what is or would be their early career and were able to reflect on all their experiences up until this point.

The pedagogy and methodology involved in teaching and learning dance is a rich scholastic field. Dance, curricular and extracurricular, often uses performance as a metric for evaluation and success. Because dance careers are often performance-based, dance scholars have argued that performance-oriented testing is necessary to prove readiness for a professional career. Performance-based assessments in dance can be public (a show or competition) or private (in-class performance of a dance for a teacher or measuring how quickly one can learn movements in an isolated environment). Performance, while a seemingly extrinsic motivator, has been shown in dance and general education to include both extrinsic and intrinsic motivators.[14] A study found that performance-based assessments facilitate stronger links between dancing and explaining ideas. Learning to explain ideas is a useful classroom skill needed to describe solutions for tasks in most subjects.[15] These studies show some of the beneficial links between training in dance and academic work.

In some cases, mastery-based approaches to dance training have been investigated.[16] Mastery-based approaches may include focusing on achieving skills and mastering the art of specific sets of movements, as opposed to putting the pressure of "success" purely on public performances or performance tests. Studies have shown that students' individual goal orientations are likely to mirror the orientation that their teacher emphasizes and the structure of

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[14] Lazaroff, Elizabeth M, "Performance and Motivation in Dance Education," *Arts Education Policy Review* 103, no. 2 (Nov, 2001): 23-29, https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/performance-motivation-dance-education/docview/210998385/se-2 (accessed December 4, 2022).

[15] Judith B. Alter, "Self-Appraisal and Pedagogical Practice: Performance-Based Assessment Approaches," *Dance Research Journal* 34, no. 2 (ed 2002): 79–95, https://doi.org/10.2307/1478461.

[16] Carey E Andrzejewski, Adrienne M Wilson, and Daniel J Henry, "Considering Motivation, Goals, and Mastery Orientation in Dance Technique," n.d., 15.

goals within a class.[17] Thus, the approach or goal structure a teacher takes in a dance program may shape a dancer's approach and goal structure in their general education. In general education, there is also an abundance of performance-based assessments such as tests, timed essays, and presentations. Thus, the performance-based nature of intensive dance may also be beneficial in accustoming dancer students to these types of assessments and the associated pressures. This specific pairing is valuable, and my interview participants drew a similar connection between self-motivation in school and dance.

Dance and School

This section intends to briefly set up the landscape of schooling and dance. My capstone looks at general education in two overarching buckets: traditional schools (public or private) and performing arts high schools (also public or private). This capstone defines traditional school as any school that follows a typical U.S. schedule (September-May/June), occurring during typical school hours (beginning between 7-9 am and finishing between 2-4 pm), and not including specific arts or other specialized training beyond that of the average U.S. public school.[18] I will include magnet schools, charter schools, and other possible school types on a case-by-case basis if they fit within this definition. I use performing arts versus non-performing arts as my main division because this is where I see the largest and potentially most influential differences for the content of this study. Specifically, I hypothesized that students who attended performing arts schools would have different perspectives on the relationship between their general and dance

[17] E. S. Elliott and C. S. Dweck, "Goals: An Approach to Motivation and Achievement," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54, no. 1 (January 1988): 5–12, https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.54.1.5.

[18] *Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS)*. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Home Page, a part of the U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). Retrieved April 18, 2023, from https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/tables/sass0708_035_s1s.asp

education than dancers who attended traditional schools and danced as an extracurricular activity.

The performing arts curriculum description from Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts states: "the school provides a uniquely balanced educational experience that includes both demanding conservatory-style training and a challenging, comprehensive academic program… Students in the Dance program will study ballet and modern dance; supplementary courses include: dance history, choreography, theatre dance (tap and jazz), career management, and survival skills."[19] In this environment, dance training spills into general academics as dance history and choreography are comparable to other types of specific general education classes, namely history and creative writing. The 2020 California Arts Education Framework uses "anchor standards" across all arts to ensure consistency of creative thinking and cognitive skill development, while also providing several dance-specific standards.[20] Using standards and assessment frameworks that mirror general education may create a setting for learning dance that feels more like a general education classroom setting. Thus, I predicted pre-professional dancers who attended performing arts schools would find more commonalities between their two types of education.

Dance (if included at all) in traditional general education usually fulfills a physical education requirement.[21] In some cases, it may serve as an arts requirement if the school has one. One study showed that students who had dance included in their physical education showed

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[19] SPECIALIZED HIGH SCHOOLS STUDENT HANDBOOK 2012-2013, 8,http://shsatcurriculum.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/201213SHSHandbook.pdf

[20] "Curriculum Frameworks & Instructional Materials." *Curriculum Frameworks & Instructional Materials - Curriculum and Instruction Resources (CA Dept of Education)*, 2020: 109-206, https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/.

[21] Sheryle Bergmann, "Creative Dance in the Education Curriculum: Justifying the Unambiguous," Canadian Journal of Education 20, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 156–65.

higher motivation and physical activity levels than those in the physical education group, who showed better self-concept.[22]

Dance is also less likely than other arts to be present as a course for credit in U.S. high schools. The National Center for Education Statistics High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSLS) data, which showed the availability of arts education nationally, found that 79% of all U.S. schools (public or private) offered any visual art, 74% offered any music course, 46% offered any theater, and 16% offered any dance.[23] In 2009, only 66% of the public schools that offered dance had a district curriculum guide that teachers were expected to follow.[24] This shows that dance, even when included in an academic setting, is not treated with the same curricular value as other subjects in a general education context, and the dance-academic relationship investigated in this capstone remains overlooked.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This capstone emerges from the intersection of the following two bodies of scholarship: (1) research on the benefits and drawbacks of an embedded dance and general education curriculum (ex: performing arts school) vs. separation of dance and general education (ex: extracurricular dance at a private studio and traditional public school) for students interested in dance professions, and (2) the impacts of intense dance training on young adults. This will cover the social, emotional, and academic benefits and harms of intense dance training for young

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[22]Allana Freitas da Rosa et al., "The Practice of Dance as Extracurricular Activity Is Related to Higher Motivation and Physical Activity Level in Students," *Motricidade* 14, no. 2 (2018): 3–10, https://doi.org/10.6063/motricidade.12287.

[23] Kenneth Elpus, "Understanding the Availability of Arts Education in U.S. High Schools" (National Endowment for the Arts, 2010): 40-45, https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/Research-Art-Works-Maryland6.pdf.

[24] Basmat Parsad and Maura Spiegelman, "Arts Education In Public Elementary and Secondary Schools: 1999–2000 and 2009–10," n.d; 44, https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012014rev.pdf

adults. By bringing these two bodies of scholarship into conversation, my capstone seeks to show how intensive pre-professional dance training impacts high school dancers' relationships with their general education.

(1) One study found benefits from engaging in arts-rich educational experiences through multiple identified pedagogical strategies for students who attend part-time theater schools.[25] Researchers have also investigated collaborative partnerships between art schools and general education.[26] They found the relationship to be beneficial, citing arts education as supporting the development of social skills, team-building skills, and life skills. One paper also proposed that emphasizing linguistic connections in dance classes in schools can help achieve language arts standards.[27] A study investigating student engagement with a dance-based general education class at the university level found three culminating themes relating to student experiences of engagement: freedom, transformation, and community. Their data suggests that "experiencing, expressing, relating, and evolving" are also key components of engagement.[28]

It appears from my research that the topic I'll be discussing in this paper—different combinations of general and specialized education and dance— taken over this specific subset of individuals —pre-professional dancers—has yet to be deeply investigated. Therefore, exploring dancers' self-reported engagement in general education at the high school level, ability to

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[25] Laura Holden, "The Benefits of Engaging in an Arts-Rich Education and the Pedagogical Strategies Used to Create These Benefits in Successful Part Time Performing Arts Schools" (Ed.D., England, University of Leeds (United Kingdom)), accessed September 12, 2022, https://www.proquest.com/docview/2189020359?pq-origsite=summon&.

[26] Rhoda Dullea, "Facilitating Dance in General Education through the Arts-School Partnership: A Case Study of Ballet Ireland's Primary School Program," Research in Dance Education 23, no. 3 (July 3, 2022): 373–91, https://doi.org/10.1080/14647893.2022.2041592.

[27] Janet H. Adams, "Dance and Literacy Hand in Hand," Journal of Dance Education 16, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 31–34, https://doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2015.1059941.

[28] Monica Jordan Cameron Frichtel, "Freedom, Transformation, and Community: Student Meanings of Engagement in a Dance-Based General Education Course" (Ph.D., United States -- Pennsylvania, Temple University), accessed December 13, 2022, https://www.proquest.com/docview/1019055681/abstract/AC1C22DD40BE498EPQ/1.

succeed in class, social belonging, and connections between their two types of education would be a fruitful addition to the existing scholarship on the impacts of dance education on young adults. I hope that the questions raised and connections made in this paper will begin to address the gap in the literature on the relationship between dance training and general education.

(2) There is a lot of generalized research about dance as it relates to students' academic performance and overall ability. Specifically, dance has been shown to utilize skills needed for critical thinking and problem-solving.[29] Some research supports a positive impact of dance on academic performance as reported by cumulative GPA, but a negative impact on wellness and self-concept.[30] They do not directly address how negative self-concepts and views of wellness caused by intensive dance training impact dancers' academics in turn. Additionally, research has suggested that hip-hop dance specifically uses some specific cognitive abilities that underlie STEM skills.[31] Overall, the literature points to a positive relationship between dance training and academic skills. This is important for contextualizing the self-reported "ability to succeed in class," but my capstone will not use any quantitative measures of academic success, such as GPA or test scores. Instead, this project focuses on individualized perceptions of success and enables participants to define their success as they see it.

A few studies have reported dancers' typical personality profile to be relatively high on emotionality, strongly achievement-motivated, and exhibiting less favorable self-attitudes. They concluded that the differences noted here from non-dancers are largely a result of self-

[29] Christian Kronsted and Shaun Gallagher, "Dances and Affordances: The Relationship between Dance Training and Conceptual Problem-Solving," The Journal of Aesthetic Education 55, no. 1 (2021): 35–55.

[30] Cindy A. Soto, "Academic Achievement, Self-Concept, and Dance in 8 to 12 Year Olds" (M.A., United States -- California, California State University, Fullerton), accessed September 12, 2022, https://www.proquest.com/docview/304779482/abstract/2E85EB5DF7AF4259PQ/1.

[31] Justin W. Bonny, Jenna C. Lindberg, and Marc C. Pacampara, "Hip Hop Dance Experience Linked to Sociocognitive Ability," PLoS ONE 12, no. 2 (February 1, 2017): e0169947, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0169947.

selection.[32] These qualities, however, may also have a relationship to learning in an academic classroom which has yet to be explored concurrently to dance. One notable study from 2007 reflected on the engagement or disengagement with dance of 700 young people. They found that students who find dance engaging hold a personal interest or emotional connection to the dance activities, and have a desire for challenge and an appreciation for autonomy in setting their standards and assessing their achievements.[33]

One study interviewed skilled, serious dance students between the ages of 16 and 18, and through thematic analysis of these interviews found that the students' identities were heavily intertwined with dance. At the same time, they perceived their current and future place in the "dance world" as being on the outskirts or bottom of a ladder of talent. This research opens an interesting dialogue about how emerging dancers perceive themselves and dance. They mention, but do not significantly address, the relationship between dance training and general education that I will discuss in this paper, specifically calling out the conflict that some dancers experience between a dance career and future education.[34]

The reasoning for this conflict is not discussed in the existing literature. I propose dancers feel they must choose between dance and academics for their time, energy, and mental and physical resource. From my interviews, this was confirmed in combination with a lack of mutual respect for the hard work put into each respective discipline from authority figures in the other. My project investigates this conflict.

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[32] Frank C. Bakker, "Development of Personality in Dancers: A Longitudinal Study," Personality and Individual Differences 12, no. 7 (January 1, 1991): 671–81, https://doi.org/10.1016/0191-8869(91)90222-W.

[33] Karen E. Bond and Susan W. Stinson, "'It's Work, Work, Work, Work': Young People's Experiences of Effort and Engagement in Dance," Research in Dance Education 8, no. 2 (December 2007): 155–83.

[34] Susan W Stinson, Donald Blumenfeld-Jones, and Jan Van Dyke, "AN INTERPRETIVE STUDY OF MEANING IN DANCE: VOICES OF YOUNG WOMEN DANCE STUDENTS," n.d., 11.

In response and in addition to the work above, one researcher synthesized the research on motivations and identity relationships of young adult, training dancers up until 1993. This cumulative work largely supports the ideas of dancers' perceptions as described above.[35] Additionally, a study of collegiate dance students across a variety of college types and programs—including 2-year degrees, 4-year degrees, and arts institutions—found that a large portion of dancers dance because of a deep love of the art form, or because of its function as a means of self-expression. However, only 30% of the participants listed a potential professional career in dance as a future goal.[36] This leaves room to continue investigating how these trained dancers think about and ultimately decide on different future aspirations, and how the time, energy, passion, and skills that these dancers bring to their craft may translate to other parts of their lives.

Across studies, dance students attributed the development of essential character traits to their dance training. These attributes include discipline, perseverance, responsibility, the ability to accomplish hard work, maturity, and a more goal-oriented mindset than their non-dancer peers.[37] However, questions remain as to how the dancers feel these qualities affect them outside of dance, and specifically in their general education. The scholarship in this field also briefly reports that both dance teachers and dance settings—private studios, conservatories, public high schools, and universities—influence dancers' perceptions of their dance experience.[38] However,

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[35] Judith B. Alter, "Why Dance Students Pursue Dance: Studies of Dance Students from 1953 to 1993," Dance Research Journal 29, no. 2 (ed 1997): 70–89, https://doi.org/10.2307/1478735.

[36] Alter, "Why Dance Students Pursue Dance", 80.

[37] Alter, "Why Dance Students Pursue Dance"; Judith B. Alter, "Self-Appraisal and Pedagogical Practice: Performance-Based Assessment Approaches," Dance Research Journal 34, no. 2 (ed 2002): 79–95, https://doi.org/10.2307/1478461; Aniko Maraz et al., "Why Do You Dance? Development of the Dance Motivation Inventory (DMI).," PloS One 10, no. 3 (2015):e0122866, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0122866; Andrzejewski, Wilson, Henry, "Considering Motivation, Goals, and Mastery Orientation," n.d., 15.

[38] Ibid

this distinction is primarily analyzed in the context of the dancers' sense of community or competition with their peers. Thus, the work of this capstone continues to expand the literature by investigating this acknowledged difference with a new focus: the relationship between dance and academic pursuits.

Dance also provides community. Therefore, peer relationships may have significant impacts on dancers' engagement and sense of social belonging in these spaces. A study that investigated the role of peers on adolescents' continuation of talent development in sports and the arts found that talented adolescents' relationships with their peers in their sport serve an important motivational function. Specifically, the adolescents were shown to be seeking enjoyable social engagement and perceived social support, which influenced their continued commitment to their talent activity. Notably, adolescents who were involved in activities not offered at their school were more likely to feel that they had to make choices between continuing their talent involvement and having a satisfying social life than those who could pursue their talent in a school-sponsored activity.[39] My capstone explores this conflict and adds to the literature by focusing specifically on dance, considering the dynamics between in-school and out-of-school engagement in an activity, and examining the resulting engagement in general education.

SCOPE OF RESEARCH & RESEARCH QUESTION

How does intensive dance training, and the way it is integrated with general education, impact young adult dancers' views of their high school general education?

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[39] Helen Patrick et al., "Adolescents' Commitment to Developing Talent: The Role of Peers in Continuing Motivation for Sports and the Arts," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 28, no. 6 (December 1999): 749-750, https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021643718575.

This study includes the self-reported perception of engagement, ability to succeed in class, sense of community or social belonging, and any connections between their two types of education. The dancers in the study were asked to reflect on this relationship as it existed during their time in high school, and how this relationship led them to their current career or educational path. This project is limited to United States-based dancers and schools. This project has been informed by my own lived experiences, conversations with peers, and an examination of the existing literature on this topic.

I acknowledge that there are many socioeconomic barriers to these decisions and that choices may be more limited for individuals with fewer resources. I will address this disparity in this capstone by posing the following questions to interviewees: "Did you face any barriers to pursuing the type of dance or general academic education you wanted? If so, how did they shape your experience?" These questions provide more context to support the themes from other interview questions.

METHODOLOGY

I employed an interview-based format to conduct qualitative research. The target population was college-age adults (18-25) who trained pre-professionally for dance during high school. The participants attended performing arts school or public/private traditional school and are now either in college, pursuing dance professionally, or potentially both. 60-minute interviews with the participants took place between January and April 2023.

Participants (college-aged dancers) were identified by snowball sampling methods from personal contacts and through the dance community at Yale. I discussed with these contacts whether they were comfortable providing me with potential participants directly, or if they would

rather ask potential participants first if they would like to be contacted. Then, I reached out to the potential participants in the manner requested by the original contacts and explained how I came to obtain their contact information. I explained my role as a student researching for my education studies capstone project and asked if they wanted to participate. Once a participant agreed to be involved, we had a 60-minute interview over Zoom. At the beginning of the interview, I asked each participant for permission to record the meeting. I then transcribed the interview from the audio recording. I also reiterated that every effort will be made to keep their identities confidential and that they are free to refuse participation at any time. I recorded the interviews to the Zoom cloud and then downloaded the audio recordings and transcripts to my computer. Afterward, I deleted the video recording, audio recording, and audio transcript from the Zoom cloud. I kept the transcripts and recordings in a password-protected folder that only my advisors and I were able to access. All quotes used in this paper come directly from these interview transcripts. In a few cases, I removed some filler words such as "um" or "like" for reader clarity, but all are otherwise entirely unedited. Each dancer was assigned a pseudonym to protect their anonymity.

My study takes a retrospective approach, as it asks these young people to look back on their dance program and consider how their dancing shaped their relationship with high school general education. Thus, I ensured that the participants did attend dance programs that were pre-professional during high school. For purposes of this study, I qualified programs as pre-professional if they: have trained, professional instructors, include more than 12 hours of training per week, and have opportunities for professional development and/or professional performances. These metrics relate to aspects of the professional dance industry, prove intensity, and are not genre limited.

I interviewed student dancers in a diverse range of styles because different training styles (for example: ballet in contrast to hip hop) may have different effects. Interviewing dancers from a variety of dance genres was essential to discover if any common threads extend throughout all intensive dance training and are not limited to just one program or style. My research specifically excludes dancers who primarily train in musical theater, due to the genre's heavy overlap with singing and other types of performance outside of dance. All of my interviewees identified as female; I was not able to speak to any male dancers. An estimated 73% of all dancers in the United States are women.[40] This is primarily a result of societal norms and social perceptions of dance.[41] It follows that pre-professional dance programs are also predominantly female. I will continue to acknowledge, but not cover in detail, the gender majority in these programs in my capstone. It was additionally important to ensure that these individuals span three post-high school outcomes: higher education in a non-dance major or program; higher education in a dance program or dance major; and industry dance careers. I predicted that there would be trends amongst those in each of these respective college/career areas and felt that having all three was necessary to try to draw any broad connections or themes. Because each experience is unique and I interviewed a small number of people, my connections and conclusions will not be generalizable results but rather generate themes and questions for further study. Interview questions can be found in the appendix.

DISCUSSION

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[40] "Dancer Demographics and Statistics [2022]: Number Of Dancers In The US," January 29, 2021, https://www.zippia.com/dancer-jobs/demographics/.

[41] Doug Risner, "Bullying Victimization and Social Support of Adolescent Male Dance Students: An Analysis of Findings," *Research in Dance Education* 15, no. 2 (May 4, 2014): 179–201, https://doi.org/10.1080/14647893.2014.891847.

This section of the paper presents the results of exploratory research on the relationship between general education and intensive dance training, conducted in the form of 6 dancer interviews. As prefaced in earlier sections of this paper, the interview questions were designed to examine an under-researched area, while also being grounded in my own experiences as a pre-professional dancer. I will not consider my experience as a piece of the research; it does, however, inform the analysis below and will be acknowledged as such throughout.

The findings are broken down into three sections. The first provides background on the dancers' schooling and dance training, including the trajectory and intensity of their dance training. The second discusses the described relationship between the two pieces of the dancers' lives. It also illustrates the reported factors which contribute to their engagement, social connectedness, and perceived ability to succeed in both areas. The final section focuses on the dancers' college and career decisions.

Dancer Background

"I had that very first [dance] class, and immediately it was like, this girl needs to dance. They pushed me into it a little bit, but I remember always loving it."

Table I below shows simple self-reported information about the dancers interviewed. To preserve the anonymity of participants, pseudonyms are used to refer to the dancers interviewed.

Table I:

Dancer Pseudonym	Type of High School	Type of Dance	Age began dancing; Age when became pre-professional	Approx. hours/week at peak training	Hometown Location
Harper	Private	Ballet	2; 11	20-30	California

Camila	Public	Most Styles: Jazz, Hip Hop, Contemporary, etc. (Competition Track)	3; 13	16 – 28 (depending on the week)	Florida
Sofia	Private, Catholic	Ballet	3; 12	22	Connecticut
Olivia	Charter Performing Arts	Most Styles: Jazz, Contemporary, etc. (Commercial/Competition)	2; 8	25	California
Jessica	(9-10 grades) Charter, Performing Arts; (11-12 grades) Online	Commercial; Then, Ballet	3; 10	18; 34	California
Morgan	Public	Most Styles: Jazz, Contemporary, etc. (Competition/Dance Team)	2; 13	15	Colorado

As shown in Table I, three of the six dancers interviewed studied classical ballet. The other three trained in most styles of competitive dance, a kind of dance in which participants showcase their dance skills in various permitted styles before a panel of judges. In addition, participants were spread out across the United States, with roughly half coming from California, and the remaining participants coming from Colorado, Connecticut, and Florida. Despite some differences in training style and geographic location, this table illuminates commonalities across all the dancer experiences. All the dancers were within a reasonable driving distance of a metropolitan center, and most noted traveling to these centers for training or special dance events. All the dancers began dancing at a young age and switched to more rigorous training around their pre-teen years. From the interviews, it appeared that for all the dancers, the intensity

of training continued to grow from their pre-teen commitments through the end of high school. Each of the dance programs met my previously stated definition of "pre-professional", including a minimum of 12 hours per week, which is vastly exceeded by all the participants. This is a testament to the significance of dance in these young adults' lives, as well as the need for this research.

Of the six participants, three had a typical school day beginning between 7-8 am and ending between 2-3:30 pm. One of the two participants who attended private school, Harper, had an adjusted high school schedule to better suit her dance training. In Harper's high school years, she left school every day two periods early to be at her dance studio promptly at 2:30 pm. The missed class time was made up by taking a class during other students' free period and her "zero" period. The zero period began before school started every morning at 6:45 am and was often taught 1:1 or with a few other students. Harper described, "sometimes people would do a zero period to accommodate an extra class. Or there was one other girl who was doing what I did, because she went to the Olympics, for I think horseback riding. So, it wasn't completely unprecedented, but it was challenging." She described loving school and noted her appreciation for the relationship that the zero period enabled her to foster with her teachers. Despite this schedule adjustment, Harper described her school experience as standard, traditional, rigorous, and largely self-motivated. Self-motivation, in fact, came up in all six interviews and will resurface for further analysis in the next section.

Meanwhile, for the two participants who attended performing arts school, a typical day consisted of a traditional 8:00 am to 1:30 pm schedule, followed by a two-and-a-half-hour block of their dance conservatory. Additional dance hours would be added for rehearsals when performances were upcoming. Both dancers also danced outside of school in addition to the

dance opportunities provided by the performing arts school. Oliva remained at a competitive studio where she trained during the week and competed on weekends. Jessica, on the other hand, used the performing arts school as her primary training and supplemented on weekends and evenings with open classes. Notably, the performing arts school did not have regular sports, so many of the electives, including PE classes, were dance classes.

I had originally intended to exclude online schooling from this study because of its inconsistent nature and to create a manageable scope for this study. However, one interviewee, Jessica, attended two years of performing arts high school, followed by two years of online school while she danced in a pre-professional apprenticeship program. This experience shaped her overall reflections and provided an interesting contrast to many of the other experiences presented in this study. I will again note that online school is incredibly variable and will not be analyzed beyond its shaping of Jessica's perceptions of her other methods of schooling and broader college and career decisions. She described her daily routine for her latter two years of high school as: Monday through Friday, 3 dance classes per day with interspersed breaks to complete online school followed by more rehearsals in the evenings and on weekends. She said, "It was a pretty rigorous program. Your life revolves around dance for sure." This study's small sample still shows the variety of school and dance experiences that exist. The day-to-day experiences of these student dancers are important context to analyze the further reflections of participants. The differences in the everyday experiences of public, private, and performing arts school dancers were important decision-making factors for dancers and their families relating to training and career aspirations.

Two Worlds Colliding

"Dance is so mental, obviously it's physical, but it is so much for your brain, remembering choreography, especially going through puberty, you don't even know where your arms are one day to the next, your body's so discombobulated and the mental energy it takes to zone in so hard with yourself that you're coordinating your movements and being completely in tune... It always felt to me like I was doing mental work that when I went to school, I felt the benefits of that."

Looking at dance and academics at this pivotal age showcases connections between the mind and body, as well as between an individual and their formative communities. All six women described themselves as strong in their academics and generally motivated in school. Most of the respondents attributed differences in their two spheres, dance and academics, to the ways those spheres interact with society at large, as opposed to their personal relationship to each respective discipline being different. Most reported feeling similarly about learning in both dance and academic contexts. Some common themes which seemed to impact the relationship between the interviewee and these two pieces of their lives were: teachers, challenge level, passion, and structure. Based on my own experiences with my "dance friends" and "school friends" and the different ways I interacted with each community during my high school years, I anticipated social relationships with peers and overall culture to be an important point of comparison. In my interviews, this was proven true, as this topic often took up a large portion of respondents' answers. The analysis below is divided into three primary themes: perceived engagement and ability to succeed, dance and academic interactions and relationships, and social environment and social belonging.

Engagement and Ability to Succeed

All the dancers noted skills from dance that they felt aided them in school. The dancers' perceptions of engagement and their ability to succeed across dance and school stemmed largely from internal traits such as determination, focus, and the ability to self-motivate. Harper described school and ballet as "complementary." She explained, "I feel like I can really attribute

the work ethic that made me academically successful to directly being cultivated in dance. That's what's prioritized, almost to a detrimental degree, putting this goal that you have above literally anything and everything else… and that is a skill in the classroom." This sentiment is consistent with existing literature that finds that the skills fostered in dance and the mindset necessary for training at this intensive level prepare students to excel in some aspects of the classroom.[42]

Like Harper, Jessica also stated that the grit and work ethic she developed in her dance training was essential for achieving her academic goals. When describing balancing her AP classes with 15+ hours of dance training, Jesica said, "I just piled them both on, and at that point in my life, I was okay with being overworked because I just assumed that that was how you became successful."

Morgan also described her success in school, and overall drive to do well, as intrinsic. She noted many ways in which her mindset remained the same in dance and school. Specifically, she remembers always wanting to dance at the front of the class, because she knew she would receive the most feedback there. She likened this to her approach to school and how she was completely academically focused during classes. This demonstrates how traits needed for success in dance—like focus and drive—benefit student dancers like Morgan when applied to their school work. Despite this, she said she didn't consider herself as having succeeded in dance in high school. Morgan, like many other dancers, defines success as being the best or most talented in their space:

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[42] Cindy A. Soto, "Academic Achievement, Self-Concept, and Dance in 8 to 12 Year Olds" (M.A., United States -- California, California State University, Fullerton), accessed September 12, 2022, https://www.proquest.com/docview/304779482/abstract/2E85EB5DF7AF4259PQ/1.; Alter, "Why Dance Students Pursue Dance"; Judith B. Alter, "Self-Appraisal and Pedagogical Practice: Performance-Based Assessment Approaches," *Dance Research Journal* 34, no. 2 (ed 2002): 79–95, https://doi.org/10.2307/1478461; Aniko Maraz et al., "Why Do You Dance? Development of the Dance Motivation Inventory (DMI).," *PloS One* 10, no. 3 (2015):e0122866, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0122866; Andrzejewski, Wilson, Henry, "Considering Motivation, Goals, and Mastery Orientation," n.d., 15.

There were always people that were better than me, that got more attention than me, and that were favored more than me, etc. But what I would do is I would dance next to them. I would push myself so that we were almost grouped together.

This quote speaks to the individualized and competitive nature of pre-professional dance. Many of the dancers in this study reference having solo dances in which they competed against not only other dancers from their area, but also their teammates. This head-to-head nature impacted their overall mindset on success, which my interviewees described as bleeding into their academic mindset in school.

A more intertwined relationship between dance and school, such as at a performing arts school, can produce different feelings toward success. Oliva reflected on her in-school versus out-of-school dance.

At a competitive studio, it's very much about trying to become the best of the best, trying to be very trick oriented, trying to impress an audience and win first place. Whereas [performing arts school] was conservatory style, it's more an emphasis on personal growth. You're not trying to be the most flexible or do the most turns, but being able to show up in a ballet, or have hip hop, really any class and be able to hold your ground.

This is a particularly interesting point of comparison because Olivia's out-of-school ideas of dance success align with Morgan's, but her in-school ideas show a different method. Olivia says she felt more comfortable trying new things in her curricular dance program, whereas she spent nearly all of her time at her studio outside of school perfecting her pre-existing skills. This difference in training approach and mindset inherently reinforces different ideas of achievement. As a result, all of the dancers' perceptions of success in dance as articulated in their interviews directly reflect the idea of success that was promoted or endorsed by their dance environment. These varied definitions of success in dance contrast with a more universal idea of success in school, largely defined by good grades. That said, my interviewees articulated a common thread

tying together these different perceptions of success: a goal-oriented mindset, determination, grit, and motivation. My interviewees all highlighted these traits as necessary for success in dance, but also found that these traits translated to their academic lives in beneficial ways.

Dance & Academic Interactions

"I got respect for dance at school, and the reverse is not true."

Participants ranged from describing their academic and dance lives as completely separate to viewing the two as interwoven. Much of the existing literature on dance in schools point to a distinct lack of dance in school settings, both as an art and as a sport. This research led me to predict that participants would report that they felt their schools and academic environments undervalued their dance training and experiences. However, some participants' experiences proved to be exactly the opposite. Harper said, "There's always a lot of discourse about dance getting undersold, people think it's not a sport. I never had that experience…I was gone every day at 1 p.m. and still managed to have all my assignments turned in and get A's." Her extended efforts to do well in school, paired with the school's schedule flexibility and recognition of her craft, created a feeling of respect. Fostering this feeling of respect for dance commitments from academic professionals takes communication, collaboration, and recognition from all parties. As stated in the Dancer Background chart above, Harper attended private school. Notably, this academic respect for dance that Harper describes experiencing was not noted by either of the dancers who attended public school. This points to a potential link between private education, including the added resources, socioeconomic status, and individualized attention that often comes with that education, and this relationship of respect for dance.

On the other hand, Harper also said her decision to remain in a traditional school as her pre-professional training ramped up was "in a weird way, stigmatized" by authority figures in her dance life. She further noted that she believed that people in the dance world, including her ballet company's artistic director, took her seriousness about school as a "lack of respect for ballet." She went on:

> I think that there's almost a sense or at least there was in my environment of almost anti-intellectualism in dance, which was really fascinating, because it's such a mental thing. Ballet specifically has such a complicated, nuanced history. There's a history here! You can't be participating in something like this and then not have an appreciation for learning when there's so much nuance to what it is that we're even doing here. But I think that people in the dance world or at least in the dance world that I was in, took it as a sign of your commitment to dance if you were unwilling to cancel every other facet of your life out in favor of dance.

Haper's words support the theme that dance is perceived as in competition with academics, among other things. To cancel all the other pieces of one's life, including academics and social life, for a teenager is a significant sacrifice emotionally and developmentally. Additionally, Harper reflects on dance as something that should be learned and learned about. Further, she implies that learning is a positive thing and that learning outside of dance can be applied to dance and vice versa. This sentiment of a mutually beneficial relationship between academics and dance was held by most dancers interviewed, despite the dancers' reports of academic and dance environments that disregarded one another.

Like Harper's experience with institutional issues and a lack of respect for academics within her ballet company, Morgan found a similar lack of respect for her academic pursuits within her high school's dance team. She felt her peers on the team did not accept her due to her high scholastic focus. Morgan too found that her dance community viewed academic

commitment as taking away from her dance commitment. With her peers, Morgan felt it went beyond a lack of respect, and was a true lack of understanding.

> *Nobody in dance understood how committed I was [to] succeeding in my academics, and so nobody at dance could understand me going home after our 9:30 pm practice and doing more homework or studying for an exam the next day. At school, a lot of people didn't understand what I did with all my 'free time.'*

She recited a conversation with a school friend where she described her typical day: getting home from school, at 3:00 pm; eating dinner, at 3:30 pm; dance, 4:00 pm -9:00 pm; doing homework, until finished; and then finally going to sleep. She remembers her school friend being shocked at this routine. Morgan expressed that she felt she was living in a limbo where she was misunderstood in both spaces, and this hindered her social connections in both spaces as well. Ultimately, Morgan quit her school's dance team in her junior year. Morgan continued to train outside of school at her dance studio. She remembers being approached in her senior year by the captain and being asked to rejoin the team as a positive influence on the academic culture of the team, where many members were academically floundering. While this signaled the beginning of change, it did not wash away the difficulties she faced throughout her high school years. Morgan did not rejoin the team.

One could argue this conflict between dance and academic priorities is remedied by the performing arts school structure. Olivia described feeling a strong connection to her peers at school. She referenced her classmates each having their artistic talent. As a result, she felt that her struggle between academically rigorous classes and her commitment to dance was understood by her peers across the arts, including her best friend in the classical piano program.

Adding on, Jessica generalized to say that artists, including dancers, brought something special to her academic space:

It was also really fun for me to go to school with a bunch of other artists because it definitely did change the energy of the academic classroom. There is a sense of community there knowing that we were all similarly minded in the sense that we were all dedicated to a certain art. Because that dedication definitely requires a certain type of person and a certain type of mindset, and it can be kind of difficult to relate to and understand if you're not an artist, but it was really cool being in a room where that was commonly understood.

Throughout Jessica's interview, examples like this one reveal a sense of peer and institutional support for dance from her performing art school that fostered a positive environment and connection between her worlds. Jessica's experience did not hold for my interviewees who attended school outside performing arts spaces. This finding offers room for further study on the academic and social benefits of creating academic spaces for students with similar interests at the high school age level. Harper, though respected at school for her commitment to dance, emphasized this absence of overall understanding, and the self-advocacy it required to garner this respect in a more traditional school environment. She cited the individuality of dancing and the lack of institutional support as creating a situation such that dancers have "lifelong practice being their own advocates." While this is difficult and can feel like a burden on young dancers, self-advocacy is a skill that may prove advantageous long-term in higher education and career contexts.

The Social Experience

"Even if I didn't open my mouth, I was able to kind of express myself through movement."

Socially, dancers noted many differences between their relationships with their school peers and their dance peers. Some notable reflections included their common interests with dancer peers, the level of vulnerability involved in dancing, and their freedom to be themselves

at dance. Not unlike school and other extracurriculars, dancers noted that their shared time and

experience were key components to their peer relationships at dance. Sofia stated:

> *You obviously get really close to one another just spending multiple hours a week together, bonding over something that's physically and mentally strenuous, because as much as ballet is physical, it's also mental and emotional. So, there's a lot of ups and downs and the triumphs of like getting the role that you wanted, and then the sadness of not getting the role that you wanted, that's all something that you experience with your friends.*

Because dance was their extracurricular and not related to school, some student dancers

found it more difficult to connect with peers at school who did not share an understanding of this

core part of their identity. The dancers also responded with more emotionally driven descriptions

of their connection to peers at dance and the reasons for these deep peer connections. Sofia

attributed this to an "inherent vulnerability" and confidence required from dancers. She

mentioned the ease at which she could put walls up to protect herself in school, something she

felt was impossible at dance. Sofia continued, "being in leotard and tights for four hours a day

and having to do difficult technical things, you kind of have to be fearless… You got to learn

how to be yourself really fast."

Oliva felt like this was true of her dancer peers in performing arts school as well as at her

independent dance studio. Because of the structure of dancing and competing as a team in her

studio training, she felt slightly more belonging in her studio than with her peers at school. Like

Sofia, Olivia emphasized the value of the shared experience of dance as a mechanism for

promoting social bonds saying, "I feel like dancers have an unspoken agreement with each other

of understanding each other, what we go through, and how we see the world."

Jessica felt that some of these bonding factors extended beyond just dancers, to include

all artists and performers more broadly. Like the other interviewees, Jessica expressed that

understanding is crucial for bonding. She felt that having an artistic craft of any kind could serve

as a bridge to create understanding. That said, she still describes dancers as a unique group within the arts.

> *It's definitely different in some ways, being in a room full of dancers versus a room full of every type of visual and performing artist. It was also funny, too. I remember, we never had to deal with the traditional high school archetypes of the jocks and the nerd but there was definitely a sense of that. In terms of like, the different types of personalities that each art tended to have.*

Jessica's example speaks to the uniqueness of dance, even amongst other arts. This understanding of dance as a distinct subgroup within the broader arts community supports the value of the research explored in this capstone which addresses a gap in the existing literature on the relationships between dance and general education. Additionally, it is interesting to observe that socially constructed personalities are assigned—and thus teens are confined by their peers to one part of their identity— across public, private, and performing arts schools.

For Camila, dance was an avenue of expression and safety that she did not have at school. She reflected, "I was trying to figure out my sexuality, which was a lot for me mentally. I kind of went to school, and was like, okay, just get your work done and leave, don't interact with anybody." She remembered being bullied and having poor social relationships. She went on, "I just wanted to get the education and leave so I can go to dance and be happy with myself…[school] felt like a job." Dance, her safe haven, enabled her to express herself more genuinely. Having this space helped her to push through her academic day.

On the other hand, interviewees also expressed that the social environment at their dance studio created a negative space which, in some accounts, diminished the social benefits described above. This environment was set by peers in some cases, but most interviews attributed the culture mostly to the tone set by the teachers. Camila navigated using dance as her form of self-expression within an otherwise harmful dance environment. She said:

The dance teachers that I grew up with, a lot of them were very mentally abusive, to the point where they were telling girls that they needed to lose weight, or they didn't look good doing a certain step. The teacher-to-student relationship was crossed many times. So, I loved going to dance and learning and being educated by people that love to do what I want to do and have the tools to help me get to where I want to be, and at the same time, socially, it was great to have friends. But still, it was so hard when teachers were telling you you're bad, you're not going to do well, and this other person is going to outdo you and you're going to be left behind.

Similarly, Morgan used the words "politics, favoritism, and drama" to describe the negative culture present within some of the dance studios she attended. This culture led to her switching studios several times throughout her childhood. She specifically noted the difficulties of being a six-foot-tall, female dancer, and how she was ostracized by dance coaches, dance peers, and school peers. Morgan recalls a dance teacher saying, "I would really love for you to chop off about a foot of your legs, so you'd be the same height as everybody."

This verbal abuse from dance coaches did not ease the difficulty she had in relating to her dance peers. Morgan eventually quit her high school's dance team due to this negative culture and frequent coaching changes. Morgan wanted dance to be separate from her social life, recalling, "I had friends who really only kept dancing because it was a social outlet. They wanted to come to class and just chat with their peers and catch up. But that wasn't me at all." She often wishes dance and school had been more separate, saying having a high school-affiliated dance team significantly complicated the dynamics and made social community increasingly difficult.

The "Traditional" High School Experience

Surprisingly, in discussing the social, academic, and familial factors that intersect within these dancers' training experiences, the idea of a "traditional high school experience" repeatedly surfaced. This is a cultural and societal idea that affected the dancers' perceptions of their

experiences and decisions related to school, dance, college, and career. Morgan recounted her decision to leave her flexible-schedule charter middle school to attend the local public high school. She stated that the "traditional high school experience" was her secondary motivator, the primary motivator being more academic variety. To Morgan, this "traditional" experience included sporting events, student council, and other clubs and events. Morgan's point about social activities, such as attending games and events, did not come up directly in many other interviews.

However, nearly all the other interviewees reflected on their decision to not —at least immediately— pursue online education and connected that choice to the benefits and common experiences of traditional school. Jessica, who left performing arts school to train professionally and complete high school online, reflected on the impact of those final years of her school experience. She said that moving away from home at 15 years old and experiencing her last two years of high school online accelerated her maturity in some ways. However, she said she felt it also "stunted [her] personal and social development in a lot of ways."

Many dancers describe the complicated feelings of a search for, or lack of, balance. From my interviews, it appears that being grounded in something other than dance, such as academics, enabled the dancers to better adjust to the difficult and intense world of professional dance. For instance, Harper—who ultimately turned down a career in professional ballet—reflected on her time training pre-professionally saying, "I feel like going to school every day kept me grounded in reality, that there's a world outside of dance, and you don't have to live and die by this, you can do something else."

The sentiment here is echoed by both Sofia and Jessica, both working professional ballerinas. Sofia said,

I think it's really good to have something else outside of ballet because dance can be so mentally and physically strenuous, it's good to have like a distraction. And not just a distraction, something else that you can find your value and worth in. That you're a person with intellectual ability and not just dancing ability is, it's really good.

Sofia's comments about her experience in traditional school echo the sentiments Harper presented earlier; that focusing solely on dance at high-school age can be emotionally and mentally draining. The interviews illuminated the importance of self-perceptions that are multifaceted, and how finding shared experiences with classmates or experiencing "traditional" school moments can help create that multidimensional sense of self.

Barriers

A high school dancer's ability to choose between dance and academic paths may be limited by barriers including the accessibility of programs, location, and other socioeconomic variables. The primary barrier discussed by my interview participants was economic. Dance can be a very expensive activity, especially given the number of hours spent training each week and the caliber of teachers with whom pre-professional dancers are working. Not to mention summer intensives, weekend travel, choreography fees, clothes, shoes, and equipment. Camila described her mentality toward auditioning for scholarships to try to reduce the financial burden dance posed for her family and create more opportunities for herself:

When you are a child going to this dance convention, you have to work three times harder just to get a scholarship so that when they come back, you can go for free. As a child, I'm 14 or 16 years old, I have to have this mentality, like, Okay, go, survive, fight. So, then you can go back for free.

Dancers in Camila's position are aware of their family's financial situation in a way that perhaps their peers are not. Dance, unlike most sports programs, operates primarily outside of the

public school systems. As such, participation is largely limited to those with financial resources. Camila uses the words "fight" and "survive" to describe her experiences, eliciting a strong emotional reaction and articulating how important it was to Camila that she receive these scholarships. This pressure on pre-professional dancers— that their continued training relies on their performance in one moment— is incredibly daunting. The emotional stakes of being rejected and made to feel not good enough are already incredibly high for young dancers. Dancers without financial resources must shoulder this emotional insecurity as well as the pressure of financial need in auditions.

Camila described her experiences auditioning for scholarships and opportunities at a young age. The setting she describes is commonly referred to as a dance convention: an event in which industry choreographers teach classes to hotel ballrooms full of hundreds of young dancers, all striving to be noticed. The primary benefits of these programs are industry experience, connections to working choreographers, and possible scholarships to continue attending similar programs. Camila continued:

> *Honestly, just put it in a real-world perspective, in case the readers are not dancers, it's like going to a job interview, and you don't know what to expect, you don't know who else is there, it could be a group interview for all you know, but at the same time, you're not an adult, you're still a growing human being…especially if you're younger, and your bones are not stable enough to support yourself on that carpet floor with all this cement and that, one square space of wood in the middle of the room. It's tough, and it's scary. It's intimidating. And it really questions: How much do you want it? And how badly are you going to work to practically outshine everyone else in the room to get to where you want to be?*

This constant pressure throughout high school training years weighs on young dancers. They know they must build their network and create opportunities to have a chance at a successful professional dance career when they turn 18. The mental impacts of these conventions are not fully examined in this paper, but there is an intensity to the audition process for these

young dancers that is unlike other sports and activities. In all of my interviews, the audition experience had a deep impact on the dancers' reflections on dance overall and their feelings associated with their training. A deep dive into Camila's responses reveals how this economic barrier was both a motivator and a source of guilt. The financial sacrifices her family made for her passion continue to drive her to succeed in dance today and pushed her to continue to get a college education.

> *I struggled a bit; we struggled a bit to pay for [dance]. But luckily, the studio that I went to, they were like, Okay, you're just going to pay what you can. ... Usually, the costs cut off when you leave, but we had to continue owing this place money, two years after I left. So, I'm not even dancing anymore, but my mom's still paying the bills. It was really hard economically for my family who couldn't afford much of the resources.*

There was also an information barrier to careers in professional dance. Despite training at a high level, one dancer reported feeling daunted by the ambiguity of the path to success in a dance career. Sofia felt like the path to success in school was "streamlined" and followed a clear trajectory: good grades, to a prestigious college, and then to a good job. However, due to the scarcity of jobs and the competitive nature of the industry, she saw the path to success in a ballet career as much less clear. She notes that she did not attend a ballet "feeder school" and felt that she was figuring it all out as she went along. The availability of mentorship and accurate career guidance for dancers is an unacknowledged barrier. The dancers who attended performing arts school attested to feeling more prepared for careers, but all of the dancers felt unsure about their path in dance and if their training and opportunities would be enough to sustain a career.

The relationship between academics and dance as presented throughout this paper is complicated. In some interviews, it seemed as though dancers and their families saw dance and school as a mutually-exclusive tradeoff in which they must choose where to put their time,

energy, and money. Given the financial component and the young ages of the dancers, parents seemed to be the ultimate drivers of these decisions. Jessica recounted her parent's acceptance of her performing arts school because it was also academically rigorous. She described her parents mandating a balance for her, saying she would stop dancing at a studio if she went to performing arts school. She said, "I remember at the time, thinking, am I dancing enough compared to my peers and am I training hard enough." This insecurity was difficult to overcome. As she continued to reflect, Jessica stated that her balance of academics and dancing was a direct reflection of the priorities of her parents.

Similarly, Morgan said, "There was a student whose mom had no issue taking her out of school a day a week just to have a whole day's worth of privates. My parents were just never willing to do that. That wasn't a barrier necessarily, but of course, that person has more individualized time and then is going to progress faster than the rest of us." Parental involvement was a key component throughout my interviews. Young dancers are largely limited to the decision for which they have parental or familial support. This adds another layer of complexity to the decisions made for high school-aged dancers and how autonomous they are truly able to be.

Other Reflections

When asked if she would change the way her dance and academic world were intertwined, Camila replied "I want to say yes, but I'm going to say no, because the school system is very structured." She cited the institutional element of schooling to be the limiting factor in the relationship between school and dance, because of the set curricular standards of what one must learn to complete high school. Now, having focused on her favorite academic

subject—science—in college, she's proud that she was able to balance her dance and academic pursuits throughout her life saying, "So now that I was able to actually have them come together, it really helps me put things into perspective, honestly. And I think it made me enjoy school and dancing more because it made me a little bit more aware of the body and how it works." In retrospect, she feels it was best that these two pieces of her life remained separate during her high school years. Based on my research, I did not anticipate this conclusion. From the literature, it seemed a reasonable hypothesis that more interconnectedness would prove to generate better engagement and enjoyment. However, Camila's quote, and this study overall, demonstrate the complexity of how each individual dancer defined their relationships and decisions about dance and school.

When speaking about her two years of online school, Jessica said she "fell out of love for learning." She said that trying to motivate herself for online school was more difficult than motivating herself to do classwork or homework when she attended performing arts school. This is because school was inhibiting time spent dancing, while also lacking the in-person classroom engagement of traditional school.

College vs Career

Table II:

Dancer Pseudonym	Dancing Professionally?	Higher Education?	Major?	Age
Harper	No	Yes, in person	Psychology Major	23
Camila	Yes	Yes, online	Non-dance Major	21

Sofia	Yes	Yes, began in person, and finished online	Non-dance Major	25
Olivia	Yes	Yes, in person	Dance Major; Pre-Med	21
Jessica	Yes	Yes, began in person, and finished online	Multidisciplinary Studies	21
Morgan	No	Yes, in person	Neuroscience; Pre-Med	20

All the interviewed participants pursued higher education at some point after high school. All but one graduated with a degree in a non-dance subject area. Four of them are currently dancing professionally. Half of the participants did at least some of their bachelor's degree studies online. The table also includes the dancer's current age to help contextualize their journey between high school and the present day. As anticipated, lifestyle and economic factors, realities of the dance industry, and familial influences all played a role in the career decisions of these young dancers. What came through the most for all of the dancers in this study was their passion. In the interview, Camila described a typical scene in her house growing up:

> *We're Spanish, so every Saturday, you clean the house, and [my mom] would play music videos all the time, and I just remember watching and thinking, this looks like so much fun. My mom's like, you're gonna do that one day, I know you can do this, you're very entertaining to watch, you can do that.*

In Camila's story, parental support again emerges as a significant theme. The encouragement described by her mom affirmed her success in dance and her ability to succeed in it. This quote shows emotional and financial support from family, as discussed above, was essential to Camila's decision to continue to professional dance. Camila remembers the specific

moment she knew she wanted to be a professional dancer. It was in her 8th-grade science class while watching Instagram dance videos after finishing her work for the period.

> *It was almost as if I was falling in love with dance in that moment. You know, when you have that feeling for a person, when you start to get like a little tingly inside, and the butterflies start going, but then your brain stops working, and working hyperdrive, and you're thinking, I see myself as whoever that dancer is in the back. That is me. That's basically what I was going through where it was like an out-of-body experience of like, I see myself doing that. I'm just not at that point yet. But it was very emotional to like, think about me doing something like this. But it was also scary to think like, the work that you have to put in to get there.*

By sharing this moment, Camila reveals a lot of the factors that ultimately pushed her to pursue dance. Falling in love with dance made it possible for her to sacrifice hours and push through barriers. It is significant that this dance-related epiphany occurred during school hours. Using spare school time to shift focus to dance, shows that even when the two sections of life are physically segmented, within the dancer they may intertwine in space, time, and mind.

Jessica found a push from her parents necessary to continue in times of dwindling passion for dance. Even though she recalls her mom's clear prioritization of academics, Jessica acknowledges how helpful her mom was in encouraging her to continue to pursue dance as well. "I remember sometimes being like, mom, I have so much homework and I'm so exhausted from the week, I don't want to go and she'd be the one pushing me to go take class, even though that was supposed to be the thing that I enjoyed and looked forward to the most."

For others, their innate passion for dance was eventually overruled by other external factors. For Harper, a change of heart late in high school redirected her entire dance and academic life. She had attended a summer intensive for ballet and was offered a year-round full-time spot. Admittedly, she was in a really good place to be auditioning in New York for ballet companies–17 years old, in peak physical shape, and excelling in her summer program. She

accepted the spot…and then rescinded. In Harper's interview, the intense pressure to choose one path or another at 17 years old comes through. She goes on to talk through the factors leading to her ultimate decision; specific examples from her story are pulled below.

Everything at school was great, but in the ballet world, a lot was not right.

> *My artistic director at the company I was at was emotionally abusive…*
> *And it is horrible to be body shamed, slash sexualized…*
> *And you know as a dancer and human being when you are being touched inappropriately in unnecessary ways that are not conducive to like what you're learning…*
> *Per his suggestion, I did lose 15 pounds and that was so bad…*
> *And on top of that, add a compound stress fracture in my back…*
> *And I had gone to a teacher, like a trusted teacher who was a principal dancer in the company, I really respected her a lot. She told me not to tell anyone about it…*
> *And I overheard a conversation of two women in the company talking about how they wish they could have kids, but they can never do that…*
> *And observing older people in the company, what their lives realistically look like, the economic strain that they were all under, with the salaries they were making, they all had other jobs…*
> *And the fact that your career is over by the time you're 30. And you've been encouraged to drop out of school, and now you have no plan B and no education…*

You have all those on one side and your passion for the sport on the other. And I was like, actually being passionate about this might not be enough to weigh out all these other things.

Harper's story brings forwards a lot of the harsh, heartbreaking realities of dance as it currently exists. Though these are not issues in all dance environments, they are prevalent and there is much room for change. Processing and navigating these issues before even graduating

high school is a challenge different from other activities, again showcasing the need for dancers' voices to be heard and studied.

Jessica knew she wanted to be a dancer from a very young age. She was signed to a talent agency from an open audition at around 13 years old. Her goal was to become a Hollywood dancer in music videos. Jessica remembered disliking the audition process and coming to resent that part of the industry.

> *If I had done that later in my life and I was more mature, maybe I would have enjoyed it more but at that point, I was shy and like not really into it. So, in eighth grade, I started kind of questioning if I really wanted to go down the commercial dance route.*

This caused a switch to classical ballet. As described above, Jessica then attended a performing arts high school for two years, followed by online school for two years while training full-time with a ballet company. She then went on to audition for companies but, under guidance from her parents and after a negative experience at her summer apprenticeship, she decided to audition for college dance programs. When she was admitted and chose to attend one of these programs, she was admittedly reluctant.

> *Collegiate programs are looked down upon a lot in the dance world. So, I went into it with a pretty pessimistic attitude, I would say and I kind of was like, 'Am I really going to be getting the training I need? is this a sign that maybe like I won't be able to make it professionally in this career?' Lo and behold, I ended up really loving that for a lot of different reasons…for example, but it really taught me a lot about me as a person, and learning to develop outside of my identity as a ballerina.*

Jessica's story demonstrates how the relationship between dance and academia remains contentious, even beyond high school and into career stages. Even within the dance world, dance that is academicized is viewed as less valuable or rigorous than dance in strictly performance or training contexts. The themes of identity and social belonging also resurface in Jessica's story, as discussed earlier by Sofia and others. The mental importance of a multifaceted self-concept that

can stem from balancing dance and academics, amongst other things, continues beyond high

school and into dancers' college and career decisions.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDY

As evidenced by their extensive presence in interview discussions of social culture and

engagement, dance teachers play a central role in these dancers' lives. This study did not

explicitly ask about teachers or mentors. Thus, it was an additional benefit to discover this key

factor. The relationship between dancers and their teachers, and the extent to which these

relationships compare to other variables in a dance education experience, is an area for future

research. Due to the scope of the project and the details of these experiences, this capstone

mentions but does not specifically analyze dancer mentorship, career guidance infrastructure,

and parental involvement. Dance has also been shown to have some mental health consequences

including, but not limited to, increased risk of developing disordered eating,[43] symptoms of

intense stress and anxiety,[44] and perfectionism.[45] I did not explicitly address these issues in this

research. Some dancers addressed these topics independently in their interviews, but no major

analysis regarding dance and mental health was conducted. I understand that this is another

possible limitation of my study, as mental health effects may be related to the dancers'

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[43] T. F. Fostervold Mathisen et al., "Mental Health, Eating Behaviour and Injuries in Professional Dance Students," *Research in Dance Education* 23, no. 1 (January 2, 2022): 108–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/14647893.2021.1993171.

[44] D van Winden et al., "Characteristics and Extent of Mental Health Issues in Contemporary Dance Students," *Medical Problems of Performing Artists* 35, no. 3 (September 1, 2020): 121–29, https://doi.org/10.21091/mppa.2020.3019.

[45]Jennifer Cumming and Joan L. Duda, "Profiles of Perfectionism, Body-Related Concerns, and Indicators of Psychological Health in Vocational Dance Students: An Investigation of the 2 × 2 Model of Perfectionism," *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* 13, no. 6 (November 1, 2012): 729–38, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2012.05.004.

perceptions of and levels of engagement with many aspects of their life, including dance and general education. I encourage future researchers to explore these valuable questions.

It also became clear in the interviews that familial support— financial, mental, and emotional, was a necessity for these dancers. This was invoked indirectly through interview questions referencing barriers and decision-making factors. However, familial influence could be studied more explicitly in further iterations of similar research projects.

One limitation of this study is that it does not fully address the potential impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the academic and dance landscape during the high school and young adult lives of these participants. The normalization and availability of online classes in both academics and dance due to the pandemic may have shifted the retroactive perspective or decisions of the dancers, directly or indirectly. In addition, it is possible that due to the use of snowball sampling from contacts here at Yale, the women in my sample are more academically driven than the average subset of dancers. It is also possible that one or both of the two factors above contributes to all six pursuing or having completed bachelor's degrees. Future researchers may find value in replicating my methodology on a larger and more diverse group of student dancers.

The sample size of this project is small, so limited generalizable conclusions can be drawn. However, this project provides a springboard for research on these pre-professional dance students and the multitude of considerations regarding their dance and educational journeys. The themes and questions I have generated in my research may prove fruitful for further exploration of the relationships between dance and general education.

A study investigating this education and dance relationship with a longitudinal design may provide insightful information. This is not something that can be accomplished within the

scope of this capstone but would capture a more complete picture of the ways the dance/school relationship may fluctuate especially across transitions from one mode of general education to another. Additionally, studies focusing primarily on performing arts school programs and online schools with pre-professional dance would be helpful in further research to illustrate the differences between environments for dancers socially, academically, and personally.

Conclusion

This capstone is self-reflective, and I have aimed to capture the essence of my dance experience in this research. I was very emotional at the end of each interview because of the stories I can share. It is also important to note here how grateful and excited all six interviewees were for the opportunity to discuss this topic, and their hope for more research to be conducted in this area.

Additionally, this capstone broadly examines an interdisciplinary study in a way that reaches outside of the typical bounds of what we consider useful academic education or crossover. It looks at how outside factors can impact general education experiences, which could lead to better support for this subset of students. The interviews identified familial support, dance culture or environment, teacher relationships, social belonging, and passion as important factors in high school dancers' future decisions. The capstone also revealed a largely competitive relationship between dance and academics in each dancer's life. My interviews revealed that there is little mutual respect between these two disciplines—despite the fact that all interviewees found dance and school to cultivate and benefit from many of the same traits and skills—and young dancers often felt compelled to choose only one as a primary focus. The candor of the interview participants allows a peek into the emotions and difficulties involved in this decision. I

hope this paper spurs more research on the relationship between dance and general education in the future. Finally, I hope to have shed light on the challenges of this relationship and the difficult position teenagers contend with in the dance industry, such that this experience can change and improve.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions:

    How/when did you start dancing?
    At what point did your training become pre-professional? What was your training like?
    What type of high school did you attend?
    Describe your high school experience.

    _____
    Traditional school:
        Did you consider alternative schooling options in which your dancing would have
        been woven into the daytime hours and your academic curriculum?
    Performing Arts School:
        Why did you choose a performing arts school?

    _____
    Did you face any barriers to pursuing the type of dance or general academic education
    you wanted? If so, how did they shape your experience?
    If you feel that you did, how would you say your dance training impacted your views on
    your general academic studies?

    How did you feel engaged by your general education and why?
    How did you feel engaged by your dance education and why?
    How are these feelings similar/different and related/unrelated to you?

    How did you feel you could succeed in your academic setting and why?
    How did you feel you could succeed in your dance setting and why?
    How are these feelings similar/different and related/unrelated to you?

    How did you feel a sense of community or social belonging in your academic setting and
    why?
    How did you feel a sense of community or social belonging in your dance setting and
    why?
    How are these feelings similar/different and related/unrelated to you?

    What are you doing now? What role does dance play in your current life?
    How did your experience with dance and general education lead you to this point?

Demographics(optional): Please share