

Of Grit and Grace: Negotiating Puberty, Surviving and Succeeding in Professional Ballet

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Abstract

Experiences of puberty and how individuals adapt to puberty may be integral to success in ballet, however, there is a paucity of current research in this area. This study explores the lived experiences of nine professional ballet dancers in order to capture the journey of negotiating puberty in a ballet context. An interpretative phenomenological analysis approach was employed with semi-structured interviews utilised to gather rich, descriptive accounts from nine professional ballet dancers from the UK and United States. Lived experiences were characterised by conflict and struggle, coming to terms with physical changes and possessing grit and grace in order to successfully negotiate puberty, succeed and survive in professional ballet. Accepting physical and aesthetic strengths and weaknesses and learning how to adapt or how to compensate for weaknesses, was described as pivotal. Factors such as social support, the timing and extent of pubertal changes, dance teacher behaviours and the ballet training context, influenced the extent to which dancers experienced conflict and struggle and how easily they were able to come to terms with their adult physique. Further research is needed to explore the implications of maturing and developing within the context of ballet training and to develop strategies to better facilitate healthy development in ballet.

Keywords: development, sociocultural perspectives, lifespan, performance, psychology

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The physical and psychological attributes associated with success in ballet are well documented (Hamilton et al., 1988; Hamilton et al., 1992; Walker et al., 2010). Experiences of puberty and how individuals adapt to puberty may be important to success in ballet but have not been extensively explored (Brooks-Gunn & Warren, 1985; Mitchell et al., 2020; Mitchell et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2016).

Classical ballet is highly stylized and subscribes to a specific body type (Kadel et al., 2005; Liiv et al., 2013); with a growing preference for sylphlike, 'other-worldly' bodies which are hyper-flexible and often skeletal (Johnson, 2018; Pickard, 2013; Wainwright, 2004). While this is a requirement of the art, ballet is anaerobic meaning that the ideal physique cannot be achieved through dancing alone, thus being naturally thin is advantageous (Hamilton et al., 1997).

Researchers have applied the concept 'survival of the fittest' when describing the physical and mental stresses inherent to success in ballet (Hamilton et al., 1997; Hamilton et al., 1992). The importance of conforming to specific physical characteristics is well established, suggesting that those who do not possess these attributes incur physical and psychological problems due to attempts to compensate (Hamilton et al., 1997; Hamilton et al., 1985; Hamilton et al., 1988; Johnson, 2018). Methods of selection have been highlighted as a way to ensure the survival of the fittest, with those selected for full-time training in childhood, reporting reduced incidence of disordered eating behaviours (Hamilton et al., 1997; Hamilton et al., 1992). These findings have been used to advocate stringent early selection processes throughout classical ballet training as opposed to later selection (Hamilton et al., 1988). However, there is little evidence to support the contention that early selection ensures greater psychological wellbeing. Evidence from sport would suggest that the earlier specialisation necessitated by early selection is associated with more negative psychological outcomes such as burnout and reduced enjoyment (Crane & Temple, 2015).

Pubertal timing influences both physical (e.g., body shape and size) and psychological development (e.g., body image, eating pathologies; Ellis, 2004; Gay et al., 2014; Mendle et al., 2007).

Earlier maturation is associated with a longer torso relative to shorter limbs and greater gains in fat mass. Later maturation results in longer limbs relative to a shorter torso and a more linear physique (Gay et al., 2014; Malina et al., 2004). Maladaptive psychological outcomes have been shown to be associated with early maturation and also with negative experiences of puberty and negative perceptions of physical change (Ellis, 2004; Mendle et al., 2007; Moore et al., 2016). Evidence exists to support this in the context of ballet, with dancers who mature early, being most vulnerable to disordered eating, poor body image and psychopathology (Brooks-Gunn & Warren, 1985; Brooks-Gunn et al., 1989; Hamilton et al., 1988).

Research on the experiences of late maturing dancers in vocational ballet training supports the notion that the pubertal timing impacts experiences in ballet. Congruent with the bias toward later maturing physiques, being 'small' and not having 'bits' were highlighted as advantageous in terms of maintaining a more pre-pubescent look and thereby conforming more easily to expectations in ballet (Mitchell et al., 2020). However, despite aesthetic advantages, later maturing ballet dancers are disadvantaged by undertaking the most crucial training period during their most rapid period of growth (Mitchell et al., 2020). The finer nuances of growing up in ballet and perceptions of physical characteristics are inherently linked with pubertal development and their association with success in ballet.

Maturity timing also impacts vulnerability to developing psychosocial issues (Ellis, 2004; Mendle et al., 2007). Early maturation in girls is associated with an increased risk of depression, obesity, earlier uptake of smoking and drinking, disordered eating and less physical activity (Arim et al., 2011; Cumming et al., 2011; Ellis, 2004; Mendle et al., 2007). Moreover, how girls perceive pubertal experiences, in particular physical changes and preparedness, is associated with disordered eating symptoms; disliking physical changes of puberty and feeling unprepared relating to disordered eating symptoms, feelings of ineffectiveness and difficulties with interpersonal relationships (Moore et al., 2016). Negative recollections of puberty were found to outweigh protective factors such as self-esteem, which may be relevant to those experiencing puberty in

ballet where puberty is perceived negatively and normal pubertal changes are heavily stigmatised (Mitchell et al., 2016). In addition, eating pathologies remain an issue for professional ballet dancers and those in training (Arcelus et al., 2014). Thus, experiences of puberty are especially relevant to general psychological wellbeing and disordered eating behaviours and, subsequently, the ability of dancers to thrive in ballet.

Research, although dated, shows that early maturing dancers are less represented as adults in ballet, with up to 70% of female professionals being delayed in maturation (Brooks-Gunn & Warren, 1985; Hamilton et al. 1997; Mitchell et al., 2020). Early and on time ballet dancers may vary considerably in their experiences of puberty and how they adapt to puberty, compared to later maturing dancers (Mitchell et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2016). Qualitative differences in lived experiences may also point to strategies for overcoming such challenges. Although current understanding of how this occurs is limited, those who 'survive' in ballet are likely to be qualitatively different from those who dropout or are selected out.

Maturity timing plays a role in the psychological development of ballet dancers and, in turn, those may contribute to their success. The underdog hypothesis, has utility in this context. It suggests that possessing or developing psychological attributes, such as self-esteem or resilience, may enable those with less desirable physical attributes associated with earlier maturation (e.g., higher BMI), to succeed (Gibbs et al., 2012). That is, earlier maturing dancers must possess or develop psychological attributes in order to succeed in a system where their physical characteristics are less ideal; later maturing dancers are, perhaps, more able to rely on their more amenable physical characteristics (Gibbs et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2020).

The psychological characteristics predicting success in ballet are understudied. Studies report a high prevalence of perfectionism and the importance of perseverance, psychological skills and social support (Chua, 2014; Chua, 2015; Goodwin et al., 2014; Nordin-Bates & Abrahamsen, 2016; Walker et al., 2010). Mental toughness or resilience is highlighted as important, though there is little research examining resilience in ballet (Moyle, 2013; Pickard & Bailey, 2009). These

psychological characteristics may play specific roles in overcoming the challenges of puberty or specific challenges associated with pubertal timing.

Brooks-Gunn and Warren (1985, 1989) provide the only studies on maturity timing and wellbeing in ballet. While their research points to an association between early maturity and poor psychological wellbeing, our existing knowledge of psychosocial adaptation at puberty is limited to a few psychological outcomes at one time point. The qualitative methods applied in recent studies elucidate challenges and advantages for delayed maturation in adolescent ballet dancers, and contribute to updating the field the impact of pubertal change (Mitchell et al., 2016; Mitchell et al., 2020). Evidence from literature suggests physical (e.g., changes in body shape, breast development) and psychological (e.g., poorer body image, eating pathologies) implications of puberty in ballet (Brooks-Gunn & Warren, 1985; Mitchell et al., 2016; Mitchell et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2020). This study builds on these findings, contributing insights from adult professional ballet dancers on their journey through puberty and into the ballet profession, to advance our understanding of women in ballet. The purpose of this study was to explore how dancers negotiate the challenges of puberty in ballet, how that differs relative to pubertal timing and how they negotiate these challenges in order to succeed. Success, in this study, was defined as achieving paid work in a ballet company. Understanding more about the strategies and characteristics which contributed to success could inform approaches to encourage healthier adaptation at puberty for ballet dancers of varying maturity timing.

Method

Participants

A purposive sampling approach was employed and 55 female dancers were contacted following an initial survey. Respondents who consented to being contacted for further research and selected ballet as their main dance style were contacted via email, with the aim of interviewing around ten dancers. Nine dancers responded and were willing to take part in an interview. The average age of participants was 22.8 years. Participants were from the United States ($n = 5$) and the

United Kingdom ($n = 4$). All participants identified as White. All participants selected ballet as their main style of dance, with an average starting age of 4.8 years. The mean number of years in full-time training was 7.2 with four participants in their final year of full-time training, three dancing professionally and two semi-professional or recently graduated.

Participants varied in maturity timing: on time ($n = 4$), late ($n = 3$), early ($n = 2$). Maturity timing was derived from average age of menarche in previous studies of ballet dancers (13.1 years) (Burkhardt et al., 2011; Hamilton et al., 1997). Early maturing dancers were defined as those with onset of menarche occurring one year or more in advance of this age and late maturing dancers as one year or more in delay of this (Malina et al., 2004). It is important to note that timing is cohort specific; the average age of menarche for ballet dancers is later than in the general population where the average is 12.9 years (Rubin et al., 2009). Therefore, early maturation in ballet, chronologically, is a similar age to on time maturation in the general population.

Design

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was utilised to facilitate an in-depth understanding of dancers' experiences of growing up within a ballet training context. IPA is concerned with the detailed examination of personal lived experience, the meaning of experience to participants and how participants make sense of that experience (Smith, 2011). This method draws on the theoretical traditions of phenomenology and hermeneutics. The process is heavily interpretative and dynamic, with the researcher playing an active role (Smith et al., 2009). In line with IPA, this research is grounded in the interpretive paradigm, holding that reality is socially constructed and each individual creates their own reality, and, therefore, there are multiple interpretations and meanings which can be derived (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004).

Procedures

All procedures were approved by the University Research Ethics Approval Committee for Health. Participants were presented with an information sheet and consent form via email, with an

opportunity to ask questions about the study before consenting. An electronic signature indicated consent to take part.

Semi-structured interviews were employed and all interviews were conducted by the first author. The interview schedule was piloted with three professional ballet dancers. This process prompted amendments to the vocabulary used (e.g., classmates instead of peers) to ensure understanding. Interview questions were focussed on generating an understanding of what characterises elite ballet dancers' experiences of puberty in dance. For example, beginning with more general questions such as 'For aspiring dancers, do you think puberty is seen as a good or bad thing? Helpful or not helpful for ballet and why?' and progressing to more personal questions exploring experiences of growing up in dance such as 'How would you describe your own experiences of puberty as a young dancer?' Perceptions of change and responses to puberty were also explored, 'People go through this process of puberty/maturing at different times, do you feel like you were early, average or late in terms of your development in comparison to your classmates? Why?' In order to explore psychological factors and physical characteristics associated with success and healthy adaptation in adult ballet dancers, implications of pubertal change were considered, 'How did those changes impact upon your training/readiness for auditions?'

Interviews were conducted via Skype. Skype interviews using video have been found to enable a similar authenticity level to face-to-face interviews with access to both verbal and non-verbal cues (Bertrand & Bourdeau, 2010; Janghorban et al., 2014; Sullivan, 2012). Interviews ranged from 30 to 56 minutes, with a mean duration of 50 minutes. This allowed for obtaining rich and descriptive data necessary for conducting IPA (Shaw, 2010).

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, with transcription undertaken by an external company due to the timeframe of the study. The number of transcribed pages ranged from 10 to 36, with an average of 28 pages transcribed for each participant. The name of each participant and any

identifying information was removed from the interview transcripts; each was coded with a unique number, for example P1.

Data analysis followed guidelines for conducting IPA set out by Smith and Osborn (2003). The analysis was divided into three parts: (1) summarising participant described experiences, (2) evaluating their meaning, and (3) evaluating the self-reflections of each individual to explore what they make of their own experiences (Storey, 2016). The first part of the analysis is to develop an understanding of the participants' world and to describe what it is like (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith & Osborn, 2003). This involves focusing on participants' experiences of a specific event, being aware that access to 'experience' is complex and inherently partial; the account is always constructed by both the participant and the researcher (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith, 1996). Several close readings of the interview transcript are required to ensure that interpretations made in the latter stages of the analysis are grounded within participant accounts (Storey, 2016). During these readings, notes are made on points of potential significance, e.g., comments on initial ideas regarding meanings. A descriptive summary was formed based on what the participants' said, issues identified, events relayed, and feelings expressed (Shaw, 2010).

The second and third parts of the analysis require the researcher to develop an interpretative analysis of the data, positioning the description within a wider social, cultural and theoretical context, in this instance positioning the description within ballet sub-culture and within the wider theoretical context of physical and psychological development (Larkin et al., 2006). Initial ideas are transformed into more specific themes and phrases, which form the first stages of interpretation, where the researcher asks how initial ideas connect to psychological theory and the participant's social and cultural context and 'what interpretation can be drawn to answer the research question?' (Shaw, 2010). Themes are then organised into clusters, reducing the data by establishing connections between preliminary themes and clustering them accordingly (Smith et al., 2009). From this, a final table of themes is presented for each participant. Each case is fully analysed before moving to the next case. Once all cases are analysed and allocated final themes, comparisons

between cases across the group are made (Smith et al., 2009). In this analysis three superordinate themes emerged with sub-themes, and representative quotations were selected.

Reflexivity

Throughout the data analysis process a reflective diary was kept, where thoughts on how to interpret the meaning of issues, events and feelings were detailed (Shaw, 2010). This enabled the researcher to build an understanding of each participant's experience gradually, throughout the analysis. This active construction of interpretations is prominent in reflexive research; whereby the researcher simultaneously constructs interpretations "what do I know?" and questions how those interpretations came about "How do I know what I know?" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). This interpretative process, together with the identification of themes, culminates in the final stage of analysis; a narrative account of the interplay between the interpretative activity of the researcher and the participant's account of their experience in their own words (Smith et al., 2009).

Adopting a phenomenological approach to data collection necessitates acknowledgement of researcher bias and experiences. Prior to the study, the lead researcher reflected on her own experiences, including her time in vocational ballet training as an adolescent and her experiences of maturing on time in this context. While it is acknowledged that this previous experience means that the researcher comes to the topic with her own experiences and assumptions, this reflexive process aids the researcher in separating the experiences of her interviewees from her own (Patton, 2015). These reflections were referred to throughout the data analysis process to facilitate reflexivity.

Enhancing Trustworthiness

Steps were taken to strengthen the credibility and methodological quality or trustworthiness of the research (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). To establish trustworthiness, a member reflection process was used to encourage reflexivity and to enhance interpretation (Cowan & Taylor, 2016). After each transcript was analysed, member reflections were carried out with participants to explore the existence of any contradictions and differences in knowing (Schinke et al., 2013). Due to time constraints, transcripts and interpretations were shared with participants via email and the

researcher encouraged a dialogue with the aim to generate additional insight. Participants used this opportunity to elaborate on their initial descriptions and challenge researcher interpretation. Three participants provided additional detail and clarification of the dancer-teacher relationship which they felt greater importance should be placed upon. All transcripts were re-examined to explore this further with a particular focus on the quality of the relationship. This process resulted in a refined set of themes grounded more firmly within each participant's social and cultural context. The final stage for the researcher was to review the interpretation of these themes in light of the theoretical context. For this reason, results and discussion will be presented as one narrative.

Results and Discussion

Experiences of growing up in ballet were characterised by a) conflict and struggle; the tension between the normal processes of growing up and demands of ballet; b) coming to terms with physical changes; a process of acceptance or adaptation in order to survive in the profession; and c) grit and grace, psychological characteristics or skills enabling them to negotiate puberty and succeed in the ballet profession. A number of factors were important within these experiences, including timing and extent of pubertal development, the teacher-dancer relationship and social support.

Conflict and Struggle

Within the theme of conflict and struggle dancers described the extent to which they experienced struggle as revolving around the extent and timing of growth, the physical context (e.g., mirrors, attire) and level of training (i.e., recreational or vocational), and the quality of the dancer-teacher relationship.

Timing and Extent of Development

The timing and extent of physical development was described as pivotal in terms of experiences growing up in ballet. Dancers described a conflict between normal physical development at puberty and the prescribed ideals of ballet "...I started to get curvy, and you're not supposed to be curvy, as a dancer; they want you to look like you have the body of a twelve or

thirteen-year-old, for your whole life” (P1). In line with literature, possessing a physique which aligns with the aesthetic demands of ballet was deemed to be advantageous (Hamilton et al., 1997; Mitchell et al., 2020).

The extent of development was particularly important for earlier maturing ballet dancers. More specifically, minimal physical development was suggested to mitigate key disadvantages associated with earlier maturation. Dancers who described a smaller growth spurt in height and minimal breast development experienced less difficulty adapting, due to relatively lesser functional and physical change. Genetic potential in terms of height, weight and maturity timing have a direct effect in terms of the physical characteristics of individuals, with certain characteristics deemed more negative than others in the context of ballet (Hamilton et al., 1997; Kaprio et al., 1995; Rowe, 2002). In line with literature, greater breast development, increased fat mass and widening of the hips were perceived negatively (Hamilton et al., 1997; Mitchell et al., 2016). The issue of height was highlighted by most dancers in relation to the extent of growth. Increased height was deemed desirable at puberty due to the aesthetic benefit of possessing longer limbs. However, smaller increases in height at puberty were perceived as beneficial in terms of causing less disruption to functional aspects, such as flexibility.

I was fairly lucky in a lot of ways... my boobs didn't get that much bigger. I didn't have breasts too big for ballet and I didn't... I didn't gain a ton of weight or have a massive growth spurt that completely limited my flexibility. (P4)

This 'genetic lottery', being genetically lucky in terms of the extent of physical development, is mirrored in aesthetic sports such as gymnastics where genetic predisposition has been noted as an individual factor which facilitated transitioning through puberty (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2017).

The timing of puberty had different implications for ballet dancers depending on the seriousness and level of training at the time of puberty. For example, experiencing puberty in a less serious training context, outside of the context of vocational training, was described as beneficial.

This could encompass both early and on time maturation depending upon whether the dancer began full-time training at an earlier or later age.

I think it didn't make it as difficult in dance as you might expect, because, since I was so young, I wasn't very serious. I mean, in life it was kind of hard because I had boobs and I got my period and I was twelve, but I think in dance it wasn't as big a deal, actually. I know that's kind of surprising. (P4)

Conversely and in line with findings from Mitchell and colleagues (2020), for later maturing ballet dancers, puberty coincided with more serious training.

...for myself when I was taking dance very seriously I was just going through it and it wasn't really a concern until I was probably 16, and then, obviously, that's when all the dieting starts and you have to be very careful with what you're eating... (P2)

Dancers identified benefits for both early and late maturation. Dancers who experienced earlier maturation described advantages of having time to adjust and getting to know their body before more serious training commenced. In comparison, dancers who experienced later maturation described the benefits of 'seeing it happen to other people' and feeling more prepared.

I went through puberty fairly young. I was twelve, which, I think, was horrible at the time, but I think it was better because I had more time to adjust. I had more time to come to terms with what my body was after puberty. But I know girls who go through puberty at sixteen or seventeen and then they are, all of a sudden, dealing with a completely different body and they're like, "I don't know what to do with this." (P4)

These findings are in line with recent research with dancers (Mitchel et al., 2016; Mitchell et al., 2020) but challenge long-standing assumptions about early maturation as a solely disadvantageous condition for young ballet dancers (Mitchell et al., 2016).

Ballet Training Context

Many of the advantages and disadvantages associated with the timing or extent of puberty were accentuated or mitigated, by the ballet training context. Facets of the ballet training context,

such as mirrors and ballet attire, have been raised in previous studies as factors known to be associated with less adaptive health outcomes including poorer body image, greater risk of eating pathology and lower self-esteem (Francisco et al., 2012; Oliver, 2008; Price & Pettijohn, 2006; Radell et al., 2014).

Aspects of the ballet training context intensified feelings of struggle and conflict at puberty. In addition to mirrors and dance attire, one dancer reflected on being weighed. Dancers described the pressure of developing in an environment with constant self-scrutiny through mirrors and peer comparison and being 'trained to look for flaws':

...it would be announced, "We're weighing you all today. You all line up outside the office." We'd all try and go to the loo thinking if we had a wee then we'd be a bit lighter and the director would laugh at us and say, "That's not going to make any difference." He'd write down our weight, etc. That was the first time ever that anyone had ever told me that I need to lose weight, it was a bit of a shock. (P5)

The level of training (i.e., recreational or vocational), and demands of the dance style in terms of physique, and conventions of the ballet training context, such as peer comparison and weighing were emphasised by dancers as central in terms of their adjustment at puberty. Dancers described how experiences in different training contexts during adolescence (i.e., recreational or vocational) and the age at which they specialised (began full-time training) in ballet, shaped expectations of their adult physique, influenced their feelings about puberty/pubertal change and helped or hindered their acceptance of those changes.

Some dancers described developing a distorted image of themselves where, in ballet, they were 'fat' or 'overweight', yet objectively, they were not. One dancer describes coming to terms with this in adulthood, whereby 'fat' or 'strong and sturdy' becomes normal and 'petite'.

Before people told me I was fat, I thought of myself as strong and sturdy... prior to puberty I just thought of myself as strong and I was always proud of it. I was like, "I'm really strong." Then suddenly my idea of myself as being sturdy and stocky was a word my mother always

used; "You're sturdy. You're stocky. You're not like other girls, you're a stocky build," which is totally not true because now I'm the weight I should be as an adult woman and I'm what everyone calls petite. (P6)

Dancers described their struggles in coming to terms with pubertal changes, and the realisation through experiencing different dance environments, of 'what I'm supposed to look like':

I think it took a long time to come to terms with it. I really didn't like it, and I would try and, yes, stop and think I needed to eat less because I was getting bigger and I really didn't like it... when I was training it was more ballet than anything else and especially if, at the weekend, I went to associate class for pre-vocational training so then it would be like... in my local dance school I wasn't really that bothered, but when I was there and it was more serious, it was like everyone was trying to get that physique and knew what they wanted.

Aspiring to be a professional dancer it was like, "Oh, is that what I'm supposed to look like?" (P3)

Equally, dancers described a self-awareness of 'right and wrong' physique from a very early age: "...it can be really detrimental when you're nine and you have an opinion about your thighs" (P6). In similar contexts (e.g., gymnastics) puberty has been characterised as career-ending, with sociological research on growth and maturation in adolescent athletes confirming that how individuals experience puberty is critical as their bodies do not develop in accordance with sport-specific ideals (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2017; Schubring & Thiel, 2014a, 2014b). With this in mind, this experience of 'having an opinion on your thighs' as a nine year old and entering puberty with very specific ideas of a 'right' and 'wrong' way to grow has significant implications for feelings about the body at puberty and beyond. This lived experience may predispose individuals, particularly those who mature early, to negative perceptions of pubertal change and of their growing body (Moore et al., 2016). In this sense, young dancers found their maturing bodies to be in conflict with the sociocultural ideals and expectations of the ballet world.

While most dancers experienced puberty in the context of vocational (full-time) ballet training, several participants (P3, P4, P7, P9) entered full-time training at a later age (from age 16 upwards). Later specialisation involved engaging with ballet training after school as an extra-curricular activity until age 16, at which point dancers began full-time dancing either in training or as part of a company. These dancers described the benefits of growing up outside of the context of more serious dance training, experiencing a 'normal childhood' and less pressure and scrutiny related to pubertal development.

I'd been doing competitions actually before that. The [name of school] had a [name of dance competition] competition and I went the year before so I was looking at everyone at my age and the standard. What I realised was I felt lucky because I'd managed to have a normal childhood up until that point and these kids had not. I wasn't too far behind really so it was okay...I guess you see the world out there and you see there's more going on and it's not everything. Even though it is everything to me but you realise that you can do other stuff...Everyone that went to ballet school, it sounds like they missed out on something. (P7)

Existing research highlights the paradox of health outcomes in recreational and vocational dance training environments, recreational dance training being associated with more positive health outcomes, and vocational training being associated with more negative outcomes (Anshel, 2004; Burkhardt & Rhodes, 2012; McEwen & Young, 2011; Quin et al., 2007). While it is likely that experiencing puberty in the context of less serious, recreational dance training may contribute to more adaptive health outcomes compared to experiencing puberty in a vocational dance context, further research is needed to substantiate this.

Research in dance, although limited to classical ballet and undertaken three decades ago, advocates for early specialisation (selection into vocational ballet training from age ten or eleven), contending that better psychological wellbeing is facilitated through 'weeding out' those with less amenable physical and functional characteristics (Hamilton et al., 1988). Findings from the current study suggest, however, that greater benefits arise from later specialisation. Dancers embarking on

full-time ballet training at a later age described a less pressurised and generally easier period of adaptation to pubertal change compared to those in a vocational training context.

I knew every day after school that I would be going to this place and then I would do this thing [dancing] for four or five hours at night and that I would spend my entire Saturday there. Later on in my latter training between 18 to 23, again it was the same thing. I would be at junior college all day and then I would dance all day in the evening and on the weekends. I had a really strong social network there and support network so when I was growing and going through all of that I didn't feel pressure. My trainers were all really wonderful mentors, especially the latter half of my training and they supported me through that. It helped that it wasn't so serious (P9)

Dancers described the opportunity to have a 'normal childhood' and to benefit from a wider range of experiences as facilitative to their success in the profession and noted that experiencing puberty in a less serious training environment was advantageous. Research in sport supports this, advocating early diversification in childhood (Côté et al., 2009; Crane & Temple, 2015). Early specialisation is associated with greater incidence of injury, burnout, and less enjoyment (Crane & Temple, 2015). Early diversification is linked to more positive psychological outcomes and continued sport participation (Crane & Temple, 2015). Future research should utilise longitudinal studies in ballet to explore the nuances of later specialisation relative to the pubertal transition more fully.

Quality of Dancer-Teacher Relationship

Consistent with existing literature, significant individuals such as the dance teacher were described as playing an important role in terms of their response to pubertal changes and subsequently how those changes were perceived by the individual (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2016; Summers-Effler, 2004). Interaction and relationship with the dance teacher was described relative to its potential to facilitate a positive transition through puberty, such as the acceptance of pubertal changes or the potential to promote maladaptive responses. This finding is

well-established in literature outside ballet, with theories positing that the contexts in which the individual develops serve to amplify the effects of maturity timing (Ge et al., 2002).

How teachers responded to pubertal changes, and subsequent changes in the quality of dancer interactions with the teacher was described as a struggle for many of the dancers. In addition, the way in which dance teachers approached puberty and their actions around that time were perceived as important. Puberty was described almost as ‘the elephant in the room’ with many dancers describing a more passive teaching approach:

...It was like I knew, on a conscious level, that I was fine and that my body was just doing what it would normally do but I think, since there were girls who were just like, some were smaller than me because they hadn't gone through puberty yet... I guess it was a little upsetting and it definitely affected my confidence, and the fact that it was not acknowledged made it worse, because I knew it, but no-one just said it. (P4)

Where more direct approaches were used, these were generally described as negative. Many dancers described their teacher's responses in terms of being told to lose weight: “I think it did affect my training a little bit because my teachers were suddenly like, ‘You need to lose weight. You have to lose weight.’ I think it made me feel a little bit stressed out and confused about what was suddenly different” (P5). Others were threatened with losing roles in performances if they could not lose enough weight: “...They took parts away unless I could lose the weight. I was only 11 and I didn't know how to lose weight at 11 years old so I ended up losing the part in the show (P6).

How significant others respond and react to puberty can impact whether or not an individual adapts healthily to change (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2017; Summers-Effler, 2004). For instance, in a study with gymnasts there are examples of the coach as a facilitator of development; whereby the coach provided opportunities to explore the adult self and conduct and provided room for exploration during the pubertal transition (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2017).

In this study, the teacher was described as less facilitative with regard to the pubertal transition, with the focus on encouragement to lose weight and a perceptible change in dancer-

teacher relationship when pubertal change led to dancers being perceived as less desirable for a career in ballet. Critical comments and encouragement from teachers to lose weight inferred to dancers that pubertal changes were negative. Certain pubertal changes are associated with more negative social value, such as breast development and widening of the hips (Mitchell et al., 2016). Moreover, teacher comments to lose weight during puberty highlight a lack of teacher understanding of normal, healthy human growth at this point in time, consistent with observations in prior research (Mitchell et al., 2016). These are examples of stakeholders, such as the dance teacher, enforcing a “fat free and sexually immature physique” through a range of practices such as weighing, de-selection and body related comments (McMahon & Barker-Ruchti, 2017, p. 157).

Dancers reflected on how pubertal changes impacted the quality and nature of their interactions with teachers. Dancers described being ignored, close relationships becoming distant and their having to look for other ways to gain teacher approval: “...it became very clear, as soon as I got there, that they weren’t going to treat me like they treated everybody else, because I had body-type issues...They started not even letting me learn things, and just kind of ignoring me altogether...” (P1). One participant described how the quality of her relationship with her teachers changed dramatically due to what her teachers perceived as a significant change in body shape:

...I was a little bit shocked, definitely taken aback when they pulled me into their office...from the end of the last year to over the summer and then to the beginning of that year, that the relationship between us, was not the same so I said, ‘I want to talk to you, I want to see what’s going on’ and their answer was literally, ‘your body has changed’ and I’m like, ‘this is what this is all about, are you kidding me?’ And they were like, ‘you don’t see this?’ ...It’s also just to see someone that you thought you knew and I loved these teachers and they really liked me too and then to come back and be treated like that, made me feel really bad about myself. So, I had to work much harder, because they weren’t going to look at me for my body, maybe they would look at me for my work ethic or whatever. So, that was hard. (P8)

As the natural process of puberty progressed and body shape and size changed, the quality of the teacher-dancer relationship changed; signalling that bodies which do not conform to the pre-pubescent ideal, are no longer worth investing in. The fact that normal pubertal changes in weight or body shape were seen as problematic speaks to the cultural expectations and norms of the ballet world. In ballet sub-culture, being 'small' and not having 'bits' conforms much more neatly to the preference for sylphlike, skeletal, 'other-worldly' bodies (Johnson, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2020).

As described by P8, many dancers felt strongly that a less ideal physique could be compensated for, through psychological or technical assets. Existing, albeit dated literature contends that compensation comes at a cost, such that dancers that succeed despite possessing less ideal physiques, report poorer psychological wellbeing (Hamilton et al., 1988; Hamilton et al., 1997). Evidence from this study supports this, in that dancers with physiques deemed less amenable to the requirements of ballet described a constant struggle to maintain an 'acceptable' physique.

Similar findings have been reported in gymnasts, among whom greater body size was associated with negative interactions with coaches, i.e., less encouragement, reinforcement and instruction, more punishment and ignoring of mistakes (Cumming et al., 2005). Some dancers described these responses as pivotal to their subsequent disliking of pubertal change. The ramifications of such responses may be significant for wellbeing, with previous studies reporting an association between the disliking of pubertal changes and the development of disordered eating behaviours (Moore et al., 2016). These findings necessitate a greater focus in research and practice upon dance teacher behaviours when working with adolescent dancers.

Coming to Terms with It

Dancers described 'coming to terms' with pubertal changes as a critical part of their experience. In contrast to the theme of conflict and struggle where factors were not within the control of the dancer, in coming to terms with pubertal changes dancers described acceptance, adapting to or compensating for changes and social support, as critical actions.

Accepting and Adapting

Acceptance of physical appearance is well-established as a challenge at puberty (Patton & Viner, 2007). Decreases in self-perceived physical attractiveness and concomitant body image concerns are common in adolescent girls (Cole et al., 2001). Dancers described acceptance of their adult physique as an important part of negotiating puberty in the context of ballet.

...you just have to learn to work with what you have, and when I was growing up I thought that I could change everything about myself, if I just tried hard enough. But, there are great things about having bigger body types, and I've been in ballet companies and they are all super slim, and I mean super muscular and everything, but they are all built completely differently, and you can see that they have all worked in totally different ways to get there. So, I don't think there is one set route to get to a professional career. (P1)

Learning to work with and accept a post-pubertal physique that may not be ideal for ballet was part of the process of negotiating puberty for these ballet dancers. Once dancers were able to reach a point of acceptance they were often able to realise a greater appreciation of what their body could do. One dancer described acceptance in terms of coming to the realisation, as an adult, that the prescribed ideal of a pre-pubescent physique may not be so desirable after all.

So, my feelings about my body, I would say that they were negative for a while and definitely not constructive but, I suppose, after... that was while puberty was happening, and then afterwards that's when they then changed to being more positive again and realising that, actually, it's not desirable to look like a child anyway, in dancing. That's not a great physique. So I think there are positives to going through puberty. (P3)

Accepting and realising the positive aspects associated with physical change appears crucial to negotiating puberty adaptively. The dancer-teacher relationship and the ballet training context could facilitate this process or make it more challenging, as described in the previous theme. However, dancers described how their own acceptance of physical changes comprised just one part of coming to terms with puberty. To achieve acceptance from the wider ballet world and survive in the profession, dancers described how they needed to adapt or compensate for aspects of their

physical appearance deemed less than ideal: "...I was always aware that I wasn't the girl with the really crazy extension and I didn't have the long legged, skinny ballet body but I was really determined to be good at everything else" (P6). In this instance, not having the desired flexibility or ballet body were considered significant enough deficits that this dancer felt she needed to be good at everything else to outweigh these flaws. Dance literature supports the idea of a 'risk-dance culture' where intense competitive training and performing environments and hyper-critical and perfectionist attitudes of teachers/performers may facilitate early success in dance yet ultimately compromise health (McEwen & Young, 2011). While further research is needed to substantiate how compensation might manifest in this context, existing work suggests compensatory behaviour is associated with risk to health and wellbeing (Hamilton et al., 1997; Johnson, 2018).

In some cases, dancers described how they needed to excel in other areas (e.g., technique, performance) to overcome those 'flaws': "I just tried to pretend that they didn't exist. I just tried to push on through it, and like I said, make people forget that I had those flaws, by trying to make my assets greater" (P1). That dancers perceive very normal pubertal changes as 'flaws' speaks to the ingrained nature of ballet body ideals. Pickard's research (2009, 2012, 2013, 2015) on the lived experiences of young ballet dancers across a period of four years, mirrors this, emphasising the significance of developing within ballet sub-culture. Pickard notes how the identity of young ballet dancers is shaped by the need to attach positive meaning to lived experiences related to pain and suffering and learn to re-frame or suppress pain and negative emotions. Moreover, conforming to dominant ideas, beliefs, norms, behaviours, values and expectations of ballet culture, such as expectations about how the body should look, is understood as capital and currency which is traded in order to succeed (Pickard, 2012). This is an accepted as part of the process of embodying an identity as a ballet dancer (Pickard, 2012; Pickard & Bailey, 2009). For example, Megan (11 years old) states: "I'm so lucky because I'm naturally slim and little and that's exactly how you must be in ballet. I don't have to diet at the moment but I know lots of my friends have to be very aware of what they eat because they have those sorts of bodies" (Pickard, 2013, p. 14). This is an example of

how Megan has been shaped through her development within the ballet world. Megan has increased physical capital because of her naturally slim and petite physique. At the age of 11 Megan is already very aware of the notion of the ideal body for ballet and how important it is in order to succeed and that same awareness is described by dancers in this study.

Utilising Social Support

While the ballet training context and teacher behaviours were described as central in terms of how dancers perceived pubertal changes, social support was highlighted as a contextual factor that mitigated some of these struggles. Utilising social support from peers, parents and teachers, was described as key in terms of 'coming to terms' with the physical changes of puberty; preparing dancers for puberty, helping them accept changes and be realistic, and in supporting them to adapt. For some dancers, realising that peers were experiencing the same changes was reassuring.

... my class was all girls, as well, I feel like in between lessons, kind of a group... because everyone was going through it about the same time, you would just chat with each other and you'd be like, 'Oh, it's happening to everyone.' So then, as a collective, it was okay. I feel that was the main, like, talking to your friends, 'Oh yes, you're getting bigger too.' (P2)

Accordingly, social support is noted in existing theory as a key factor associated with the development of coping strategies in young athletes (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; White & Bennie, 2015). In addition, social support has also been acknowledged as a factor contributing to success in ballet and dance more broadly (Pickard, 2006; Walker et al., 2010). Dancers who described more positive overall experiences and easier adaptation at puberty described strong social support networks with parents, peers and, in some cases, dance teachers who acted as mentors.

Well it [dance] was positive for me because it gave me a home, it gave me a group of people that wanted me there and were expecting me there so I had a place to belong...I had a really strong social network there and support network. My trainers were all really wonderful mentors, especially the latter half of my training, even more when I was professional as an adult. (P6)

Research in dance has found social support to be an important determinant of wellbeing in adolescents (Francisco et al., 2012; Stark & Newton, 2014). Social support was described as key in the experiences of elite dancers, as such, consideration of ways to facilitate greater social support for young dancers warrants further exploration.

Grit and Grace

The characteristics or behaviours dancers described acquiring or possessing in order to negotiate puberty and succeed within the ballet profession can be summed up by the term 'Grit and Grace' which one of the dancers used to describe these qualities: "...you have to have a little bit of luck on your side but you have to have that grit, you know, kind of, grit and grace at the same time to be able to sustain, to first get into the – to a company but then to be able to sustain it" (P9). This grit underpins the psychological attributes which helped dancers to negotiate the challenges of puberty and contributed to their success in ballet; enabling dancers to have resilience in the face of rejection of their post-pubertal bodies and to find the strength to accept and adapt to pubertal changes in a context where prepubescent bodies are preferred (Mitchell et al., 2016).

Two key aspects formed the core of 'Grit and Grace': Learning to question authority figures such as the dance teacher, and having perspective. Each of these factors was perceived to contribute to successfully negotiating the pubertal transition in ballet.

Learning to question teacher and authority figure 'wisdom' was described as an important skill for survival and success in the ballet profession and as an important learning curve, in some cases pivotal, for coming to terms with changes "Just taking everything with a grain of salt and evaluating everything. Still listening and paying attention but knowing that one opinion isn't everything. Like, any correction you get, sometimes you're like, 'that's a stupid correction. That just doesn't work for me, at all.' Having that same perspective when people have opinions about you" (P4).

Beginning to question authority is a feature of cognitive development which usually arises in early adolescence (Brown et al., 2017), and may be an important development for young dancers,

particularly in terms of coming to terms with pubertal change. As described above (P4), being able to question the 'wisdom' of authority figures facilitates the process of perspective taking and choosing which teacher comments to take on board. This critical ability is central to the 'grit' described by dancers in helping them to negotiate pubertal change in a context which does not necessarily welcome those changes (Mitchell et al., 2016). In ballet and in sports such as gymnastics where the teacher-dancer or coach-athlete relationship is often authoritarian in nature, the value of being able to question teacher wisdom may be particularly great and warrants further exploration in the context of adolescent development and ballet (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2017; Green, 1999).

Perspective and the ability to cope with rejection was an important part of dancers' experiences: "You also have to never be, you know, take anything personally, because you're going to get a million 'no's' and a million, 'You stand in the back line', you know, and you have to still be fine with it" (P9). Dancers placed great value on the ability to put things into perspective:

With negative things, you just have to take yourself back into the real world and be like, 'No one's died. You're not in a war zone. You're still getting to dance.' Generally, what I've learnt as well is sometimes the person who is saying the bad things or having that, it's the teacher who is actually having the bad day. It's not necessarily you. Maybe you did something a little bit but I think you get so many eccentric people as well in the dance world that it's almost entertaining. So I never really took it so seriously. (P7)

In line with the underdog hypothesis, possessing or developing attributes, such as resilience and perspective taking, may facilitate those with less desirable physiques, or other physical attributes associated with pubertal change, to succeed (Gibbs et al., 2012). It is possible that dancers, particularly during puberty, develop these attributes in order to succeed in a system where their physical characteristics may be less ideal (Gibbs et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2020).

While further research is needed to substantiate the role played by psychological attributes, findings from the present study suggest that they may mitigate the effects of maturity timing and the ballet context; enabling dancers to overcome or accept challenges associated with puberty

and/or the ballet world. The importance of these qualities for success in the profession is well documented, with evidence of psychological skills training being applied successfully in dance settings (Brassington & Adam, 2003; Chua, 2014; Chua, 2015; Klockare et al., 2011; Moyle, 2013; Pickard & Bailey, 2009; Walker et al., 2010). Further research focussing on psychological skills training for dancers during puberty is needed.

Practical Recommendations and Scholarship Recommendations

In summary, conflict and struggle were central to experiences of negotiating puberty in a ballet context; specifically challenges arise from the conflict between normal pubertal change and body ideals of the ballet world. Coming to terms with pubertal changes involved navigating this conflict and struggle and was described as a process of acceptance and adaptation. Adaptive examples of this process relied heavily on social support from peers and a positive dancer-teacher relationship. While 'Grit and Grace' describe the psychological attributes harnessed by dancers to 'survive' this process; negotiating the pubertal transition and achieving success in the dance profession.

This study is limited to the experiences of nine elite ballet dancers, who can be considered 'survivors' of the ballet training system and these findings cannot be generalised to all dancers. In particular, interviews with those selected out of the training system would likely yield very different findings. The international nature of the sample, provides evidence of similar lived experiences and points to a homogeneity in ballet sub-culture in the United Kingdom and the United States. However, this sample comprised only White participants, therefore the findings from this work are not generalizable across different ethnicities. Further research with a larger, more ethnically, culturally and geographically diverse sample is needed to substantiate and advance these findings.

Mean interview duration was 50 minutes. While it is recommended that interviews of a duration of 60 minutes or more are used for conducting IPA, it is not uncommon in other published IPA studies to report an interview duration of less than 60 minutes (Alase, 2017; Bennett & Harden, 2019; Stoll & McLeod, 2020). Shorter interview duration in this study was related to participant time

availability. Interview transcripts were reviewed by the lead researcher (SM) and two senior researchers (SC, AH) and, thus, deemed rich enough in detail to complete the analysis. Member reflections were carried out via email due to time constraints. However, it is noted that encouraging participants to critically engage in this dialogue may have been better facilitated verbally.

Interviewing adult ballet dancers about lived experiences means that much of the data is retrospective. This has implications for the findings of the study and their application to ballet. For example, advances in the field of dance medicine and science, dance teacher knowledge and behaviours may have moved forward since this cohort of dancers was in training. However, evidence from Mitchell et al., 2016 and 2020 suggests that further education around puberty and maturation in ballet is still warranted. The experiences of dancers in this study highlight a need for dance teacher education to generate a greater understanding of child development, physically and psychologically. This may include information about normal pubertal development (e.g., weight gain, breast development), the timing of development and the extent of normal variation (Hoyt et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2016). While further research is needed to substantiate a need for this in current cohorts of young dancers, findings also point to a need for further education for young dancers (Mitchell et al., 2020). Education for teachers and dancers may facilitate avoidance of particular teacher behaviours such as comments on body weight and shape and weighing (Annus & Smith, 2009) and achieve greater preparedness and acceptance of pubertal changes for dancers.

Evidence from the four dancers who began their full-time ballet training post-16 (later specialisation) also warrants further investigation. These dancers reported benefits of later specialisation for 'normal development'. The potential for this approach to foster more adaptive responses at puberty and subsequently greater psychological wellbeing, while under-researched, goes against previous literature in ballet pertaining to wellbeing and selection age (Hamilton et al., 1988). Future studies should consider examining this association with a larger sample of dancers.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how dancers negotiate the challenges of puberty in ballet, how that differs relative to the timing of puberty and how they negotiate the challenges of puberty in order to succeed. Findings suggest that conflict and struggle are central to experiences of negotiating puberty in a ballet context; specifically challenges arise from the conflict between normal pubertal change and body ideals of the ballet world. While dancers recognised both challenges and benefits in relation to early and late pubertal timing, those who developed early described greater conflict between physical changes and the ballet training context. Coming to terms with physical changes through a process of acceptance and adaptation was described as central to surviving the pubertal transition in ballet. While grit and grace underpinned the psychological attributes needed to negotiate the pubertal transition and succeed in the ballet profession. Factors such as social support, the timing and extent of pubertal changes, dance teacher behaviours and the ballet training context, influenced the extent to which dancers experienced conflict and struggle and how easily they were able to come to terms with their adult physique. Future research should explore the implications of experiencing puberty within the context of ballet training in more depth in order to inform strategies to better facilitate healthy development in ballet.

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