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Productive Balance in Ballet Pedagogy

What does a dancer need to be successful? This is a question circling the ballet community as teachers work to move towards more productive ways of teaching. In Zeller's chapter of Akinleye's book, she cites Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci who indicated three basic needs that humans require for wellbeing and optimal functioning which I propose are applicable to what a ballet dancer needs in the classroom. The needs are categorized as:

> "Autonomy, acting according to our own wishes and goals; having input and choice; belonging, being meaningfully associated with others; having respect and support; and competence, feeling capable and in control; able to affect what happens to us" (Akinleye and Zeller, pg.174).

The historical methods of ballet teaching are not synonymous with the needs listed above and instead may foster toxic environments where dancers lose their voice and self-worth. I posit that ballet teachers can change the tradition of authoritarian power teaching models in the classroom while still preserving the elements essential to the art form.

In this paper, I examine three types of teaching and learning environments: toxic, productive, and unproductive to understand what level of discipline, resilience, humanization, and power dynamics they depend on. My point of view is informed by research from the field and years of classical ballet training from impressionable ages through my current involvement in collegiate level dance.

Toxic Environment

Ballet is a historic art form, dating back to the 15th century, that is rooted in authoritarian teaching practices to *create successful artists*. Dance Researcher, Suvi Honkanen wrote "many still believe that to create good art, one must be broken; that to produce something good onstage, the process has to involve screaming and shouting; that to get the best out of an artist, one must be tough, not kind" (Honkanen, 2021). Thus, her account of exposure to toxic pedagogy as a former professional ballet dancer aligns with my own lived experiences in ballet.

Discipline

Over the years, the word discipline has been manipulated into an excuse for authoritarian teachers who believe that to achieve the "ideal" in ballet, one must be pushed to their breaking point. These teachers are known for utilizing harsh teaching styles, and their students know not to speak out or question anything. As Honkanen suggests (2021), most dancers are taught that the ridicule faced in these situations is expected and to succeed they must endure the physical and psychological pain.

Resilience

Resilience is the “capacity to withstand or to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness” (“Resilience”). Ballet is an inherently difficult art form. Most ballet dancers love that they will constantly be challenged. The plethora of physical stamina and mental capacity required for years of training is extensive. All artists must be resilient as they receive constant feedback on their work, but when the work involves one’s body, it can become more personal.

I theorize that resilience becomes negative when it is interpreted as pushing through an injury or prioritizing training in an unhealthy way. Two years ago, I had an acute ankle injury and pushed through it to prove to myself and my colleagues how strong I was. This unrealistic mindset instead made me weaker and worsened my injury. I was on the sidelines for much longer than I would have been if I had taken the time to rest. Upon reflection I have realized that no one told me to keep pushing, but it was an inherent mindset of mine from years of being told that rest made you lazy and sitting out of a rehearsal was rude to your fellow dancers.

This idea of pushing forward no matter what can cause burn out, also known as *overtraining syndrome;* which dance science researcher, Yiannis Koutedakis states “tends to occur in dancers during periods of increased commitments either in class or on stage and in individuals whose daily practices produce an imbalance between physical activity and recovery from it” (Koutedakis, 2000). As the author notes, dancers cannot prioritize their training over their mental health and physical recovery for years on end without consequences. Koutedakis writes that there needs to be a balance for them to keep progressing and enjoying this process; because young dancers who prioritize ballet over their personal and social lives, may burn out and quit before they even have the chance to make it to the professional world.

Dancers may also give up on the art form if they are convinced that they do not and will not fit the ballet *ideal.* So many teachers are convinced that this *ideal* needs to be met and practice methods of molding their students into this image. BFA student, Joao Ducci, notes in his research some toxic methods that he has experienced: some include "yelling at dancers to crank their turnout, get their legs higher, go further back in their port de bras, and even sometimes physically forcing their students to do so" (Ducci, pg.1). This example of toxic pedagogy contributes to the mindset in dancers that they will never be *perfect,* which cripples their self-esteem and ability to believe in their own eventual progress.

Dehumanization

Authoritarian teachers and choreographers are prone to treating dancers like empty vessels for their own gain or progress. In fact, Ducci continues, "we are taught to bow, to listen without questioning, and to constantly pick out our flaws. We are shamed for our bodies, our inability to acquire certain skills, and even our emotions, which are often categorized as dramatic or over-sensitized... We are taught to be empty vessels: blank bodies, subject to training, coaching, choreography, and another person's expression" (Ducci, pp.1-2). As *ideal* vessels, dancers should not have emotions, nor should they ever let them affect their dancing; but is not artistry informed by emotions and feelings? This paradox in pedagogy can escape a teacher's notice and confuse students.

Teachers who ignore mental health issues and the effects they can have on a dancer's effort and progress fail to offer an inclusive class. Acting as if a student remains in the same constant headspace from day to day is an unrealistic expectation because life is up and down, and

therefore a dancer's physical and mental abilities will vary. It is difficult to remain consistent despite life's challenges, both as a dancer and a teacher. Some teachers' attitudes change every day, and their dancers learn to prepare for this inconsistency so why would the road not go both ways? The teacher is not being asked to work as a therapist, but just to acknowledge the existence of mental health issues their dancers may be experiencing so that their own behavior does not worsen the issues. Ducci states, "whether the problem is dance-related or not, dance teachers seem unaware that mental health is something that affects our performance, focus and ability to learn and improve" (Ducci, pg.2). As people in power, they can look at how to offer support and be more understanding when it comes to psychological health. I theorize that the acknowledgment of the humanity of all participants can help a dancer grow as an artist and as a communicator to advocate for themselves.

If dancers are treated like human beings, rather than empty vessels, it is often in the format of getting too personal and having opinions on how dancers spend their lives outside of the studio. For example, Honkanen shares

> "During my career, I was told that I needed to have sex with men, be more feminine, be thinner but not too thin, be stronger, be more confident, have more personality but always stay in line... I was told to change how I dress, walked, and talked. At the age of 18, my director told me that I must have a boyfriend and lots of crazy adventures outside of ballet to be interesting onstage. At the same time, a repetiteur told me that a good, dedicated ballet dancer must be committed only to dance and spend a minimum of eight hours at the theater daily" (Honkanen, 2021).

Like this author, I will never forget my own experiences of having a teacher I was close with share their thoughts on my weight, personality, and family dynamics. It is difficult to not get personal when you spend every day together; especially in my case where I attended the studio from the ages of 11-18. I was at an impressionable age and cared deeply about what my teacher thought of me, and this vulnerability made an impact on my behavior. There is a fine line when it comes to teachers commenting on a dancer's life choices or any personal matters. The question of balance is how to consider humanity and have empathy for the dancer without crossing over into inappropriate discussions. While this is a challenge, I propose that the person in power set the boundary in his or her work environment.

Roles in the Classroom

Authoritarian power dynamics rely on a leader and a follower being present in the classroom. In my experience, the leader acts all-knowing, and the follower is lucky to be in their presence and receive their wisdom. Teachers who practice this dynamic believe that they are helping their students, but they are doing quite the opposite. If a dancer is constantly told what to do, how will they ever be able to determine right or wrong for themselves? Too much power diminishes a student's ability to think critically, their sense of self, and their autonomy.

As a student, I have often been told what I am doing wrong in technique class, but not how to fix it. When I came to college, my professor asked me to analyze my own work and produce a solution for my problem: why were my turns spiraling out of control? I was caught speechless for the first time in my life. This professor went on to talk about details as small as

my pinky toe pushing off the floor, my fingertips reaching into the space, and getting my passé up faster. Now in my fourth year of college, I can critically analyze on my own. This is an example of a balance in pedagogy because my teacher educated me, while also giving me the autonomy to think for myself.

It is uncommon for a dancer to stay with the same teacher their whole lives. Yet, some teachers do not prepare their students for anywhere other than the classroom they are in; meaning they are not focused on the tools their students need to move on and succeed. In this situation, dancers may become dependent on their teacher and not be able to move on because they are more focused on pleasing the power figure than their dancing. As a student who experienced this dynamic, I quickly learned how to please my teacher and tip toe around to ensure good casting and to avoid being yelled at. I became more focused on my teacher's needs and wants than my own. Honkanen shares some insight that supports my experience: Students

> "... learn that it is unacceptable to speak their mind or to challenge authority-all you must do is smile, nod and do as you are told. Ballet students become completely dependent on their teachers, and what comes to shape their sense of self is the words, opinions, and attitudes of their instructors" (Honkanen, 2021).

I propose that teachers should not only focus on what is happening in their classroom, but also what their students need to succeed in an unfamiliar environment; because dancers cannot be dependent on their teachers if they ever want to move on and work their way up in the ranks.

Unproductive Environment

While I am not trying to promote a toxic environment, I theorize that the completely opposite end of the spectrum can have similar effects on dancers. Authority in the classroom is becoming unpopular, but what happens when there is no authority? Dance professor, Christine Murgida notes that "There seems to be a movement to implement progressive ballet pedagogies that emphasize co-learning to create a more democratic classroom in place of a leader and follower relationship" (Murgida, pg.7). She then goes on to "question whether a progressive approach can effectively tackle the pedagogical challenges associated with teaching a developmentally diverse class" (Murgida, pg.7). From my research, the question emerges: how can this democratic approach be productive and inclusive for all students?

Discipline

Ballet is a competitive field, and it can be tempting to quit on hard days. As a dancer, it can be hard to self-motivate and not let your training fall into a part of your daily routine. Consequently, a push from a teacher can be beneficial even when you do not think you want or need one. I often find myself needing a reminder to work towards improvement every day, which is necessary if I want to enter the professional field. If I were to have received minimal or no discipline or tough love in my training, I fear that I would have flatlined in my progress.

I also theorize that receiving minimal or no discipline is a form of coddling and stunts a student's progress. Students may need the teacher to give them corrections daily and remind them of past ones so that repetition can be a force in their growth. It is self-evident that

corrections and discipline help students improve no matter their level of training and that there is a stage for everyone in their training where they can critically analyze their own work with the occasional advice from the teacher. But this stage is different for everyone, and some students may not be able to self-assess their own work even at the Collegiate level, especially if they have never received this form of training before. So how do teachers accommodate for this difference in development? I propose that they avoid treating everyone harshly or letting everyone discipline themselves; these extremities do not account for the fact that each student is developmentally, psychologically, and physically at a different stage in his or her training.

Resilience

Resilience is a requirement of becoming a professional dancer. The reality is that there are thousands of people who dream and only a few who make it in the workforce. This is a harsh truth that all dancers must face so that they can assess how much they are willing to sacrifice to make it to the top. This is not the only reality of the dance world that is hard to swallow. The professional realm of ballet or what some refer to as *the real world* has work to do in creating healthy, inclusive environments. A lot of teachers use this as an excuse to treat their students poorly, because in the *real world* it will be the same. In contrast, I propose that those in power work towards changing this reality and make it to where both learning and professional environments foster growth.

While there is movement towards inclusivity, I question what expectations of the dance field will remain firm. I theorize that some expectations will remain present no matter how much

progress is made because of the competitive nature of the field. In this sense, I worry about the students who have never faced hardship or witnessed these expectations first-hand. I propose that teachers be honest with their students and acknowledge the obstacles they will face and the presence of the *ideal* in ballet. If students are unaware of these hardships, then the shock when they face them will hit even harder. One can hope that their students never face the expectations, and some may avoid them; but it is better to prepare them than let them be stunned and then deterred from moving forward. I fear that a student who has never faced a harsh truth and goes into auditions, may let rejection shatter their self-confidence completely.

Roles in the Classroom

The growing dislike for authoritarian teaching is leading a movement towards progressive teaching where power is dismantled. How far can the line be drawn while preserving a productive environment for students to be challenged? I posit that authority can be beneficial to a student's development, and how progressive practices that create a democratic classroom can blur the lines of where the teacher's role presides. If there is no authority, where is the respect and distinction of roles? The teacher possesses more wisdom from their vast professional and life experience. This underlying fact should not create an environment with silenced students, but encourage collaboration, communication, and curiosity with the existence of a person in power with whom to go to for questions. Murgida writes that confusion of roles can lead to students

> "...who feel pressured to practice choice prematurely can feel just as threatened as those who experience the feelings of subjugation associated with abusive power. The "paradox of choice" seems related to this notion. This concept correlates the experience of anxiety

> with an overabundance of options. Furthermore, forcing collaboration may minimize the availability for choice to be realized intrinsically. Consequently, it seems collaborating does not have to be about dismantling power" (Murgida, 4)

This idea of co-learning relies on students who are ready to navigate their own learning. While a democratic classroom may work for some students, it may be a more stressful and anxiety-filled environment for others: for example, "a student who feels mentally, emotionally, and physically vulnerable most likely needs to attain stability from structure and authority in the classroom" (Murgida, 6).

Productive Environment

"Ballet demands discipline, resilience, and patience, but there is no reason why these assets cannot be developed through care and support. Thick skin is not built by belittling. One's will is not strengthened with manipulation" (Honkanen, 2021).

Discipline

I theorize that the level of discipline needed to promote growth depends on the teacher's intention. If the intent is to motivate students and get them to focus on the task at hand, then it is productive. It is self-evident that students may need a push every now and then and I posit that this push will be better appreciated if it comes from the teacher thinking the student is capable of more. In my experience, having a teacher believe in you supports growth, self-confidence, and faith that you can reach your goals.

I posit that motivation can arrive in many different forms due to the wide range of students that teachers encounter. While tough love may work for one student, it may break another. According to the Dean of Teaching at Lafayette College, Tracie Addy, the importance of this difference lies within teachers "...having an awareness of the cultural, geographical, and other experiences of their students. [this] can help instructors carefully design relevant assignments that motivate and encourage students to meet learning goals through culturally relevant pedagogies" (Addy, pg.27) Each student will benefit from different pathways of learning, but the teacher cannot know what will work best without communication. It is their job to get to know what each student needs in the classroom.

Resilience

Resilience encompasses the athleticism, stamina, and drive needed to strive in the art form. Ballet is rigorous and must be treated that way in the classroom to prepare dancers for the field. But some teachers need to find the right language to implement rigor, while still being inclusive for all different body and learning types. I theorize that it can be beneficial for teachers to acknowledge the *ideal* that exists in the ballet world if they push each student to work towards it in their individual way. The antithesis of this would be to expect perfection which Brenda Dixon Gottschild refers to as the 'tyranny of the ideal' in Akinleye's book (Akinleye and Zeller, pg.173). She suggests that teachers instead "encourage dancers to drive their own work with confidence and to turn the popular and tired misperception of the meek and dimwitted ballet dancer into the empowered role of the embodied dance artist in ballet" (Akinleye and Zeller, pg. 173).

Humanization

To successfully treat a student as a human being, I propose that the teacher practice inclusivity and acknowledge the individuality of each student, because it is self-evident that each student has his or her own body type, learning style, and background that influences their progress. Honkanen's research supports this focus on individuality as she writes, "While screaming and yelling might push one dancer to her very best, it might break someone else. Ballet schools and companies need to recognize each student as an individual" (Honkanen, 2021). Progress looks different for everyone, and no student should be comparing their work and growth to another's. I theorize that the eradication of unhealthy comparison could help students believe in themselves and focus more on their personal goals instead of what the other dancers are doing. They will have control and more autonomy in self-assessing their work without self-deprecating it.

From my research, I propose teachers humanize their students by acknowledging mental health issues. Ducci writes, "It may not be a teacher's job to be comforting and act as a counselor, but empathy and support go a long way. If teachers and choreographers were more aware of all aspects of a dancer's health, and were understanding of our limitations, dancers would be able to take better care of themselves without shame or guilt" (Ducci, pg.3). If a student is struggling outside of the studio, it could bleed into how they work in class. My mental health issues have had a lot of repercussions in the classroom: some including lack of motivation, loss of energy, and a negative outlook towards myself and my ability to reach my goals. These all affected how I danced and responded to feedback from the teacher. If my teachers had tried to understand these

changes and not take my change in behavior personally, I would speak up for myself and my mental health more often.

Roles in the Classroom

I propose that the roles in the classroom be clear and create a partnership between the student and teacher. In this situation, the teacher holds the role of guide: to aim for one's dancers to have autonomy and the ability to self-assess, while answering any questions the students may have and giving discipline when it is needed. I theorize that this relationship is possible through mutual respect. Ideally, the students in this case remain curious and in communication with the teacher to take full advantage of their training.

In *What Inclusive Instructors Do*, Addy continues that

> "Instructors who adopt inclusive teaching approaches seek to understand who their students are in their courses in order to maximize the learning that occurs. They do not make assumptions about their students, but rather base their understanding on information obtained on their learners at the institutional, program, classroom, and individual levels" (Addy, pg.25).

Inclusive teaching further builds the relationship of trust between the student and teacher because the student feels a sense of respect when the teacher tries to understand them. I posit that following this pathway of understanding can allow teachers to provide their students with the three basic needs for "wellbeing'- autonomy, competence, and belonging. According to self-

determination theory, without these three needs, students cannot strive in a creative environment" (Akinleye and Zeller, pg. 174).

Conclusion

Ballet runs the risk of becoming an outdated art form, but by becoming more progressive through the efforts of those in power and those leaders changing their practices will slowly change the field. They are breaking the cycle of authoritarian teaching styles that exist when teachers pass down their habits to their students. Dancers often stick to what they are comfortable with in a classroom because that is what makes sense to their brain and thought processes when teaching and creating. The idea of passing down teaching methods is difficult to tackle because there is difficulty in examining one's roots and changing one's patterns of behavior. Lakes comments that "Although dancers have long shared whispered dressing-room complaints about authoritarian dance teacher behaviors, this " secret" of the dance world could benefit from being more fully "outed" or unmasked to analyze its dangers, examine its authoritarian roots, and point the way toward reform" (Lakes, pg.1). She analyzes this contradiction in her work to explain why the dance world is behind on making changes towards progressive teaching.

I propose that teachers not only look at their behavior, but the language and intention behind their actions so that they can push each student to reach their potential; instead of pushing a student to their breaking point or not pushing them enough to where their fears stop them from pursuing their dreams. This is an under-researched field and if my research were to continue, I

would examine how other fields are finding a balance between teaching styles. I would also want to look at the unproductive environment and the psychology of the “paradox of choice” to determine how democratic the classroom can become before the framework of the art form is lost.

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