

Voices of Young Women Dance Students: An Interpretive Study of Meaning in Dance

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What is dance and what is the experience of dancing? What does dancing mean for those who do it?

Dance scholars and critics have written many words in response to these questions. Choreographers give their answers to “what is dance?” in the work they create and, often, in commentary about it. Professional dancers have also spoken, primarily in biographies and autobiographies, of what dance and dancing mean to them. Not all voices are heard in dance literature, however. In particular, the voices of children and adolescents, especially those not enrolled in professional schools, are silent. What is the dance experience like, and what does it mean, for them? What do their experiences—and the meanings they make of them—say to us, who work with young people in dance?

These were the questions that propelled three researchers into this study focusing on a group of 16-18 year old young women. In particular we were interested in finding out what young women dancers thought of their place within dance and dancing. This research focused initially on young adolescents and, as such, represents only a beginning of what we view as an important area of investigation.

As in any study, our questions were not divorced from who we are and what we value. The voices of students heard in this study come through our own. We thus find it relevant to make ourselves visible before we begin.

We share a concern for the relationships between what goes on in the dance classroom and the rest of a student’s life, as well as a desire to look critically at dance education in its social context. By “dance education” we mean the general notion that people are educated in the ways of dance in a variety of dance classrooms: professional schools, private studios, public schools, recreation programs, and university and college dance programs.

Our perspective on the relation of dance education and social context was shaped by our common experience as doctoral

students in Curriculum and Teaching, with an emphasis in Cultural Studies, at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. At the time of the study, we were also teaching at UNCG, where our students were, generally, only slightly older than our subjects. Beyond these commonalities, we each brought our own individual experiences, our own lens, to this work.

Jan Van Dyke grew up with the desire to become a dancer. She began studying dance as a child at both modern dance and ballet studios in the Washington, D.C. area. She majored in dance at the University of Wisconsin, earned an M.A. in dance education at George Washington University, studied in New York City with Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham, and then ran her own school and performing space in Washington, D.C. in the 1970s and a company from 1972 to 1985.

Donald Blumenfeld-Jones began to dance at the age of 21. Prior to his graduate school experience, he danced professionally in New York City for seven years and studied in professional studios there. Subsequently he taught dance at Duke University and Columbia College in South Carolina.

Both Jan and Donald, having come to their doctoral work from backgrounds in professional dance performance, started with a focus limited to technical aspects of dance—how to do it, how to teach it, how to get funding. In their doctoral study they began to encounter ways of thinking which enabled them to seek answers to long submerged questions about dance education, questions which had arisen during their professional experience. Because their professional experiences had differed, they developed different areas of exploration. Specifically, Donald began to question whether or not many of his negative educational experiences had been necessary for learning to dance, and whether or not there could be ways of teaching which would be more attendant to humane values while still enabling quality dancing. Jan began to examine artistic funding as a cultural force in the development of dance knowledge.

Sue Stinson began to study dance as a 17 year-old, but her

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study was limited and definitely avocational until completing her undergraduate work in sociology. When her career interest shifted from social work to education, she settled on dance as “something to teach” and pursued a graduate degree in dance education. Following several years’ engagement in choreography and performing, she began an intensive focus on teaching children, especially in public school settings. She was named a Master Teacher by the National Endowment for the Arts’ Artists-In-Schools program, and then joined the UNCG faculty in dance education. Her doctoral work in curriculum allowed her to recognize not only the possibilities but also the problematic aspects of learning to dance.

As the three of us shared our stories with each other—when and how we had started in dance, why we continued—and as we pursued our work together, we found increasing appreciation for our differences in helping us expose our biases and find their roots. We became particularly aware that the language we used legitimated some experiences over others. For example, we realized that the phrase “professional dance background” conventionally refers to only those professionals who are connected with the stage. Other kinds of professionals in the field—the educator, the historian, the critic—despite their skill and years of preparation, are often regarded as less significant than the performer and choreographer. Even though we found such a hierarchy problematic, it was difficult to avoid using language that perpetuated it. As the study developed, our subjects made clear to us how deeply embedded hierarchy was within our dance culture. However, our interaction made us, in effect, additional subjects in the study; we wish to acknowledge the impact of our own consciousness(es) on this research.

I. Methodology

Assumptions

Two assumptions guided our choice of methodology. First, meaning in dance is, ultimately, personal meaning. Despite commonalities among people, each individual’s point of view is, by definition, uniquely his or hers. We sought a methodology that would retain the uniqueness of each person, and at the same time reveal larger issues.

Second, personal meaning as we saw it is not always immediately available to consciousness, ready to be expressed briefly and quickly. This implied a methodology that would allow us to pursue each individual’s emerging thought in whatever way it unfolded, and to follow up on issues raised. It was important that we participate in a dialogue with our subjects rather than administer a questionnaire. The length of time needed with each individual and the amount of data that would be generated posed a limitation to the number of subjects we could include.

In keeping with our focus on personal meaning, emerging thought, and our assumptions about the lack of immediate availability of meaning, we chose an interpretive methodology drawn from both phenomenological and hermeneutic inquiry. These methods allowed us to seek meaning through the twin processes of attending to the words given (a phenomenological approach) and of interpreting meanings of the words (a hermeneutic approach).

It should be understood that form and content are related in interpretive research similarly to the way they are related in

choreography. In both situations, form and content evolve together. There are no pre-existing rules which determine this relationship. As Howe and Eisenhart (1990) state,

[A] methodology must be judged by how well it informs research purposes . . . methodology must respond to the different purposes and contexts of research. (pp. 4-5)

They go on to say that a methodology proceeds by what they call “logic in use,” by which they mean that the logic for the method evolves during the process of research. In the case of this research, what we found and the subsequent discussion at each step of the process guided subsequent decisions about how to proceed. This procedure will become clearer as we describe the interview material and our processes of interpretation. (For further information on this methodology see Beittel 1973, Braxton 1984, Kollen 1981, Van Manen 1990.)

Subjects

In order to allow us to focus on more personal, individual differences we attempted to select a group that was relatively homogeneous in terms of a number of fairly obvious characteristics. We agreed to limit our subjects to young women between the ages of 16 and 18 who had studied dance for at least five years, and who lived in a geographic area that would be accessible to us. Further, we decided to focus on serious, well-trained, and verbally articulate dancers. Four studios and schools known by us were contacted and asked for referrals of individuals who met the criteria for the target group. They included one jazz studio, one ballet studio, one modern dance studio, and one with an equal reputation in both ballet and modern. Only one of the studio/school directors indicated both interest and support for the project; both referrals from this studio indicated their willingness to participate. Two of the other three directors referred students, but only one of these students was willing to participate; this student was reached only through a personal contact known to one of the researchers. We were very aware that these were busy young women who considered dancing a more valuable use of their time than talking to university researchers. The difficulty of finding participants for a study such as this is a methodological problem that needs to be addressed in future studies.

Ultimately, other participants for the study were selected from among entering freshman dance students at a single university—ones who were placed, through audition, at the upper intermediate level or higher in ballet and/or modern dance. All of these students were sent letters inviting them to participate in the study; the four who responded were selected. This gave us a total of seven subjects.

It would be most appropriate, in terms of our intentions to present each of our subjects in depth, allowing them to speak in this paper as they did with us, one by one. Limitations of time and space, and the anonymity we promised, prevent that. We will give only a brief introduction; all names have been changed.

Two students were from the same studio, a modern dance school which includes improvisation and choreography within the curriculum. These students had also studied other dance

forms at their studio, and while they were still in high school had attended a summer dance program for college students. They had been friends and had danced together since they were four years old.

For the other five students with whom we spoke, dance study had focused primarily on ballet, with some amounts of jazz, tap, and modern. One student had studied modern at a summer program for individuals selected as gifted in dance from throughout the state. Another had spent her junior year in high school at a highly competitive state arts school, where, as she said, "I had a year of Graham beaten into my soul." She had not been asked to return following that year.

Our general observation about all of the young women with whom we spoke was that they were mature, bright, and verbally articulate, as well as skilled dancers. They had started dancing as young as age 2 1/2 and as old as 11; all except Jane had been studying almost continually since that time. Jane had taken a 2 1/2 year hiatus from class, during which she continued dancing and choreographing for high school musicals. By their final year in high school, the other six students were dancing—in class and rehearsals—almost every day of the week.

Despite these similarities, the students were all unique individuals. When asked to describe herself, Rachel chose the words "intelligent athlete;" she noted that she did not fit the stereotype of an "artsy" person. Ellen spoke of having "a best friend who doesn't dance," with whom she did "normal" things like shopping and going to movies. Lily was classified as "academically gifted," and had just received a valuable scholarship based on her academic excellence. As she described herself for us she said, "I'm a good girl," and observed that sometimes others saw her as "Little Miss Perfect." Peggy talked about her desire to be involved in activities other than dance; she was particularly interested in running track, but found that it conflicted with her dance schedule. She also indicated that she was very conscientious about grades. Amber described herself as having been the "average high school student on appearance," and, in addition, noted that she was intelligent and generally cheerful. Jane described herself as changeable and openminded. In thinking about her future she said she wanted "to help people, not just relate with them." Elizabeth told us about her aunt, a very independent woman who was a role model for her. In the future, Elizabeth said, she would like to be very assertive and intelligent, and to be in control of her actions and her life.

Procedures

Each student was interviewed twice by one of the researchers. The first interview, lasting in most cases 60-90 minutes, focused on questions that allowed the student to speak about dance and about herself as a person and as a young woman. Later, the interviewer observed the student in a dance class. The observation class was followed by a second, shorter interview focusing on the student's feelings during that class and issues that arose in relation to it.

During the interviews we used some pre-determined questions that were intended to serve as a framework for conversation rather than to guide the dialogue in a particular way (see sample interview questions in the Appendix). Instead of obtaining answers to specific questions, our interest was in hearing the young women speak about dance and about themselves,

selecting aspects they (the students) considered significant. Because of this, different issues came up in each interview.

Tape recordings of the interviews were transcribed, resulting in 28-92 pages of data per student. Analysis of the data occurred in three stages. The first was a summary of the transcripts using the students' words but eliminating what we considered to be extraneous material—such things as hesitations (except where we interpreted them to be significant markers of shifting thought patterns) and redundancies within a particular interview.

There were two checks on the accuracy and completeness of these summaries. First, the summary prepared by each researcher was checked by another researcher against the original transcript and against the tape recording, when necessary, for clarification of intent. Second, each student was consulted regarding whether or not the summary basically reflected what she felt at the time of the interview; the few changes requested by the students were made.

The summaries were the primary source used in further stages of interpretation. However, we did find it necessary to return at times to the full transcripts and even the tape recordings for confirmation of interpretations.

The second stage of the analysis was a reduction of the summaries in which each researcher identified each interviewee's point of view about dancing. With three researchers, the result was three versions for each student. There were many similarities among our versions, but each was also distinct. Since the distinctiveness of individual voices is considered an asset rather than a liability in this kind of methodology, we decided not to attempt to reduce our unique perspectives to a single version of what each interviewee was saying.

The third stage of the analysis involved using our three perspectives in regard to each individual to seek common themes across subjects. Again we discussed the similarities and differences of our interpretations. We recognized that our differing views of the meanings of these young women's words stemmed from our differing life experiences and attitudes toward those experiences. Through a series of drafts and negotiations about meanings we eventually came to an agreed upon understanding of the young women's words. This understanding will be discussed in Section II.

Clarification of Purposes and Limitations

It is important to recognize the intent of the interpretive methodology we chose and what it can and cannot tell us. The work of Robert Donmoyer (1985) presents a helpful way of thinking about research methodology in relation to its purpose. He points out that questions of meaning are appropriately answered by methods of what he refers to as "humanities-based" research. This kind of research is not concerned with testing whether a proposition is true or false, but with developing a language, which provides a way of illuminating the lived experience of the persons in question. In all cases the language which emerges out of the investigation becomes a way of narrating a number of different and specific stories.

Languages are neither true nor false. However, each has considerable capacity to be useful to us, because different languages allow us to "both see different things and see things differently" (Donmoyer 1985:4). To alter our language is to bring into view new perspectives on a situation, thing, or

experience. Thus, different investigations will develop different languages, all of which can account for differing experiences in the world and enhance the possibility of understanding the stories and experiences of others.

Interpretive research, then, cannot tell us whether a proposition is true or false. Further, it does not give us findings that are generalizable in a statistical sense. Donmoyer (1988) argues that statistical generalization is important when thinking about aggregates and cause-effect relationships, but not when we wish to think about individuals, who construct their own meanings from their lived experiences. Vicarious experiences, whether they come from reading a novel or listening to the voices of others in interpretive research, can also contribute to this construction of meaning. Donmoyer suggests that this kind of generalization is particularly important in helping us expand the cognitive structures that serve to filter our perceptions of the world. In other words, when we see the world through someone else's eyes, we may be able to see a different world.

These comments are important in understanding the purposes and limitations of this research. Our desire was not to develop a statement of fact about what dance means to all young people, or even to the seven young women with whom we spoke. Rather, we sought to expand our own language for thinking about what dance can be for those who do it, how it comes to have meaning, and what all of that means to us as persons involved in the teaching and doing of dance with young people. Such language is grounded in what people actually say about their experience in dance, and our own language was enriched by the words of the young women with whom we spoke.

In the spirit of participant hermeneutics, we invited our subjects to engage in the meaning making process with us. By this we mean that we did not act as neutral or mechanical observers of their discourse but, rather, engaged in interested conversation with them. We did not so much lead as allow them to direct the conversation by encouraging them, during the conversation, to reflect on what they were saying. We expected our respondents to not just tell us what they already knew about their experience of dancing and what it meant to them, but to become more aware of its meaning in the process of trying to find words to talk about it. One of the premises of hermeneutic inquiry is that the meaning of a phenomenon becomes richer and/or more clear in the process of reflecting on it.

In the spirit of phenomenological inquiry we attempted to describe the lived experience of our respondents and the structures of consciousness underlying it. Holding to the guidelines for this methodology, we attempted to attend only that which presented itself. During the interview process this meant allowing the students' interests to guide the development of the interview. During the analysis phase we required that our interpretations be substantiated by the words of our respondents, and we frequently, as researchers, challenged each other in this regard.

Our attempt to attend to only that which presented itself made us quite aware of two premises underlying phenomenological research. The first is that the researcher cannot remove subjectivity from a relationship, even a research relationship. In the interviews, our own personal interests inevitably influenced the way we each followed up on initial statements with further probing questions, and the way each of us came to understand

the interview content. We recognize the current debate over objectivity and subjectivity in research methodology. (For examples see Bernstein 1983, Peshkin 1988, and Phillips 1987.) While we will not discuss this issue further here, we must note that subjectivity was intentional for our method, allowing us to interact with our subjects as subjects ourselves.

A second premise of phenomenological research is that the nature of the data is always fragmentary. We recognized that the words spoken by our respondents were not in themselves the complete and accurate representation of what these students actually thought and felt, and that much of the reality out of which each of us acts does not exist in our conscious awareness.

II. Analysis

In our analysis we identified two general structures which helped us organize the words of the interviewees and begin to understand the way dance became meaningful for the students with whom we spoke. The first structure focuses on the relationship between the student dancer and her own experience of dancing. The second focuses on the relationship between the student dancer and the dance world as she makes the transition from childhood.

The Dancer and Dancing

In the first structure the meaning of dance is intertwined with the identity of the students. Their own words help clarify this point.

It is who I am. . . . If I couldn't dance I think I would feel like there was a part of me that was just totally dead.
(Lily)

I just can't imagine life without it. (Peggy)

I can't imagine not doing it. If something would happen and I couldn't do it I'd be a very bitter person probably.
(Amber)

It became clear that how students perceive, describe, and experience dance reflects in general what they value. We do not know to what extent these values are instilled by dance training and to what extent students bring the values with them and thus shape their own experience of dance. We do, however, see their relationship with dancing as a satisfying one.

One particularly vivid example lies in the area of hard work and discipline. Jane noted, "Dance is . . . discipline that I need." Rachel referred to structure and hard work when she discussed her preference for technique class over improvisation:

You work harder and things are set, so you know what you're supposed to do. . . . And you get a hard sweat, heavy sweat and get tired. I guess I like it 'cause it feels like you're really dancing . . . working hard.

Amber echoed the words of other students when she spoke about discipline, saying,

. . . if I'm in any class I'm there to take class and not to goof around. I don't particularly like to be in class with somebody who's all the time laughing and talking and

not paying attention.

The focus in technique class is on doing the movement and getting it right. When asked what she was thinking about during class, Lily responded, "I'm basically thinking about the step and how you do it. . . . I think about what I would look like to someone if they were watching me right now." Ellen stated her thoughts as "I gotta get it. Oh God I did that wrong. I gotta do this right. I'm too fast here, I'm too slow here." Jane said, "There's so much pressure to get everything right. I want them [teachers] to think that I can do things. I want to impress them, for them to see my progress."

Dance class offers challenges and thus gives students a forum for proving themselves. Peggy described one teacher as "throwing" the material at the class, and "then we have to do it. I really enjoy that because it's a challenge for me." Satisfaction comes from meeting challenges (keeping up when the teacher "pushes you," keeping up with older and more experienced dancers, being able to do things which are physically demanding), doing specific movements correctly, improving (seeing the results of one's hard work), and getting recognition from the teacher or choreographer. The recognition need not be in the form of approval; just being recognized validates their existence and effort. As Amber said, "I'd much rather be told that I'm doing it wrong than not to be noticed at all." Elizabeth recalled one setting where "I got yelled at a lot, but that felt just as good, getting yelled at or told you did something wrong."

Performing offers another arena for proving oneself. Lily described a special moment on stage that illustrates this: "I did a triple [pirouette] on stage. . . . I just threw it in . . . like, well why not? Show what I got—that was a really neat moment, just being able to say I can do it and doing it." The consequences of failure are greater in a performing situation, but the resulting sense of risk can be a bonus when one is successful. As Elizabeth stated, "It's the excitement . . . thinking about whether something will go wrong and if it doesn't it's such a triumph." They recognize their own mistakes even when the audience does not. However, audience response is a major contributor to their sense of satisfaction. Amber noted, "I like to perform better when the audience is good . . . you give them back so much more. Your satisfaction is greater when you know without a doubt they enjoyed it." Lily said, ". . . it's nice to have someone say that was really wonderful . . . when you get the nice reviews and the compliments or maybe someone's admiration . . . these are like bonuses."

While these young women desire the acknowledgment of others, and are most satisfied when they exceed the expectations of others, they also need to feel connected with themselves. A number described needing time alone. Class allows them to get in touch with their bodies; Elizabeth described it as being like "each little part is talking to me." They said that performing gives them a chance to express their feelings; most find this easier through dance than through the written or spoken word.

As well as helping them get in touch with the body and express feelings, dancing gives them a chance to enter a transcendent state. Elizabeth told us, "When I dance I'm more of a soul." Sometimes the transcendence of the here and now happens in class. Ellen indicated this when she said, "I come to dance a lot because it's a way to forget everything else." Several spoke of

transcendence when they dance all alone, without anyone watching. As Peggy noted, ". . . when I . . . get frustrated with life in general . . . it's a real release . . . I can come out so at peace with the world and ready to take everything on." Performing offers another major opportunity for transcendence, going beyond the steps. It was described as "the ultimate high" (Lily) and "above the normal plane of living" (Elizabeth).

Whether dancing alone, in class, or in performance, there is a total absorption in what one is doing; the rest of the world is blocked out. As Peggy stated, "Sometimes I really get in touch with something . . . in which case I'm so caught up with it that the whole world could crash around me." There is a sense of power and well being that comes from feeling in control of one's body, as long as one is able to do what is called for and do it well. Elizabeth referred to this when she said, "It's such utter control and all that's important is that pirouette that you've done."

The real limitation to this sense of power, however, is that, no matter how well one dances, one's body and technique are never good enough. These young women have high standards for themselves. Lily and Jane each claimed to be "a perfectionist;" Peggy said she "likes perfection." Yet perfection is never possible in dance technique and satisfaction is elusive. As Amber noted, "I always feel I have so much room for improvement." Rachel said, "Technique is hard because you're always striving for more." Elizabeth described a teacher who often tells students they are doing well, but says, "A lot of times I just don't believe him . . . my standards are higher than his."

Further, dance students believe that only certain kinds of bodies are desirable in dance. Rachel alluded to this when she said, "Lots of times I think I'm too much of a brute to be a dancer. Dancers in companies always seem either long and lean, tall dancers, or they're petite and small." Amber told her interviewer, "If my legs matched my body then I'd be perfectly happy." To her friends who asked why she dieted, she responded, "You don't go in a studio with the little stick girls and see yourselves looking at the leotards with the blobby legs." Lily said, "I can see myself as practically a hunchback." Elizabeth summed it up this way:

I don't look at myself in the mirror very often, except when I have to. Or if I do, then I look at my face or my feet, or my hips to make sure they're right. But I don't like my body, the way it looks. I guess everyone's critical on themselves.

In regard to the theme of dance as identity, then, we see a number of dualisms. The students perceive dance as either discipline and structure, in which the goal is to "get it right," or else as a transcendence of structure, a release and/or an escape from the everyday world. Lily expressed the dualism she experiences when she stated, "You either dance it or you don't. There's no in between. You're either performing or you're working." Similarly, the students experience themselves as alternately body or soul, working hard and sweating or existing "above the normal plane of living." They feel alternately full of deficiencies and limitations, trying to improve themselves; or strong and full of power, as they meet challenges and exceed the expectations of others.

Making the Transition from Childhood

In addition to what they know of their own experience of dancing, the students' words reflected an implicit awareness of a world of dance that exists beyond their own experiences in the studio and theater. Their ideas about the larger dance world emerged for us as they told the stories of how they had gotten started in dance, as they recounted the effects of studying dance intensively while growing up, and as they told us what they saw as their future.

In terms of starting to dance, a common theme for these young women was the influence of their mothers. As Rachel told us, "I don't know how my mom got me into it. When I was four I didn't have much to say about it." Several of them said they hated dance at first, but it is clear they are all glad it is now a part of their lives. As Jane said, "Even though I might not have wanted it or I might have missed a lot when I was younger, I'm glad that my mom put me in those classes." However, they are not sure how dance came to be so meaningful to them. Rachel simply stated, "It's really important or I wouldn't be doing it." There is a sense of finding themselves on a path without being clear how they got there. As Jane observed, "It just depends on what you are put into when you're young."

At this point a number of factors keep them dancing. One is personal satisfaction; as Amber told us, "I dance because I want to dance." Another is fear; Ellen said, "If you give it up you'll regret it later." Several noted they can never let up or they will "lose it." There is also a sense of need or dependency, not only because dance is such an important part of their lives, but also because they have done it for so long and cannot imagine not doing it. Rachel said, "I'd have to find something else to do every day." Being a dancer means living a disciplined life, having control over oneself. Jane described her self-disgust when she stopped and "got out of shape."

Despite this sense of almost being driven to dance, our respondents clearly valued the idea of free choice in regard to whether or not one dances; several said that being forced to dance would ruin the experience of dancing. They had no regrets about their choices thus far, but recognized that a choice to dance was also a choice not to do other things. They noted that it was hard to have a "normal" life and also be a dancer. Non-dancers usually did not understand them. Rachel's words echoed those of several others in our study when she said, "Most of my friends don't even know what I do. Every day you go to dance and you want to get away from that sometimes and do other things..." The most extreme statement of this came from Elizabeth, who said,

I didn't have any friends. Dance was all I talked about, cared about. I wanted to get through school so bad so I could go take my ballet class. I didn't care about anyone there and I thought no one understood.

Ellen, however, felt differently, saying, "It's hard to have a normal life but I do. . . . I don't want to feel like I'm missing out on something."

Several students noted a sense of community or of understanding with other dancers, at least among those at their own studio, as indicated in this comment by Jane: "Artsy people are a lot more caring. . . . Everybody in a class becomes friends and

you have something in common. The people you meet and the friends you make are real, not superficial."

However, the sense of community is equaled or even exceeded by the competitiveness fostered among dancers. Most competition is regarded as constructive; as Rachel said, feeling competitive "is good in a way because it makes you strive for more."

There also is a sense of feeling special in being set apart. While dancers may not be particularly understood or appreciated by the larger culture, these students appreciate themselves—the discipline that characterizes their lives and the knowledge they have that others do not. Elizabeth indicated this when she shared, "I think that dancers are above angels—God, dancers, angels, humans."

The young women with whom we spoke perceived their future options in dance as very limited. Performing was the only dance career any of them had seemed to consider. They had all weighed whether they had what it takes to become a professional performer: ability (talent and the right body) and great effort/will/desire. Elizabeth told us:

Technique has to come first. People who have soul aren't allowed on stage unless they have strong technique. I see where that's important, 'cause everybody probably thinks they have a special something inside of them when they dance; if you really do it will probably come through in your work. . . . Maybe there wasn't anything inside of me that did make me work hard enough or do what they wanted me to do. If you really love it, it'll show in your technique.

All of the students seemed to feel it was important to be "realistic" in evaluating their own abilities in relation to the expectations they perceived. None of them thought they could make it to the top echelon in dance. Lily was the only one who clearly intended a performing career, but felt there were limitations in how far she could get:

I think I could make it in the corps level in New York, but I think I started too late to get any further—not that I couldn't do it but that I'm too old by their standards. . . . I'd like to be a principal dancer in a regional company.

Other students were still in the process of choice-making. Elizabeth was typical in her confusion over what she wants to do, mixed with a general optimism about deciding not to pursue dance as a career.

. . . if you're going to be a dancer when you're young that's all you can be. But once you're not going to, you can be anything. Now I'm confused because I don't know what I want to do. If I were going to be a dancer maybe it would be safe 'cause I'd know, but if I failed it would be too late and now I can do anything. I can be an anthropologist, a dentist, whatever.

Rachel expressed the conflict involved in trying to make a choice between what she saw as mutually exclusive opportunities:

I'm really concerned 'cause I don't know if I want to do dance, or all my education that I've learned at school, I don't want to throw that away. I'm thinking about maybe minoring in dance or something, 'cause I'm going to hate spending this much time working hard and coming to this point and then just throwing it away.

All of these young women seemed to have considered a career as a dancer, and with most there was at least some sense of sadness in giving up a dream. Elizabeth spoke poignantly to us when she said:

Every six year-old girl wants to be a dancer. It's like every six year-old girl has a pink tutu in their closet. I just thought mine was special and apparently it's not 'cause I would have [been successful] already and I haven't.

It seemed to us that these students were giving up the dream not because they preferred to do something else but because they did not think they would "make it" as a major performer. Several of them noted that it was easier for men to be successful in dance, because there is less competition.

Even if they were to succeed in professional performance, however, they recognize that there is little monetary reward for such a career. Further, they realize that they would have to continue to make the sort of sacrifices that currently characterize their lives. As Jane said:

To be a dancer means going through a lot. You have to really love it, really care about that a lot and not about a lot of other things. Everybody knows that being a dancer does not give you money. It does not give you a lot of time to go out and do things. It's hard to have a family. It's got to be something you love.

Despite the risks and sacrifices of a performing career, teaching dance was not seen as an attractive alternative. Even though dance teachers clearly had been important in their lives, the students perceived teaching as having considerably less status than performing, and offering much less gratification. As Amber said, "I don't particularly want to teach people to do what I should be doing myself." None of the students with whom we spoke mentioned any other career possibilities in dance.

Elizabeth summed up her very strong feelings about herself in relation to the dance world when she said:

I feel good when I do a combination myself but if I start thinking about myself in relation to anyone else who might have done that, it's not important 'cause it's not the professional world which is what I wanted. I can't settle for teaching. It's like stepping down from what I wanted. If I can't have exactly what I wanted, I don't want to settle for something else. I want to just remove myself from it completely, and do something else that I can succeed in. If I stay in dance I'll feel like a failure. I can't live with myself if I only do it halfway.

As these young women spoke to us about trying to decide

what they would do with their lives, a picture of the Dance World emerged for us as a separate and fixed world, a hierarchy that is created and controlled by others. They perceive themselves as being at the bottom of it, and at times outside of it altogether. At the top of the hierarchy are Real Dancers—professional performers—and at the very top are those in the best known companies. The hierarchy functions as a series of levels to which individuals must gain admittance; teachers and choreographers serve as gatekeepers, deciding who may enter. Such decisions are based on fixed requirements in two basic areas: ability and desire. There is no way of knowing if one has an adequate amount of either without attempting to gain admittance; those who "make it" are the ones who have what it takes. What it takes gets greater and greater as one moves up the hierarchy. Failure is inevitable for the majority of those who attempt to enter; the number of those who wish to be Real Dancers, even the ones who are talented, is much greater than the number of places open to them.

III. Discussion

As we discussed the relationships that emerged through the words of the students, we were particularly struck by what seemed initially paradoxical. On the one hand, the students feel a sense of identity between self and dance. On the other hand, they feel themselves on the fringes of dance and likely to remain so. They seem to conceive of those who dance for a living as existing in a Dance World composed of a set of givens and fixed values. These students, themselves, are powerless to do anything about affecting or changing the values which delineate the Dance World. Instead, they focus not on their lack of power over the field of professional dance but on their power to make "realistic" choices about whether or not they wish to try to enter the field as it is.

The more we discussed this paradox, however, the more it made sense to us, and a metaphor—of mother and daughter—began to emerge. Because the child is connected with the mother prior to a consciousness of self as separate creature, both child and parent are aware of the ways in which the parent influences the child, shaping and molding her, but both are hardly aware at all of the child's corresponding influence on the parent's development.

Similarly, we see a picture of students beginning dance at an early age, and finding themselves embedded in it before developing a separate consciousness. As Amber said, "I've always done it." Our students recognize that dance has made them who they are. Their teachers, in some cases, have acted very much like surrogate nurturing parents and in others like distant, authoritarian parents. In either case, the young women do not question the correctness of the teachers' behaviors but see them as necessary for their dance development, and not only in terms of physical development. Responsibility and discipline are particularly credited to dance. As Ellen stated, "I usually finish what I start. I think that's because I dance. . . . I've got everything together and I'm real responsible and I think that's because of dance." They do not seem to conceive of themselves as being able to influence the development of the art (either as dance performer or choreographer); nor do they see that they might contribute to the art, or even change it, in the future. They remain unable to perceive any choice other than whether or not

to participate in it.

We do not see this as particularly surprising in the context of current society. The vast amount of education for most children is directed toward helping them fit into society and adjust to things as they are. This is particularly true for oppressed peoples (Freire 1983) and women. Recent dance literature (see, for example, Brady 1982, Gordon 1983, Kirkland 1986, Vincent 1979) points out the degree to which dancers in professional ballet companies are encouraged to remain both physically and emotionally at a prepubescent stage of development—children who will obediently do what they are told and fit into structures created by others. The young women with whom we spoke are not as passive as the picture presented of professional level ballet students; they seem to be strong young women who wish to be in control of their own lives. However, they still perceive the world as fixed and do not see that the dance field is a human creation which they have the capacity to expand and/or change. It might be argued that young people, in general, are not interested in changing their world but only in fitting into it; we are attempting to point out how the particular experience of dancing reinforces this mode of thinking. In addition, we remain convinced that both young people and the field would be better served if the students were able to see themselves as active contributors to dance as an art and a profession, rather than only as passive recipients of someone else's knowledge.

IV. Conclusions and Implications

At first glance, the results of this study seem decidedly unremarkable. It appears natural and inevitable in a glamorous and competitive field that only a few will "make it." "Many are called; few are chosen" applies to many other fields as well as dance. It also appears natural that young students in the midst of their dance study reject career possibilities other than performing even if they hear about them. Some degree of disappointment and confusion is normal during adolescence; these students have gotten many good things from their dance study and now, whatever their choices, will go on to live the rest of their lives.

Our conclusions address two areas: 1) the questions we stated at the beginning and 2) the significance of this research methodology for analyzing and understanding the experience of dance students. A number of issues emerge for us.

We find evidence that the choice to dance is not necessarily as freely made as one might assume. To some extent dance has chosen these students and will not let them go, while at the same time expelling them from the ranks of the chosen. By "dance will not let them go" we mean to indicate that their dancer identities dominate the other aspects of their self-definition. It is as if their ability to exist is strongly bound up with their ability to dance. In addition, their feelings of self-worth are strongly tied in with their ability to succeed in dance. Dance, seeming to exist outside of themselves, appears to measure their success and failure against external standards. These young women find themselves in the sway of values and judgments over which they exercise no influence. Simultaneously, they are at a point in their lives when they are concluding that they do not possess the qualities necessary to "make it" in the field of dance. They recognize that they possess many admirable dance qualities but not the right ones. Failures are due either to their own weakness

or inability, or to physical factors over which they have no control. Coupling their strong self-identity as dancers with their lack of exposure to alternative possibilities both inside and outside the dance field makes more problematic their belief that they will not be able to continue being dancers in the terms they have known.

We also note that these young women can see performance as the only possible way of being involved with dance and it appears that their dance study has been focused almost entirely on learning technique. They have not had a full education in the art, which would include exploration of its career possibilities and their satisfactions, as well as ongoing dialogue regarding how they perceive dance and their place in it. As we look beyond the students to the current world of professional ballet and much of modern dance, we see extraordinary technical demands which dictate the requirement of almost total dedication to training from middle childhood through adolescence, especially for girls. This is not so for boys, because the competition for men is not as great; therefore, they do not have to start as early to do it. In other words, girls have to start dance training at an early age without sufficient understanding of their options. Influenced by parents and teachers, they become embedded in a system before they can concretely think of what is best for themselves.

What are the costs of this state of affairs? In terms of human costs, we see that they may include a great deal of personal destruction, as revealed by recent literature on the professional ballet world (see, for example, Brady 1982, Gordon 1983, Kirkland 1986, and Vincent 1979). However, only one of our respondents, Elizabeth, indicated that her experience in dance had been personally destructive.

Whatever the human costs, readers may feel that they are an inevitable consequence of having great art. But we see that there are consequences as well for the art. What is lost when a great many bright, articulate young women decide that there is no place in dance for them, because they do not have the "right body," or do not otherwise meet the requirements for the art as it now exists? To what extent does this restrict the development of the art, by allowing entrance only to those who will maintain the art as it is?

Another issue which may reflect the costs of the current system is the disproportionate representation of men in positions of leadership and power in dance. We wonder how this relates to the emphasis on passivity and obedience in dance training, and the earlier age at which girls begin to study.

We also question whether it is natural and inevitable that the system operate in this way, in which human lives are seen primarily as means to make great art, and the art itself is diminished by the loss of so many who might well have important contributions to make. Is it inevitable that art determine artists, rather than artists determining the art? Who is being served by maintaining the extraordinary technical demands which dictate an obsessive dedication to dance study that has time only for technical training? What kind of art form might result if dance training consisted of less time learning to reproduce movement, and more time studying dance more broadly, learning to think about it as well as do it? What might result if teachers spent more time in dialogue with students?

Teachers are the major points of access through which stu-

dents develop their relationship with dance; teachers serve as interpreters of the dance world and gatekeepers to opportunity and self esteem. When we asked the students about dance, all spoke at some point about dance teachers. Some of their relationships with teachers had been close, nurturing, supportive; others were characterized mainly by distance, pressure, inequality, power plays, and fear. Regardless, the authority of teachers was rarely questioned. We find this problematic as we reflect on the way in which these strong young women seem to give up so much personal power when they make the choice to participate in the dance world. The responsibility is on us as teachers to reflect on what we do, what of dance—and the rest of the world—we present to our students, and how we encourage students to use their own power.

In considering the significance of the methodology used in this research, we note that listening to students gives us input which may help guide the choices we make in our studios and classrooms. We continue to reflect on the words of our respondents. However, speaking is also important for the students themselves, giving them a chance to develop their voices as well as their bodies. Many of these young women indicated what we would describe as delight in having someone listen to them with clear interest as they spoke of dance and of themselves. Several noted that they had never had an opportunity to speak in this way with someone who understood, and that all dancers should have a chance to do this.

We looked for verbally articulate young women dancers and we found them. We also recognize that many others have not developed their verbal skills as much as our respondents. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberg, and Tarule (1986) point out that development of one's voice is part of the development of one's mind, and one's whole self. They carried out an extensive study regarding how women come to see themselves as knowers, concluding that finding one's own voice is essential if individuals are to become able to recognize their ability to create their own knowledge and not just receive the knowledge of others. They observed that, in our society, women are effec-

tively silenced much more often than men. Since most young dance students are girls, we cannot help but question any pedagogy which takes these girls at a young age, before they have found their own voices, and trains them to be silent. It seems critical that teachers build in opportunities for dialogue with students and between students about what dance means in their lives, and what they perceive as possibilities for their futures.

It also seems essential for the voices of dancers to become a part of the literature in dance research. Theories of how to teach dance, what to teach in dance, and what the importance of teaching dancing in particular ways might be, are all grounded in our own experience. The voices and stories of dance students surely need to be part of the realm to which we attend as we deliberate over dance curriculum and pedagogy.

Lastly, we believe that the themes we derived from these young women's stories may be useful in interpreting further research. These structures will become modified as we hear more voices which provide new kinds of language for our understanding. The framework becomes, therefore, open-ended and available to constant change, functioning not only for purposes of analysis and research but also for developing ways of thinking about teaching dance.

If we have a disappointment with this research it is that we have lost much of the distinctiveness of each individual because of constraints on space. We heard each voice individually, but we are unable to allow each to truly speak as an individual in our presentation. In many ways we feel that this sort of work is better presented in a book rather than an article, in which our voices would go alongside theirs without dominating them.

We began this paper with a number of questions. It is clear that they do not have easy answers. However, the value of interpretive research lies not in its capacity to give answers, but in its capacity to reveal complex issues. We hope to continue exploring these issues in the future in our work as educators and researchers. As we do so, we take with us a clear affirmation of the significance of hearing the voices of dancers.

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APPENDIX
Sample Interview Questions

Initial Interview

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|---|-----------------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|---------|--------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|--|---|
| <p>1. Background information</p> <table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%;">Years of instruction</td> <td>Forms of dance studied</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Age when started instruction</td> <td>Age now</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Frequency of class</td> <td>Why did you start to dance?</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Time away from dancing</td> <td></td> </tr> </table> <p>2. Try to describe for me what it is like when you take a dance class? How do you feel when you dance in class? (Is it different when you dance different styles?)</p> <p>What is it like when you perform dance?</p> <p>Is it different for you when you dance in a group situation and when you dance alone? If so, how? Is it different when you dance with or without a teacher present? If so, how?</p> <p>Are you different when you're dancing compared to when you're not dancing? If so, How?</p> <p>3. How important is dance to you? Why is it important/not important? What does your dancing mean to you?</p> | Years of instruction | Forms of dance studied | Age when started instruction | Age now | Frequency of class | Why did you start to dance? | Time away from dancing | | <p>4. Tell me about the kind of adult you want to be and/or think you will be (including career plans, if any). Tell me about your family.</p> <p>5. What things do you like to do when you are not dancing? Can you tell me some words that describe you as a person? How would others (parents, teachers, friends) describe you?</p> <p>6. Can you describe yourself as a woman? (Do you think women are or ought to be different from men? If so, how?) Has the fact that you are a woman and/or your feelings about it made a difference in your choice to dance? If you had a daughter/son, would you like her/him to dance? Why/why not?*</p> <p>7. Can you describe a very favorite experience you have had in dance?</p> <p>8. Is there anything you do not like about dancing? Have you ever wanted to stop dancing? If so, why—and what made you continue?</p> <p>9. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about yourself and dance?</p> |
| Years of instruction | Forms of dance studied | | | | | | | | |
| Age when started instruction | Age now | | | | | | | | |
| Frequency of class | Why did you start to dance? | | | | | | | | |
| Time away from dancing | | | | | | | | | |

Second Interview

(following a class observed by the interviewer)

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|--|---|
| <p>1. Is this class like most you have taken? What characteristics make it similar to or different from other classes?</p> <p>2. How were you feeling (or were you thinking about anything) during specific parts of the class)?</p> | <p>3. Is there anything you have thought of since our first interview that you would like to tell me about yourself and/or your dancing?</p> <p>4. Do you have any comments to make about the interview process in which you have participated?</p> |
|--|---|

*We asked questions which gave each student an opportunity to speak about being a woman because of our expectations that gender issues are involved in the complex relationships between dance, dancers, and the society of which both are a part. However, awareness of relationship between gender and dance seemed minimal in their consciousness, and we elected not to pursue it at this time.