

Dancing Through High School:
The Experiences of High School Females Engaged in Elite Dance Training

A Thesis Submitted to the
College of Graduate Studies and Research
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Education
in the Department of Educational Psychology
and Special Education
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon

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ABSTRACT

A basic interpretive qualitative research approach (Merriam, 2002) was used to investigate the experiences of adolescent females engaged in elite dance training while attending regular high school programs. Participants were five adolescent females from the local dance community of a mid-size Canadian Prairie city. Semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity for the participants to share their experiences and perspectives, and describe what it is like to dance through high school. Data were analyzed in terms of Kearney's (2001) shared meaning and descriptive categories. The shared meaning of the dancers' experiences reflected a common sentiment of mastery, accomplishment in both dance and school, and recognition of dance as a coping behavior and resource. Descriptive categories included two themes: The Daily Life of a Dancer (School and Dance Integrated) and The Social Life of a Dancer (School and Dance Separated). Findings are discussed in terms of the current literature on dance training and extracurricular activities for adolescents; implications are identified for counselling and educational professionals; and recommendations are made for future research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The journey of *Dancing Through High School* began long before this project and, therefore, I must acknowledge the contributions of a number of individuals. First, thank you to the dance instructors and my dance friends who helped make my dance experiences so memorable. My dance experiences have contributed to every aspect of my life and I am grateful for the opportunity to have shared my love for dance with such wonderful people. The opportunity to integrate my passion for dancing with my academic endeavors has been a very meaningful experience.

Thank you to my parents, for introducing me to dance and supporting me through nineteen years of training, and also for your support and encouragement regarding my academic endeavors. Thank you to Adam, Nicole, Victoria, and Keaton for your love and support.

Thank you to the five young women who volunteered to share their experiences for this project. You are all truly remarkable and I truly appreciated and enjoyed talking with you as you shared your thoughts and experiences.

Thank you to my supervisor Dr. Jennifer Nicol for your support and guidance in my graduate course work, my adventures in qualitative research, and this project. I thank you for helping me transform my thoughts, experiences, and ideas into this thesis. Your commitment and dedication to this thesis is a reflection of your proficiency as a researcher, teacher, and mentor. Thank you to Dr. Brenda Kalyn for bringing her love for dance and research expertise to this project. Thank you also to Dr. Louise Humbert, external examiner, for offering her support and sharing her expertise with this project.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Sometimes, even though I have not really danced in years, I still have those days, those moments. I will be sitting in class, and all of a sudden, I can only concentrate on how badly my body wants to dance. Sometimes it happens when I am walking to school with my I-Pod playing. Walking is just not enough; I need to dance. It is so true: once a dancer, always a dancer.

I started dancing when I was three years old. I have loved everything and anything to do with dancing ever since. For me, dancing was so much more than an extra-curricular activity or something I did for fun; it was a way of life, it was my passion. I attribute so much of who I am and what I have accomplished to my dance experiences. Through my dance training experiences I practiced an art, worked to perfect specific techniques, and learned to use my body to tell a story. However, dancing not only opened my eyes to a world of artistry and visual esthetics; it also introduced concepts like commitment, dedication, perseverance, and intense concentration.

Throughout my life as a dancer, I have had experiences as a performer, a competitor, an instructor, and an audience member. These experiences were the foundation for many fond memories, and important friendships. My formal training ended because of injury when I was twenty-two-years-old. After this point I stayed connected with the dance community by volunteering at my former dance studio, working in a specialty dance store, and remaining friends with the many dancers I had met over the years. Although my life is very much so dedicated to academics now, I will always consider myself a dancer.

Prior to starting the present study I explored the importance and impact of adolescent dance experiences in conversations with “dance friends” and former dance group members. Although some have followed their dreams and pursued professional dance careers, others, like myself, have pursued academic or professional paths. Yet we all agree that our dance experiences are very important parts of our lives and our identities.

Many commented that they felt like dancing was an emotional escape - another world where they could be whoever they wanted to be, and could use their bodies to express whatever they thought or felt. Thoughts, feelings, experiences, and emotions for which there are no words, can be expressed through dance. What one can not, or will not say, can also be expressed through dance. Others, with whom I have spoken, suggested that their dedication to dancing helped them stay diligent in regards to their academic course work. I agree; the lessons of dedication, hard work, and concentration taught in the dance studio transfer to many academic and professional experiences.

One friend's comment sparked my interest in this topic. She casually wondered if she truly appreciated her dance experience when she was in high school, before she pursued her professional career. She questioned what dancing had meant to her as an adolescent and what aspects of the experience she valued while immersed in her world of dancing through high school. She described her dance experiences throughout adolescents to have been very positive, stating that dance shaped the self-confident and self-aware young woman that she had become. She not only appreciated the artistry and expression that she experienced through dancing, but also the friendships and camaraderie that the dance studio provided.

The Present Study

Competitive and elite dance training experiences are increasingly common for high school females in Canada. Some individuals dance for fun, taking part in recreational clubs or community activities; others make dancing a definite priority; committing time, energy, their parents' money, and their hearts and souls to the art. According to the Canadian Council for the Arts (Cheney, 2004), 85% of all dancers are women. Furthermore, the number of dancers nearly tripled during the 1970s, then increased by a further 40% in the 1980s, and by a further 70% in the 1990s, making dance the second fastest growing arts occupation in the 1990s (Canadian

Council for the Arts). While researchers for the Canadian Council for the Arts reports a marked increase in the number of individuals participating in dance classes and pursuing professional dance careers, they observe a lack of research regarding the experiences of these dancers (Canadian Council for the Arts).

Nevertheless, research on the topic is limited and vague. Research tends to focus on the negative aspects of dance training, (e.g., Ackard, Henderson & Wonderlich, 2004; Buckroyd, 2001) without acknowledging the positive aspects. Some research fails to identify the type of dancers being studied or the style of dance (e.g., ballet, modern, or ethnic) being investigated (Ackard, et al., 2004), or the level of commitment (recreational or elite) made by the dancer (e.g., Ravaldi, et al., 2006; Slater & Tiggemann, 2002). Research that involves dancers who are training at a more elite level has focused exclusively on individuals attending professional ballet academic training programs that require the dancers to live in residence at the ballet school (Buckroyd, 2001).

An obvious gap in the literature is the study of adolescent females who attend regular high school programs and are committed to dance training at an elite level. This group of individuals differs significantly from those engaged in recreational dance programs because they are training for possible professional careers, they participate in competitions, and they complete dance examinations, which all require a greater commitment in comparison to recreational programs. They also differ from those dancers who attend the professional ballet academic programs because they attend a regular school program and live at home with their families during their high school and training years and have friends who are not dancers in high school. The present study addressed this gap in the literature, and gave young women who were committed to elite dance training, while living at home and attending regular high school programs, an arena in which they could share their stories, and inform readers of their journeys

and experiences of elite dance training during their high school years. This research is important and significant because it not only addressed a group of individuals who have been excluded from previous literature, but also because, as the following chapter will discuss, involvement in such activities are an important aspect of adolescent development for those involved.

The next four chapters include a review of pertinent literature (Chapter 2), an explanation of the research methodology (Chapter 3), followed by the research findings (Chapter 4), and a discussion of the findings (Chapter 5). The following terms appear throughout the document and are defined as follows:

Dance training – the act of participating in dance classes

Elite dance training – participating in dance classes at a level that requires a significant time commitment (e.g., at least 8 hours per week) with dancers motivated to participate in competitions, to complete dance examinations, and to explore a potential professional dance career.

Extra-curricular activities – activities that one participates in outside of academic responsibilities, which may or may not be related or associated with the school.

Recreational dance training – participation in dance classes with minimal commitment expectations (e.g., less than 5 hours per week), no competitions, dance examinations or interest in pursuing a professional dance career.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The following chapter provides an overview of the limited literature regarding the topic of adolescent girls' dance experiences and adolescent social and academic development in the context of extracurricular activity involvement. The literature reviewed has been organized into two sections: research related to dance training, and research related to extra-curricular activity involvement. For the purpose of this section, dance training refers to participation in all types of dance forms at all different levels. Extra-curricular activity involvement refers to activities (available through schools, communities, or private organizations) that individuals are involved in outside of academic school work.

Dance Training

Academic research regarding the experiences of adolescent dancers is quite limited. Research is generally focused on those enrolled in professional ballet schools, (e.g., Buckroyd, 2001) or primarily examines the negative aspects of dance training, (e.g., Hopkins & Lock, 2004). Specifically, within the spectrum of dance-related research, a majority of the research focuses on eating disorders and body image problems. For example, it has been reported that body image dissatisfaction and eating disorders are more common in athletes and dancers (e.g., Abraham, 1996; Hopkins & Lock, 2004; Lewis & Scannell, 1995; Ravaldi, et al., 2006; Sundgot - Borgen & Torstveit, 2004). Although several ideas have been forwarded to explain this finding, Ravaldi and associates aptly summarized the issue stating that “eating disorder symptoms in athletes and ballet dancers have been reported to be sustained by a complex interaction between sociocultural pressure for thinness, athletic performance anxiety, and negative self - appraisal of athletic achievement” (p. 530).

Author and counsellor, Julia Buckroyd (2001), summarized many ways in which elite dance training can be psychologically detrimental for young women, with one suggestion being

that dance training damages young women's developing sexuality because their bodies are on constant display in tight and revealing clothing. Slater and Tiggemann (2002) examined this concept using Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) objectification theory. Objectification theory suggests that the pervasiveness of societal sexual objectification causes women to internalize this attitude and in turn view themselves similarly. In other words, young girls "gradually learn to adopt an observer's perspective on their physical selves and to treat themselves as an object to be looked at and evaluated on the basis of appearance" (Slater & Tiggemann, 2002, p. 344).

The authors surveyed thirty-eight females ranging from twelve to sixteen years of age who studied ballet at a recreational level. No significant differences were found when adolescent girls involved in classical ballet training were compared with a control group, not involved in classical ballet training, on measures of self-objectification, body shame, appearance anxiety, and disordered eating (Slater & Tiggemann, 2002).

Vicario and Chambliss (2001) also found that individuals involved in dance training did not suffer from excessive negative body image or self esteem issues. Twenty-six female dancers (enrolled in ballet, tap, jazz, or pointe dance classes), ages 13-20 years, ranging in dance ability and commitment, were surveyed on the benefits of taking dance classes. Participants were asked to rate their self-esteem, body-image, dance ability, and peer and parent relationships on a four point Likert-scale. They were also asked to rate their dance ability, attractiveness compared to other girls at their dance school, and several emotions experienced while dancing using a 10-point Likert-scale. The dancers also completed an extroversion scale. Findings indicated that dancing was generally a positive experience for the respondents. The majority of dancers responded that dancing helped to improve their discipline (92%), and release both positive and negative feelings (88%). They disagreed that dancing made them hate their bodies or made their lives extremely hectic (92%). Analysis of the survey data, when grouped by dance experience

and dance efficacy, found that those with more experience or who rated themselves as better dancers were more likely to enjoy performing, to feel confident when dancing, to feel happier at dance class, to feel comfortable around their peers, and to feel more relaxed at dance classes. These individuals were also less likely to feel critical towards their bodies (Vicario & Chambliss, 2001).

The results of this comparison of dancers with more experience and who rated themselves as better dancers to those who were less experienced contradicts findings presented by other researchers (e.g., Buckroyd, 2000, 2001; Reid & Fowler-Kerry, in press). For example, Buckroyd (2000) concluded that recreational dance training can be a beneficial and positive experience for adolescent females, but that professional or elite level dance training is potentially detrimental to the adolescent female.

Perhaps conclusions presented by Buckroyd (2000) and Vicario and Chambliss (2001) are incongruent because of situational variables regarding the elite dancers that they refer to. Perhaps one way to make sense of the existent literature is to explore whether the negative aspects of dance training manifest in situations where competition becomes the primary focus of the dance training or where the dance training becomes so intense that students are required to attend private academies, and therefore, end up living away from home without a regular high school experience (e.g., daily interactions and friendships with non-dancers).

For example, participants in the study conducted by Vicario and Chambliss (2001) who classified themselves as more experienced, more advanced dancers and reported less criticism of their bodies, attended regular high school programs and danced at local studios in their communities. In contrast, the advanced dancers who Buckroyd (2000) described as suffering negative effects, attended private dance academies.

Another pertinent situational variable might be dance competitions. Results of a survey study regarding young dancers experiences of studio dancing suggested that the negative aspects of elite dance training are often related to the individuals' experiences in dance competitions. While younger students enjoyed competition because it provided them an opportunity to wear costumes and make-up and spend time with friends, some of the older and more elite respondents remarked that competition was a stressful time as the focus is no longer on dancing, but winning (Reid & Fowler-Kerry, in press).

One study (Stinson, Blumenfield-Jones & Van Dyke, 1990) did attempt to describe the experiences of adolescents involved in elite dance training while attending regular high school programs. Given the busy schedules of these participants, only three high school students were recruited, so four other participants, who were training at American universities, were also included. Participants were interviewed on the following topics: performing, feelings while dancing, importance of dance, personal identity, favourite dance experiences, and negative aspects of dancing. The researchers concluded that these dancers saw "their relationship with dancing as a satisfying one" (Stinson et al., 1990, p. 16). The participants described satisfaction in experiences of achievement, validation, and learned discipline through their dance training. Other themes involved body image concerns and perceptions about what was an appropriate "dancer body". Participant quotes suggested that there was pressure to look a certain way, and that being around other dancers with "dancer bodies" did make them feel self-conscious at times. Participants also discussed the challenges of "making it" as a dancer after high school. They acknowledged the competitive nature of professional dancing and that few dancers have successful professional careers as factors that made them question whether or not they should pursue professional dance careers. The participants also discussed the sense of community present in their home dance studios, specifically the special friendships that they developed with

other dancers (Stinson et al., 1990). The descriptive nature of Stinson and associates' 1990 study is most pertinent to the present research study because it illuminates both the challenging and rewarding aspects of elite dance training, and also focuses on individuals participating in elite training while attending regular high school programs and university.

The present study restricted participants to those still in high school, or who have very recently finished. This was important, as through both personal experience and casual conversations with other dancers I know that the end of high school represents a time of decision: dance or school? Some dancers choose to pursue professional dance careers after high school, or continue dance training away from their home studio (through professional schools or universities); others choose to focus their time and energy on academic endeavors. Although the latter individuals often continue to be involved in dancing, their training is adjusted to accommodate the new responsibilities of a university course load. It is probable that the experiences of those who choose to make dance a focus are quite different than those who choose to make academics their top priority.

Critique of the Current Literature

Discrepancies among study results and researchers' opinions suggest that further research is needed and that such research must be more specific and detailed. For example, Vicario and Chambliss (2001) used the dancers' self-judgments to categorize the dancers by experience and level of engagement. This is problematic as some individuals may over-or-under estimate their abilities. The present study clearly defined the concept of elite dance training and recruited only individuals who fit specific criteria (see Chapter 3). It is important to recognize that the experiences of dancers involved in recreational programs are much different than those involved in competitive, elite, or professional dance programs.

Conclusions and assumptions made by Buckroyd (2000) were based on interviews with young girls attending professional dance academies, with the intention of pursuing professional dance careers. Many of the identified detrimental aspects of the dance training experience related to the notion of pursuing a professional career at a young age in a competitive industry. These dancers have to cope on their own, as they live away from their families and home communities (Buckroyd, 2000).

It is apparent that the available literature regarding dance training presents mixed results about the benefits and harm of elite dance training. While some researchers (e.g., Stinson et al., 1990; Vicario & Chambliss, 2001) concluded that elite dance training is a positive experience, others (e.g., Buckroyd, 2000, 2001; Reid & Fowler-Kerry, in press) questioned the benefits of such involvement.

Extra-Curricular Activity Involvement

Adolescence is an important time of transition and social and personal growth. While young children spend a majority of their time with and are primarily influenced by immediate family members; peers and external influences acquire greater importance during adolescence (Arnett, 2007). Extra-curricular activities provide one context in which adolescents experience peer interaction and external influences. Larson (1994) described the social effects of engagement in extra-curricular activity as multi-faceted because involvement in extra-curricular activities integrates adolescents into a social world, as well as facilitates personal integration (e.g., discovery of self, self-expression, and self-understanding).

Social Integration: Exposure to Adult Models, Peers and Subculture

The social world provided by extra-curricular involvement has three components: relationships with adults, peers, and subculture (Larson, 1994). Without extra-curricular activities, adolescents would rarely interact with adults apart from their parents and teachers.

Extra-curricular involvement exposes the adolescent to the adults (e.g., coaches, instructors) who establish and maintain the activities and serve as role models and mentors. Unfortunately, these relationships are not always positive. Larson (1994) noted that in some instances extra-curricular activities are too adult-dominated, that is coaches and leaders become too involved in the child's activity. For example, other academics and researchers (e.g., Buckroyd, 2001; Lee, 2001) have suggested that, in particular, the adults encountered by adolescent dancers are not always ideal role models. Survey and interview results presented by Buckroyd (2000) suggested that dance teachers can be over-critical and under-aware of the students' individual needs. Buckroyd (2001) reported that in some instances, dance teachers become over-involved in the dancers life, taking on a parental role, and regulating many aspects of the adolescent female's life. For example, the dance teacher may dictate what the dancer should to wear, when and what they should eat, and when and for how long the dancer must train each day or week. Furthermore, this direction is expected to be accepted passively (Buckroyd, 2001).

Assertions by Buckroyd (2001) were supported by Lee (2001) who summarized some of the issues in contemporary adolescent development in the context of dance training. Lee (2001) suggested that dance instructors should be more aware of the psychological aspects of adolescent development in relation to their young students. For example, dance teachers should be more sensitive to the biological changes in the adolescents' physical appearance and abilities, should recognize that it is each individual's own choice to participate in the dance training, and should be aware of the potential for body image problems and disordered eating in their adolescent students (Lee, 2001).

Involvement in extra-curricular activity also fosters the development of friendships with peers who share a similar interest. For adolescents, the involvement in an activity such as dance can, "interweave the schedule of their day and provides a common set of experiences, goals, and

gossip that is a basis for friendship” (Larson, 1994, p. 48). Buckroyd (2000) identified envy and competitiveness, which are common in the dance studio, as risks involved with the social integration of adolescent females engaged in elite dance training. She also suggested that individuals attending private dance academies are at a social disadvantage as they have limited time to socialize with peers and are exposed to a narrow peer group (Buckroyd, 2000).

However, other researchers have identified peer relationships and friendships facilitated by extra-curricular involvement as a primary reasons that adolescents stay committed to such activities (e.g., Stinson et al., 1990). In one study, forty-one high school students were interviewed, individually, using a semi structured format about their involvement in extra-curricular activities and their decisions to either quit or continue involvement during adolescence (Fredricks et al., 2002). The high school students interviewed were involved in a broad range of activities, such as sports, dance, art, and music. The level of commitment or intensity of involvement of the participants was not specified. Findings suggested that the beginning of high school was a time of contemplation in regards to the individuals’ commitment to extra-curricular activities. Reasons for continuing with the extra-curricular activity were primarily related to the social aspect of the activity and feelings of accomplishment and enjoyment (Fredricks et al., 2002). Individuals who decided not to continue with the activity during high school stated that their decision to quit was based on not having enough time for school work, feeling stressed, not having time to try other activities, no longer wanting to continue the activity to please parents, or not being challenged by the activity (Fredrick, et al., 2002).

In contrast, Buckroyd (2001) warned that the peer relationships developed in dance training can be detrimental to the adolescent’s social development, because the dancers are always in competition with each other. The amount of time young dancers commit to training also interferes with opportunities to develop peer relationships outside of their circle of “dance

friends”, making it difficult for the elite dancer to interact with individuals who do not have similar obligations or are not dedicated to an activity as they are to dance training (Buckroyd, 2001).

The third component of social interaction facilitated by extra-curricular involvement is the exposure to a subculture (Larson, 1994). The role of the subculture is ongoing as “adolescents who participate in an activity are often still connected to that activity and its subculture in adulthood” (p. 49). Larson (1994) suggested that the involvement in such subculture is beneficial to the developing adolescent, because it provides a community for the individual to identify with. Other researchers suggest that the particular subculture experienced by adolescent dancers can be problematic (e.g., Buckroyd, 2000; Lee, 2001).

For example, Lee (2001) described the subculture of dance training to be one that values compliance, obedience, and conformity, which prevents the adolescent female from developing a sense of individuality. This argument is supported by Buckroyd (2001) who suggested that the environment of dance training facilitates dependency and therefore impedes young dancers’ freedom, autonomy, and independence. Arnett (2007) described adolescence as a crucial period of identity development, in which young people engage in serious consideration of who they are, who they want to be, what they believe, and how they fit into the world around them. According to Buckroyd (2001) and Lee (2001) the environment of elite dance training impedes rather than facilitates this exploration of self.

Larson (1994) suggested that extra-curricular involvement provided adolescents with exposure to adult role models, peers, and subculture. Depending on the circumstances, this exposure can be either positive or negative. Integrating research pertinent to the present study with Larson’s (1994) model illustrated that much of the research suggested that dance training can have a negative influence on adolescent social development. Perhaps researchers’ have

generalized the negative aspects of dance training too broadly. For example, Buckroyd (2000, 2001) suggested that dance training interfered with adolescent social development; however, did not acknowledge or explore how such training could be positive, or under what circumstances (e.g., recreational, competitive, or professional training programs) involvement benefited social development.

Personal integration

The second benefit of extra-curricular involvement described by Larson (1994) is the personal integration facilitated by the activity. In other words, involvement in extra-curricular activities facilitates the personal well-being and development of the adolescent because “by connecting adolescents with a community and socializing them into a set of pro-social values, activities also provide a reference group and a set of norms that may shape their self-concepts” (p. 56). Personal integration reflects the process through which the individual develops a sense of self-knowledge and self-understanding in reference to those with which they interact.

Activity involvement is believed to facilitate positive self-concept as it provides adolescents with an environment in which to “experiment with different selves and experience a feeling of competence” (Larson, 1994, p. 56). Contrasted with school work, which is an imposed or required activity, extra-curricular activities are generally self-chosen. Based on a review of the available pertinent research, Larson (1994) theorized that success in an activity that is self-chosen is ideal for identity development because it provides the individual with (a) a reference group for self-definition, (b) an opportunity to experiment with different selves, and (c) the chance to experience feelings of competence. However, he also cautioned that this casual relationship is small and varies by both the activity and the quality of the leadership.

Research regarding self-concept and self-esteem in adolescent dancers provides mixed results. For example, Buckroyd (2001) referred to a specific study (Bakker, 1985) that compared

the self-esteem rating of young dancers and their non-dancing peers. Bakker (1985) surveyed young dancers of various training levels about their self-esteem and self-concept. Results suggested that dancers attending both private academies and local dance studios presented with lower self-esteem than non-dancing peers (Bakker, 1985). Another study investigated the psychological effects of successful or unsuccessful auditions or tryouts for school dance and cheerleading teams by interviewing thirty-six high school females who had either been successful or unsuccessful at team tryouts (Barnett, 2006). Findings suggested that membership to such teams not only affirmed adolescent identity development (e.g., being able to call oneself a cheerleader or a dancer) but also increased self-concept and self-esteem on the basis that the participants felt that they had competence and possessed valued skills. However, described feelings of identity development based on team membership and increased self-esteem were conditional. Individuals who were not successful in making the cheerleading or dance teams described feelings of lowered self-worth, incompetence, and questioned their identity (Barnett, 2006).

In contrast, Fredricks and colleagues (2002) reported that feelings of competence and effectiveness about one's chosen activity promoted positive self-concept in adolescents. However, this concept was most pronounced when there was an appropriate match between the demands of the activity, and the individuals' skills and perception of their ability (Fredricks et al., 2002). These results support Barnett's (2006) understanding of identity development via activity participation, in that the participants in Fredrick's (2002) study also reported that being able to identify with a group was a positive aspect of their activity experiences. In other words, participants defined themselves based on the activity in which they are involved and described the activity as a part of who they are.

Critique of the current literature

Research regarding the effects of extra curricular involvement on adolescent development and self-esteem are contradictory. While some researchers suggest that involvement in such activities is beneficial to the adolescent (e.g., Fredricks et al., 2001; Larson, 1994), others caution that the potential for failure, over-involved adult leadership, and the possible narrowing of social opportunities can be detrimental to the developing adolescent (e.g., Bakker, 1985; Barnett, 2006; Buckroyd, 2001; Lee, 2001).

Unfortunately, many of the studies discussed fail to identify or appropriately describe the level of commitment that the individuals have made to the activity, which I believe is important because the level of the individuals' engagement can dictate both the time commitment required and the nature of the instruction. For example, the study conducted by Fredricks and associates (2002) included individuals involved in sports, art, music, and dance at various levels of commitment and intensity. As stated previously, the present study focused specifically on the experiences of adolescent girls involved in elite dance training.

Research about dance training and extra-curricular activity involvement during adolescence does not appreciate the complexity of dance training and the importance of various aspects of training commitment. For example, researchers have failed to clearly define the level of commitment the participants have made to the activity or assumed that all individuals involved in dance training, be it elite, competitive, or recreational, have similar experiences (e.g., Fredricks et al., 2002; Lee, 2001; Vicario & Chambliss, 2001). In contrast to such research, the present study focused on one type of dance training; that which is at an elite level, but does not require students to attend private dance academies away from home.

The Present Study

The literature reviewed regarding dance training and adolescent experiences of extra-curricular activity involved a mixture of results, opinions and suggestions regarding the risks and benefits of involvement in such activities. Factors such as the degree to which individuals are committed to the activity (e.g., time commitment, intensity of training); the relationships with peers and adults fostered by activity involvement; individuals' experiences of success and failure; and the effect of involvement on other aspects of daily life all appear to be pertinent features of the overall experience of adolescents participating in extra-curricular activity. The present study investigated the experiences of a specific group of adolescent females engaged in a specific type of extra-curricular activity at a specific level of involvement: adolescent females engaged in elite dance training while attending regular high school programming. The following two research questions anchored the study: (a) What are the experiences of adolescent female's involved in elite dance training during high school, and (b) how do these individuals perceive their dance experiences as influencing their social and academic experiences as high school students?

Chapter 3: Methodology

The following chapter provides a detailed description of the research methods used to complete the present study. First, a description of qualitative research and its applicability to the present study are presented. Next, the specific qualitative method used, basic interpretive research (Merriam, 2002), is described in terms of participants and data collection and data analysis. Finally, evaluation criteria and ethical considerations are discussed.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is an interpretive and naturalistic approach to everyday lived experiences and phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Merriam (2002) suggested that the “key to understanding qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals interactions with their world” (p. 3). In other words, qualitative research seeks to understand the meaning that individuals construct from their own lived experiences. Therefore, qualitative research involves having individuals describe their experiences in their own words, with the assumption that “reality is rooted in the perceptions of the subjects” (McMillan, 1996, p. 10).

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) described four core features of qualitative research. The following three features are most pertinent to the present study. First, qualitative research aims to produce descriptive data. Rather than reducing pages of data to numbers, qualitative researchers analyze data with great scrutiny looking for meanings, themes, and patterns (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Secondly, unlike quantitative research, qualitative research is more concerned with investigating process rather than static phenomenon. This notion is reflected in the concept of inductive data analysis, which describes the method by which qualitative researchers analyze their data without the intent to prove or disprove hypothesis. Inductive analysis involves letting

the analysis develop throughout the data collection, rather than seeking data or evidence to prove or disprove hypotheses (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) used the metaphor of creating a puzzle to describe this concept: “you are not putting together a puzzle whose picture you already know. You are constructing a picture that takes shape as you collect and examine the parts” (p. 6). Merriam (2002) also described qualitative research methods as inductive, meaning that researchers seek to build concepts and gain insight, rather than testing hypotheses.

Finally, Bogdan and Biklen (2007) described qualitative research to be essentially concerned with meaning. Research questions or the phenomenon of interest generally reflect concepts such as understanding, perspective, meaning, and significance, with the purpose of describing the participants’ perspective (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Merriam (2002) characterized qualitative research by the unique and active role of the researcher, who acts as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. As understanding is the primary goal of the research, the researcher’s responsibility is to be both responsive and adaptive in collecting and analyzing data. The researcher must “expand his or her understanding through nonverbal as well as verbal communication, process information (data) immediately, clarify and summarize material, check with respondents for accuracy or interpretation, and explore unusual or unanticipated responses” (Merriam, 2002, p. 5).

Basic Interpretive Design

There are many different approaches to qualitative research. Merriam’s (2002) method of basic interpretive qualitative research was used to examine and describe the participants’ experiences of elite dance training and high school, with particular attention to dance experiences in academic and social contexts. The purpose of Merriam’s (2002) method is to develop an understanding of how individuals come to understand, or make meaning of their lived

experiences. As the researcher, I worked inductively with the data, which was generated through interviews to identify recurrent themes or patterns within the data (Merriam, 2002).

Participants

Purposive sampling was used with the intention of acquiring rich information from informants who were knowledgeable regarding the proposed subject matter. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) defined purposive sampling as a method for choosing participants who “are believed to facilitate the expansion of the developing theory” (p. 73) because of their experience with the phenomenon being studied. Purposive sampling was both applicable and beneficial as it presented participants who have not only experienced the phenomenon of study first hand, but were also willing to participate in the research (Merriam, 2002; Morse & Richards, 2002). Snowball sampling strategies were also used. Snowball sampling involves requesting participants who meet the research criteria to pass on the information to individuals they know who might also meet the research criteria (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

“Call to Participate” letters were distributed via e-mail to individuals that I was acquainted with through the local dance community (see Appendix A). Although I was acquainted with the dancers who participated in the study; I was not in a place of power within these pre-existing relationships. Specifically, I had no influence or authority regarding the potential participants academic or dance related experiences and so they were free to accept or reject the invitation to participate without concern for possible consequences.

Individuals initially contacted were invited to forward the e-mail to their friends and acquaintances who might also be interested in participating. Interested individuals then contacted me via e-mail and provided a phone number, date, and time that they could be reached. During this subsequent phone conversation individuals were screened using the following criteria.

In order to participate, participants had to meet the following criteria:

- a) be female;
- b) be enrolled in a regular high school education program (or have graduated from a regular high school education program within the last year);
- c) be currently enrolled in elite (competitive/vocational) dance training (8-10 hrs/week) in disciplines such as classical ballet, jazz, and tap; as opposed to recreation dance programs (1-2 hrs/week);
- d) been involved in dance training for at least 5 years

During the phone conversations, the difference between “recreational dance programs” and “elite dance programs” was clearly established. Based on my personal experiences, and conversations with other dancers I knew that recreation dance programs tend to require one or two hours of dance training a week, while dancers engaged in elite dance training are required to attend upwards of eight to ten hours of training each week.

Section C of the participation criteria refers to elite (competitive/vocational) dance training programs. During phone conversations, these terms were explained as follows. Elite dance training was defined as individuals who are training at what the Royal Academy of Dance (R.A.D.) calls the “vocational” levels of ballet examination syllabus. The R.A.D. defines the Vocational ballet syllabus as a “full training regime... geared towards those engaging the in the serious study of ballet” (from the R.A.D. Canada website). Dancers training for their vocational ballet exams are generally required to participate in at least three hours of ballet training each week. The definition of elite dance training also included involvement in competitive dance groups. The involvement in competitive dancing intensifies the individuals’ weekly training schedules, and also adds an additional dynamic to the dance experience.

This phone conversation also provided potential participants an opportunity to ask questions regarding the research process and the nature of the study. Interviews were scheduled with those interested and willing to participate and who met the participation criteria.

Participants who were under the age of eighteen at the time of the interviews required a parental signature on a consent form that outlined the purpose and procedures of the research as well as the individuals' right to withdraw at anytime during or after the interview (see Appendix B). Parental consent forms were delivered to the participants' homes to be signed before the first interview. Underage participants signed a similar document, an assent form, (see Appendix C) at the time of the first interview. One participant was eighteen years old at the time of the interview and was able sign her own consent form. However, I requested that the individual inform her parents of their decision to participate in the research study.

Five adolescent females ranging in age from 15-18 years were recruited who met the participation criteria. The participants were all from the same mid-sized Canadian Prairie city (population of approximately 208, 000 people); however, they did not all attend the same dance studio nor high school within that city. They were all Caucasian and from middle-class homes.

Data Collection

I met with participants for two individual interviews that took place in a university research office. The university campus was an ideal location for interviews as it provided a quiet space with minimal distractions or interruptions. Interviews followed a semi-structured format and were approximately sixty to ninety minutes in length. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) defined semi-structured interviews as “interviews in which the same general questions or topics are brought up to each of the subjects involved” (p. 261). The general format of the first interview, such as themes and topics to be discussed were pre-established (see Appendix D); however,

participants had the freedom to interpret these questions, and introduce new concepts as they saw fit. A conversational tone characterized the interviews.

Following the first interview, participants were verbally debriefed and given a debriefing document (see Appendix E). The debriefing document outlined the research in general, as well as provided the participants with information regarding counselling services and resources, should they feel the need to further discuss any of the topics raised in the interview or want further support. This form also provided the participants with both phone and email contact information for the researchers, in case they had any questions or concerns.

Both interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts from the first interview were reviewed to identify discussion topics for the second interview. Discussion topics were chosen based on common themes among the participants and topics that might be further explored (see Appendix F). Participants were provided a transcript and summary of the first interview before their second interview. Transcripts and summaries from the second interviews were provided at a later date. The participants were then given the opportunity to add, change, and alter any of their quotes before signing the data release form (see Appendix G).

Data Analysis

Kearney (2001) introduced five levels for classifying and applying qualitative data based on various levels of complexity and discovery: findings restricted by a prior framework, descriptive categories, shared meaning or pathway, depiction of experiential variation, and dense explanatory description. Although her article was intended for research regarding nursing practices and health care, specific aspects of this model of data analysis were appropriate for the descriptive intentions of the present study. Two of the five categories of data interpretation were used: descriptive categories and shared pathway or meaning.

Kearney (2001) compared the process and results of using descriptive categories to more common methods of content analysis. Applying descriptive categories to data involved creating a series of labeled data categories, or “clusters of data [that] are labeled with brief headings to indicate the topic or type of data contained therein” (Kearney, 2002, p. 147). Data were then presented in a manner that indicated that all categories were associated to a central theme, yet the nature of connection was not explored. Descriptive categories are useful in exploratory work, such as the present study.

The concept of shared pathway or meaning involves the “integration of concepts of themes into a linked and logical portrayal” (Kearney, 2002, p. 148). Possible relationships among the themes and categories described by the process of descriptive categories were explored. This type of analysis is useful as it integrates and increases the complexity of the analysis: “the increased complexity enables greater discovery” (Kearney, 2002, p. 148). The shared pathway describes the commonality, core, and essences of the participants’ experiences of the phenomenon.

Data analysis began with the very first interview. As a researcher I made notes and journal entries during and after each interview regarding aspects of the discussion that I felt to be meaningful, things that I wanted to remember, and comments that came as a surprise or were unexpected. This journal was referred to throughout the data analysis process.

After all interviews were completed and transcribed, I reviewed each transcript multiple times. During the first readings, comments that were of interest, or that I felt would be relevant to possible data categories were highlighted. Next, a series of data labels were created based on dominant themes identified while reviewing the transcripts (e.g., competition, friendship, school success, relationships with dancers, favorite moments) and highlighted quotes were sorted into the appropriate category. Two major themes - the daily life of a dancer and the social life of the

dancer - were identified based on the richness of the quotes and noteworthy excerpts from the interview transcripts.

I met with my thesis committee members to discuss the themes that I had created and described. The description of the shared meaning, or essence of the participants experience was discussed at length during this meeting. This meeting provided an opportunity for additional and alternative interpretations, comments, and understandings of the participants' quotes and conversations.

I also created data poems by combining pieces of quotes from each of the participants into prose. The poetry was intended to further illustrate and convey the participants' experiences. Furman and associates (2006) used data poems in human service related research with the intention of "inspire[ing] an empathic, emotional reaction, so the consumer of research can develop a deep, personal understanding of the "subject" of the data" (p 2). It has been suggested that data poems are applicable in human service related research as they are an appropriate method to communicate the profundity of the described experience in a readable manner (Furman, Lietz, & Langer, 2006).

Richardson (1994) suggested that "poetry comes closer to presenting lived experiences for literary, sociological, and cultural reasons" (p. 9), as the poems are representations of the human experience consciously created to evoke emotion. The use of data poems is becoming increasingly common, as exemplified by researchers in human services (e.g., Furman, Lietz, & Langer, 2006), as well as researchers in education (e.g., Weibe & Nicol, 2007), sociology (e.g., Richardson, 1994), and women and gender studies (e.g., Commeyras & Montsi, 2000).

Data poems were applicable to the present study in that they helped to integrate and illustrate the participants' experiences. The use of vocative writing also reflected the expressive nature of dancing as an art form.

Evaluation Criteria

Evaluating or critiquing qualitative research involves considering both “the design of the study, as well as the rigor with which the study was conducted” (Merriam, 2002, p.19).

Analyzing the study’s design involved determining the significance of the study and questioning whether or not the present research problem was addressed appropriately by qualitative research (Merriam, 2002). The present study was suited to qualitative inquiry as the available literature did not describe the experiences of this particular group of individuals, those involved in elite dance training while attending regular high school programs, in a satisfactory manner (e.g., including this group with those involved in other dance training programs, or other activities). As the present study is looking at dance training in a manner different from much of the referenced literature, by specifying the type of dance training experience, qualitative research is applicable.

Internal validity, external validity, and reliability are criteria associated with experimental research. The evaluation of qualitative research is topic of ongoing debate, and additional or alternative concepts such as positionality, voice, reciprocity, and critical subjectivity are being presented (Lincoln, 1995). The present study applied more conventional methods of evaluation criteria suggested by Merriam (2002) as well as the emerging criteria described by Lincoln (1995).

Internal Validity

Internal validity raises questions regarding the concept of reality (Merriam, 2002). For example, internal validity refers to the extent to which the researcher is observing or measuring that which is meant to be observed or measured, or said differently, how congruent the research findings are with reality. Merriam (2002) suggested; however, that in qualitative research, the understanding of reality stems from the researchers’ interpretation of the participants’ understandings of the phenomenon of interest. This concept is similar to that of constructivism,

which suggests that suggests that “each one’s way of making sense of the world is as valid and worthy of respect as any other” (Crotty, 1998). Yet, it should be established that the researcher has appropriately interpreted the participants understanding, which is accomplished through concepts such as member checks, peer review, and the researchers own commitment to the research and the data.

Member checks. Merriam (2002) described the process of member checks as a way of ensuring that the researcher has correctly heard and interpreted what the participant has said or done. The process involves bringing interview transcripts or observation notes back to the participant and having them comment on the accuracy of the data. Merriam (2002) suggested that the “participants should be able to recognize their experience in your interpretation” (p. 26). In other words, the participant should agree with not only the way that the research has recorded their actions and words, but also the way that these actions and words were interpreted and represented. The present study used member checks through out the data collection process. Interviews were transcribed, verbatim, and summarized. Participants were requested to review both transcripts and summaries to ensure that they accurately reflected what the participants were trying to communicate.

After reviewing their transcripts, the participants were surprised at the quality of their speaking skills (e.g., use of interjections such as “um”, and “like”), and the manner in which they switched topics of discussion mid-sentence when answering specific questions. One participant rationalized her disorganized thoughts by explaining that she was excited to be talking about dancing, and therefore kept losing her train of thought. None of the participants commented on the content of their transcripts or felt that they had left out any pertinent details.

Peer review. The process of peer review involves the examination of data and findings by a colleague. The colleague may or may not be familiar with the topic of study, and is asked to

comment as to whether or not the data appear reasonable based on the data collected (Merriam, 2002). In regards to the present research, peer review occurred on different levels. Throughout the research process, thesis committee members were consulted. The opinions of individuals who relate to the population of study (for example, individuals who were involved in elite dance training as high school students) were also sought and considered.

Conversations with committee members were useful in that they provided support during data analysis. Specifically, committee members assisted in and affirmed the creation of descriptive categories and describing the shared meaning of the participants' experiences. Throughout the data analysis process I was also in contact with my former dance group members and other adult dancers. During these conversations individuals commented that they were able to identify with what the participants had shared and that the themes I had described were applicable to their dance experiences.

Researcher commitment. Merriam (2002) advised that researches be “submerged or engaged in the data collection phase of a long enough period to ensure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon” (p. 26). Data saturation is used to determine how in-depth or lengthy the commitment to the research should be (Merriam, 2002). Data saturation occurs when no new information is presented despite continued data collection. This judgment was made on the basis of repeated themes and conversations that I observed throughout interviews. Although it could be argued that data was not saturated in the present study, as the results of this study reflect a very positive or idealistic look at the participants' experiences, seeking more information from the participants regarding the negative aspects of their experiences would have been unethical. This is discussed more thoroughly in following sections of this thesis. Given that topics presented during interviews produced similar responses from participants, and participants were beginning

to repeat responses to question presented in different ways (or when questions were posed with alternate wording), the need to continue data collection was not apparent.

Commitment to this research was also evident in my personal connection to the topic of study. As a former dancer and dance instructor, I had a personal and ongoing connection to the research. I was committed to and immersed in the data collection and data analysis for a full year's time.

External Validity

The concept of external validity speaks to questions regarding “the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations” (Merriam, 2002, p. 28). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) further described this concept as the extent to which research is complementary to existing research. Merriam (2002) stated that providing a rich and thick description of the phenomenon is an acceptable strategy for ensuring external validity in qualitative research. By providing a rich and thick description of the phenomenon, it is then the responsibility of the reader to determine whether or not the findings of the present study are relevant to the work that they are doing.

Reliability

Specific to qualitative research, Bogdan and Biklen (2007) described reliability to be the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed that in regards to qualitative research, the concept of reliability is better described in reference to the dependability or consistency of the data. In other words, the reliability of the data is indicated by the extent to which the data makes sense, or appears consistent and dependable (Merriam, 2002). The processes by which dependability and consistency are achieved in qualitative research are similar to processes regarding internal validity. For example, Merriam (2002) proposed that

triangulation, peer review, and the audit trail were also appropriate ways to establish reliability.

The audit trail was most applicable to the present study.

The audit trail. Lincoln and Guba (1985) first conceptualized the audit trail as a method in which researchers can present the ways and means that they navigated the research. The audit trail describes how data were collected, categories were created, and how decisions were made which provides the research with a sense of auditability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002; Sandelowski, 1986). This final document describes the processes of reviewing existing literature, interview questions and transcripts, and the process of data analysis.

Emerging Concepts

Lincoln (1995) presented five emerging concepts in regards to the evaluation criteria of qualitative research that were applied to the present study. Positionality (the researchers personal stance regarding the topic of interest); voice (acknowledgment of the voices providing the data); critical subjectivity (understanding individual differences); community as arbiter of quality (benefits of research to the community of interest); and reciprocity (benefits of the research to the individual participants).

Positionality. The notion of positionality refers to the researcher revealing their personal stance regarding the phenomenon of study (Lincoln, 1995). Identifying the researchers' motives, personal history, and assumptions regarding the research are thought to be foundational in regards to the qualitative inquiry (Caelli, Ray & Mill, 2003).

As an individual who was committed to elite dance training as a high school student, my interest and commitment to this research was personal. Awareness of my personal investment to this subject was imperative in ensuring that I held separate, as much as possible, my personal opinions, beliefs and expectations from the data. This was accomplished by bracketing.

According to Ahern (1999), bracketing is the "process by which researchers endeavor not to

allow their assumptions to shape the data collection process” (p. 407), or the “ability to put aside personal feelings and preconceptions” while collecting and analyzing data (p. 408). Although my personal relationship with the phenomenon was beneficial in understanding the daily experiences of the participants regarding their dance training, I needed to continually remind myself that the experiences of the participants were their own, and different from my own.

In retrospect, I considered my dance experiences to have been a positive aspect of my adolescence. As the existing literature identifies negative aspects of the dance experience, I was prepared for the participants to share both the negative and positive aspects of their experiences. While at first I was surprised at the absence of specific negative experiences, I realized that although my dance experiences were not without challenges, as an adult I have made sense of the negative aspects of my experiences, and choose to focus on the positive elements of such experiences. Specifically, I consider the more challenging aspects of the training to have been those that were most influential on my developing sense of self and academic success. Therefore, my personal experiences that could be considered negative, are experiences that I now consider to be positive.

Voice. It is often the purpose of qualitative researchers to give voice to those who have gone unheard. Lincoln (1995) elaborated this notion by stating that “voice not only becomes a characteristic of interpretive work, but the extent to which alternative voices are heard is a criterion by which we can judge the openness, engagement, and problematic nature of any text” (p. 283). This research provided adolescent females a safe and productive arena to present their thoughts and feelings regarding their high school experiences as elite dancers.

Critical subjectivity. Sometimes referred to as reflexivity, Lincoln (1995) described critical subjectivity as the ability to understand the “differences in the personal and psychological

states of others” (p. 283). In other words, critical subjectivity speaks to respecting the participants’ emotional and psychological states throughout the research process.

To some extent this notion is more aptly addressed in regards to the ethical considerations regarding this research. For example, given the age and developmental level of the participants, as well as their current commitment to dance training, I was aware of their demanding lives and did not pressure or coerce participants to answer questions of a more personal nature (e.g., body image, negative peer relationships). I believe that because I had experienced the phenomenon of interest, I was sensitive of the participants’ emotional state. As a student of counselling, I was also able to draw on skills learned and practiced through counselling and ethics coursework throughout the interview process. Such skills contributed to the quality of collected data, specifically in posing questions in a non-threatening manner, summarizing participant responses to ensure I had properly understood their responses, and using self-disclosure in a discretionary manner.

Community as arbiter of quality. Lincoln (1995) suggested that research should not only be productive by contributing to academic knowledge but, should also benefit the community in which the research took place. The present research has implications for parents, school and dance educators, and counsellors, as well as the dancers themselves. Ideally, parents and educators will be able to use the information presented to better understand and appreciate the issues that young dancers encounter and how they cope with these situations. It is also a goal of the present study to provide counselling professionals with a better understanding of the triumphs and challenges that individuals involved in elite training of any kind may face. In terms of the population of interest, this study provided young dancers with a vehicle for their voices and stories to be heard.

Reciprocity. Reciprocity is “a characteristic of high-quality, rigorous qualitative inquiry [that] is argued to be essential because of the person-centered nature of interpretive work” (Lincoln, 1995, p. 283). This concept suggests that the nature of the participant-researcher relationship should include trust and caring and benefit both the researcher and the participant (Lincoln, 1995).

I believe that involvement in this research was beneficial to the participants. The opportunity to discuss and share their experiences, interpretations, thoughts and feelings promoted self-awareness and self-understanding. The casual conversational tone of the research interviews provided the participants a safe, supportive, and positive environment for the individuals to share their stories. Participating in the present research also provided individuals an opportunity to contribute to research that is relevant to their daily experiences. Conducting this research was of personal benefit in that it provided an opportunity for me to integrate my love for dancing with my academic endeavors, therefore allowing me to share such experiences with fellow students, faculty, and readers.

Ethical Considerations and Approval

The present study received ethical approval from the University of Saskatchewan Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioral Science and Research (see Appendixes H and I). Participation in the present study was strictly voluntary. Through the informed consent process, participants were aware strategies take to maximize their confidentiality, and anonymity, and right to withdraw at any point during the study. Audiotapes, consent forms, and transcripts are available only to the researcher. These items will be securely stored in the office of the supervising researcher, in the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education for five years.

As the participants were high achieving individuals who lead demanding lives, a sense of perceived vulnerability was observed. In other words, the participants presented as being very confident in their ability to balance the demands of school work with dance training, while being successful in both avenues. Furthermore, they were very confident that their dance experiences were primarily positive and that they benefited from their demanding lifestyles. Interviews were conducted in a manner that intended that participants would be able to return to their lives of dancing and school with the same perspectives, attitudes, and understanding that they had prior to participating in the research interview.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the findings of the present study. I start by introducing the five participants, after which the shared meaning of dancing through high school is described. Two themes, The Daily Life of a Dancer and The Social Life of a Dancer, are presented next. Data poems, which were created by combining quotes from the participant transcripts, are included to further illustrate each theme

To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were given to each of the participants and identifying information was altered. For example, specific names of people and places were changed. Quotations were also altered for readability. Deleted words have been represented by ellipses, and added words are represented by square parenthesis.

Participants

Elizabeth

As the oldest participant and a recent high school graduate, Elizabeth, was in the process of negotiating the end of her high school experiences with her competitive dance group and beginning to anticipate what her life would be like as she begins University and can no longer dance as many hours each week. She was contemplating whether or not to pursue entrance to law school, or to pursue a professional career as a dancer. Elizabeth successfully completed the highest grade of the Royal Academy of Dance vocational examinations and described much value in the intensity of her ballet training. It was with a harmonious balance of matter-of-factness and passion that Elizabeth described her dancing experiences.

Dance has provided me with a lot of knowledge of who I am and what I like to do. I would like to go and dance professionally for a little while... and you know get all this creativeness out of me and kind of go and perform

Elizabeth was proud of her accomplishments as a dancer and what they represented. She felt that dancing helped her grow into a mature young woman and shaped the way that her peers

viewed her. In the opening statement of her first interview, Elizabeth described dancing as a creative outlet, something that had taught her discipline and provided a sense of social connectedness, as well as a way of life. She commented that, “it’s a passion of mine... it has just always been something that is a part of me... I kind of grew up with it; it would seem really weird to not have it in my life.” For Elizabeth, dance was a very significant aspect of her life.

Grace

Grace was seventeen years old and about to enter her final year of high school when we had our first interview. Despite her honour roll (an average exceeding 80%) standing, and parental expectations, Grace was contemplating the challenges of pursuing a professional career as a dancer. Although Grace felt her strengths in dance were in disciplines such as jazz, contemporary and lyrical, she was committed to classical ballet training at an advanced level. Dance gave Grace a venue for self-expression and a means to self-assuredness. Grace struck me as self-confident without being arrogant. She displayed a strong sense of who she was, and acknowledged how dancing contributed to this self-awareness. Grace spoke of ‘dance’ as a place of safe haven, a passion, and a part of her life; dancing also provided an important coping mechanism for Grace.

It’s kind of given me like a centre... I know that if I have like a bad day at school or if I have like a rough time at home I can just go to dance and forget about it all and have like this escape... you don’t really have to think, you can just dance it off.

Grace spoke of dance as a physical place (e.g., the studio) that she associated with self-growth, exploration, and accomplishment. She also described dance as an emotional centre, or sense of grounding, that she associated with the expressive or artistic experiences of dancing. In the moment, when Grace danced, she felt the experience was beyond cognition; “it’s almost like you aren’t thinking at all... the movement becomes like a part of you and you aren’t even really thinking.”

Mackenzie

Mackenzie came to her first interview days after her sixteenth birthday and days before her first day of the eleventh grade. It was with a sense of excitement that Mackenzie spoke of her passion for dancing. Although she was planning on focusing her ballet training on completing her Advanced I Royal Academy of Dance exam (the second to highest level), she was also committed to and enjoyed other types of dancing, such as hip hop, jazz, lyrical, modern, and acrobatics. At times, when talking about her love for dance and her favourite moments, Mackenzie's face would glow and she would sit up in her chair as if she was about to break into a dance routine at any moment. Mackenzie's passion was balanced with a distinct attitude of commitment, hard work and dedication that was evident in both her school and dance achievements. Mackenzie's love for dance represented a sense of mastery and artistry coupled with a genuine love for dancing.

You never feel like you have to go to dance; you just always want to. It just makes you feel good when you are there, and you just never want to quit, because it's what you do... it is what you know.

Conversations with Mackenzie brought her feelings of passion and enjoyment to the foreground. When she described embarrassing moments on stage, she still continued to glow and smile. Even when asked to think of her most stressful experiences dancing, in terms of external pressure, Mackenzie shrugged her shoulders and commented that "I guess I just realize that this what I love to do, and it doesn't matter." While her comment could be interpreted as cavalier, Mackenzie's genuine attitude suggested that she had made sense of such challenges, and that her passion for dance facilitated resiliency and strength. She could still be successful despite challenges she might face.

Hannah

Although it appeared to be difficult for Hannah to describe her experiences dancing, it was really quite simple. Dance is what Hannah has done and what she knows. Hannah spoke of balancing her busy dancing schedule and school work with a tone that seemed to assume that all sixteen year old girls spend seven days a week at the dance studio and still receive grades exceeding ninety percent. About to begin her final year of high school, at the age of sixteen, Hannah wondered whether she should attend University in her first year out of high school, or pursue a career in the world of professional dance. Not only was Hannah committed to her own dance training, she also taught ballet classes to pre-school aged children one day each week. On top of these dance responsibilities, Hannah was confident she would maintain her impressive high school marks (mostly high 80's and 90's) and hopefully work a few hours each week at her part time job she had started over the summer.

[I like that you can] express yourself and what you are feeling and [show] off your own personality through your dancing... whatever you are feeling, you just kind of get to explode!

When asked what has kept her committed to dancing, Hannah responded with a giggle that suggested such questions need not be asked, "just because I love it". She elaborated and described a sense of enjoyment from accomplishment and the social connections, but it all came back to the fact that Hannah just loved all aspects of dancing. At times her train of thought was difficult to follow. She would begin talking about an experience on stage and some how end up describing a social connection to another dancer or accomplishing goals. It was not that Hannah was not articulate or well spoken, but that all aspects of her dance experiences were important and contributed to every other part of her life.

Kate

Fifteen years old and about to begin the eleventh grade, Kate, the youngest participant, experienced a change in her identity as a dancer between the first and second interviews. In the first interview, she was hesitant to call herself a dancer, as she liked to participate in many other activities. However, after performing as a dancer in a school production, she described, with a sense of pride and accomplishment, the attention she received from other students following the performance. It was with a sense of humble pride that Kate described moments of accomplishment in her dance career, her academic success, and the friendships she had made through dancing.

I think that people know me more as a dancer now, just cause of the musical. There was like four of us who were like the main dancers in it, so like a lot of people would come up to me and be like, so I didn't know you danced and stuff... they know you have strong interests or like a passion for something... it just adds a new dimension to what they think of you.

Kate was the only participant who spoke about considering quitting dance to participate in athletic activities at school. However, she was confident that she had made the best decision in staying committed to dancing. For Kate, it was the integration of music and emotions with the athleticism of dancing that compelled her to sacrifice sports for dance. She commented “everything with dance is really different; it never gets boring, because you’re not doing the same thing over and over... for sports and stuff, you just kind of do it.” Dance was something more than an after-school activity or a recreational sport for Kate. Not only had dancing shaped who Kate had become, but she was able to express herself through her dancing.

Shared Meaning of Dancing Through High School

Interviewing these five young women provided a rich and in-depth look at various aspects of the lives of adolescent females involved in elite dance training during high school. Throughout our discussions about relationships, time management, competition, and their commitment to

dancing a common sentiment of mastery, accomplishment, and the manner in which dance was a coping mechanism or resource for the participants wove through the conversations. When discussing their favourite moments of dancing, the participants often described feelings of accomplishment and satisfaction from having others recognize their hard work, progress and ability. For example, Grace seemed proud and pleased when she was ‘noticed’:

I like going to workshops and then having people, like teachers you don’t even know like pick you out and compliment you or give you a correction, which means they noticed you. You know, it’s just like, it’s the greatest feeling, cause you know that all the work that you’ve put into it is finally like paying off and your being noticed.

Grace felt that her efforts were validated when another teacher or instructor recognized her hard work and her talent. This external validation was something that motivated Grace to work her hardest during all practices, rehearsals, and performances.

One of Mackenzie’s favourite dance moments involved recognition by a competition adjudicator. Despite the fact that it was not her best performance, the recognition from an experienced dancer made it a memorable moment:

The first year I did a solo, I went out on stage, and I was nervous, like I was so nervous, and I hit the curtain and fell over. And I just got up and kept going, and then I started bawling when I got off stage... after that the adjudicator made a special mention about it and then she gave me a fifty-dollar scholarship, so it was nice.

For Mackenzie, a situation that could have been a humiliating and embarrassing memory became one of her most favourite moments in dancing because her efforts were still acknowledged and recognized by an adjudicator at the dance competition.

The participants also described a sense of satisfaction from performing for an audience and having the attention of a crowd. Elizabeth’s most enjoyable moment dancing involved playing the lead role in a year-end dance recital:

One of my best moments that I can recall at dance is when I got to play the [lead role in the dance recital]. That was because it was the one time that I really got a role at my studio, like a main role, where I could dance my own part and play a character... the best

part is that you can perform for everyone, not in a group, but people will be watching you in your solo, because you are the only one dancing and you have a role. And they don't just see you as a dancer on stage, but as a character.

Elizabeth savored the experience of being the lead role, because she enjoyed not only the experience of performing, but also the attention of being a soloist. She described the experience as if playing a lead role in the dance recital was a certain right of passage, or form of validation regarding her talent as a dancer. Elizabeth described this experience as one of her favorites because she was able to develop the character and perform on her own. Although she enjoyed her group performances, she found a certain sense of accomplishment in being able to perform as a soloist in her studio's year-end dance recital.

Grace also enjoyed performing as a soloist:

When I did my jazz solo at [one competition], it was probably like the best I'd ever done it, and I just felt 'on', and you kind of like, you can hear the reactions from the audience at certain parts and it felt just felt really good... with all the work you put into something... you just feel so good about it and you can just feel everyone watching you and it's like you can feel when you are 'on', [then] you walk off with this awesome feeling like everything you've worked for is finally paying off, it just feels right.

Grace used the term being 'on' to describe the ultimate performing experience. Being 'on' meant that all aspects of her performance were successful and not only did Grace feel good about her work, an audience also enjoyed and was impressed by what she had done. Such peak experiences were the payoff for her hard work. She was working hard not only because she loved dancing for herself, but also because she wanted to share her love for dance with others.

Other favourite moments that included a sense of achievement and accomplishment arose from being successful in dance examinations. Elizabeth had completed the highest level of Royal Academy of Dance examinations. She remarked that: "doing well in exams, that is another thing that has really stood out for me, because you work so hard all year, just for one day, for one person to see you, and one chance". Elizabeth worked for hours and trained for years to have one

person validate and approve of the work she had done. Hannah also described the satisfaction of such success:

I enjoyed just achieving exams, and finding out marks on that. You just feel like you've accomplished things, getting distinction or honours, that feels really good. It is kind of a goal that you've reached for all year and worked really hard to get, so it is really rewarding to see that you've worked hard and achieved something.

Hannah enjoyed doing well in her dance exams. Although she enjoyed all of her dance training, she valued the opportunities to know that she had accomplished a certain standard of technique and performance. Having an examiner or an adjudicator approve of her work made it more real and provided tangible evidence of her accomplishments.

Kate, on the other hand, found a sense of achievement through mastering new steps and tricks:

When you are having trouble with a step and then you finally get it, then you feel relieved, and you've accomplished something. Like when I started taking acro, and then I learned how to do an aerial... I was happy, because I had always wanted to do one.

She was proud of mastering an aerial. Kate decided that she wanted to learn the trick, and was excited, proud, and satisfied when she achieved her goal. The other participants were most satisfied when they received a mark or a medal as tangible evidence of their success; however, Kate was satisfied each time she mastered a new step or trick.

The participants often described their lives as dancers in a concrete or matter-of-fact manner; however, they also alluded to a certain passion or emotional connection with dancing. For example, Elizabeth felt that her level of concentration while dancing had positive emotional implications:

[This] sense of calm, that you can go into dance class and kind of forget about everything else that is going on in your life... you are concentrating so much... and you are focused on your technique and becoming as best as you can and doing such a good job of what you are doing, that you forget about your outside life and you're focused only on what you are doing right there.

Elizabeth felt that she benefited from dance as an additional dimension in her world, something that she could focus on and that helped her feel calm. Dancing was like an escape for Elizabeth. When she needed a break from her life at school or at home, dancing provided a world where learning, performing, and expressing could occupy her mind.

In many ways, dancing functioned as a coping mechanism for the participants. When describing her passion for dance, Elizabeth suggested that her love for dance, and her own personal emotional experiences dancing, helped her cope with the negative aspects of adolescence, and the intense commitment she had made to dancing:

Dancing gives you an immense sense of freedom... it just makes you feel good inside. So I think that really allows everything negative to kind of get flushed out of you, and once you are done dancing for the day, you know you feel better.

While the demanding schedule, the notion of competition, and the social stresses of being adolescent could all be potential stressors for the participants, it was as if dancing was their most precious coping skill. As Grace described:

When the music gets on and you just kind of stop thinking, you can like shut off that part of your mind and just focus on the dancing you are doing... like there is a weight off your shoulder, like the problem is still there so it obviously hasn't gone away, but it's kind of like after you've cried really really hard, you know the problem is still there, but you feel better about it and it's kind of like you've let it all out.

The mention of a weight off her shoulder, suggested that Grace felt her stress and her problems in a physical manner, and therefore it was natural for something physical, like dancing, to relieve her of such pressures. She compared the emotional release of dancing to crying, as tears can represent one's sadness, she could use dancing to represent everything and anything that she was feeling. Hannah described similar experiences:

I find usually through using my body and putting all my emotions into it, that is just like clears my mind of everything... you just kind of forget about your own life and everything that is actually you and become a totally different person. It's kind of neat. Because you don't have to be yourself, you can just be someone else for a short while and

it's pretty cool. Like in a whole other world, not even anywhere near the people you know or the places you know.

For Hannah the escape that dancing provided allowed her to become someone or something different. It provided her another world, where she was able to be free to express her inner most thoughts and feelings. When she was dancing, she did not have to think of the daily stressors in the life of an adolescent female, she could focus on herself, her body, and her mind and be fully present in the moment of dancing. Dancing allowed the participants to become fully engaged in the moment, rather than ruminating on things from the past, or anticipating the future.

The shared experience of the participants suggested that they appreciated mastery and accomplishment. They also utilized dancing as an important coping mechanism or resource that the participants depended on and valued when faced with daily life stressors. Dancing was a way of life for the participants and they thrived in response to the challenges of training, the self-growth and understanding developed through training, and the relationships fostered through dancing.

Descriptive Categories

Two principal themes were identified: The daily life of a dancer, and the social life of a dancer: dance and school. Although the daily life of a dancer seemed to closely integrate dance experiences with academic endeavors and daily activities, the social world of the dancer seemed divided into school and dance. At times, school and dance were fluid and integrated (e.g., the ability to use skills learned in dance training in daily life and academics), however at other times, the two worlds were separate (e.g., high school friends did not interact with school friends).

Theme 1 – The Daily Life of a Dancer: School and Dance Integrated

The first theme is about how the participants integrated their commitments to and experiences of both dance training and academic responsibilities. The participants emphasized

the challenges in managing their demanding schedules and noted how their dance experiences impacted on their academic endeavors and social lives as high school students. Although the participants were aware that their dance commitments were demanding, and, at times, difficult to manage, they discussed even the most adverse moments with a sense of satisfaction, accomplishment, and enjoyment.

It teaches you discipline
It has given me more confidence
I always want to do a good job

It has given me discipline
It's allowed me to work for a goal
I am motivated

It takes up a lot of your time
If you really love it, you stick with it
I have accomplished something

So Much to do, So Little Time

The significant amount of time that participants committed to dancing was evident not only in the details of their weekly schedules, but also in how difficult it was for me to find time to meet with the dancers once the dance season began. The typical schedule for a dancer at this level fluctuates throughout the season. Most dancers attend a series of weekly scheduled classes and then additional classes to prepare for performances, competitions and examinations.

The participants' weekly time tables involved eleven to fourteen hours of dancing, consisting of approximately five hours of classical ballet training, three hours of jazz classes, and another three to six hours for other dance forms such as hip-hop, tap, lyrical, and modern. These classes usually took place after school between the hours of five and ten. When preparing for performances, competitions, and examinations, additional classes and rehearsals were generally scheduled for weekends. The participants commented that these additional rehearsals often involved six to eight hours of dancing on a Saturday or Sunday. At the peak of their dancing

responsibilities, the participants danced approximately seventeen to twenty-two hours each week. In addition to these dance commitments, two of the participants taught dance classes to younger students for two to four hours each week.

When asked about the negative aspects of being involved in dancing at such a high level, the participants were unanimous in noting that their dance training took up a lot of time.

According to Elizabeth, sometimes too much time:

Like sometimes, it's just like no matter how much you try to organize your time, there is just not enough time to spend on stuff, and you can always think to yourself, well I wish I would have had more time to spend on that essay, or I wish I would have had more time to research this, so sometimes you can feel really rushed, or sometimes you don't get to study as much as you want and you don't do as well on things.

Demanding dance schedules limited the amount of time the participants could spend socializing and participating in activities outside of dancing. Kate managed to include some school sports with her dance schedule in her first years of high school, but now, in grade eleven, this was not possible:

This year I am not quite sure, like I won't be able to play as many, but like some school sports are more flexible, like track and cross country... but, um, team sports like, I played basketball [in grade 9 and 10], but I can't try out this year, cause it is senior and I couldn't miss at all. But, I guess I just decided that I would dance, like I could have decided to take less dance, but I just decided not to.

Kate did not consider that choosing between dance and sports as a decision to be made until we discussed it in the interview. In retrospect, she realized that she could have chosen to cut back her dance hours and continue to play high school sports; however, dancing was so much a way of life for Kate, that giving it up was not an obvious possibility. At the beginning of grade eleven, when she realized that there was not time for both school sports and dancing, school sports were eliminated without question. Hannah similarly prioritized dance as always the top priority:

You just miss out on a few school events and things that your friends get to do or clubs that you might want to join... it sometimes sucks, but it's a choice that I make, so obviously it is what I want to be doing. So I don't really mind.

Like the other participants Hannah identified the substantial time commitment required for dancing as a negative aspect of her elite training; however, she chose to frame it in a positive manner, or in a way that suggested that it did not bother her. In other words, the participants recognized that the hours required for dance training were very demanding, but decided to not let it have a negative impact on their experience.

Overall, Grace did not generally find her dance schedule to be too demanding. However, she was able to predict at what time in the dance season that balancing school and dance commitments would be the most difficult:

Mostly just like around competition it gets bad, cause I mean I like worked all year on this routine and I am in this number, I can't just back out, right? But always around that time, schoolwork gets really heavy and I have to go to my [school] teachers and tell them I will be away [at dance competitions], and you know

When the demands were at the highest, even borderline unmanageable, backing out was not an option for Grace. She described balancing her school and dance demands at the most difficult times with a sense of anticipation and excitement, as if successful time management was part of the enjoyment that she found through dancing. Hannah also described moments where the balancing act was difficult, however it did not seem to bother her at all:

When you are dancing seven days a week and doing school and having a job, it is hard to juggle once in awhile, but you get through it... Maybe I haven't put as much time into this [assignment] as I could have because I have been at dance, but it's never had too much of a negative effect on [my school work]. It is just what I love to do, so being there doesn't seem like as big a deal, 7 days a week, it is just kind of a part of my life.

Hannah's comment brought to life the metaphor of a balancing scale. She was aware that taking time away from dancing and focusing it on school work may lead to better marks, but she was also certain that taking time away from dance would negatively impact her dancing. For Hannah, dance was so important that it was worth sacrificing a few marks at school.

The intensity of the training was a part of the process, part of the experience, and part of what it meant to be a dancer an elite level. Although the participants identified time commitment as the most negative aspect of their training, they were able to make sense of it in a manner that suggested that the adversity contributed positively to their dance experiences. If their dance schedules were less demanding, then the overall experience would not have been as meaningful.

According to Elizabeth:

You spend so much time at the studio; you really have to be organized. And going to dance only once or twice a week, you don't have to be as organized. But when you are there everyday for X amount of hours you have to know how much time you need to do your school work... which is something that can be really frustrating... but I think it made me a better person, and I have no regrets about what I did with dance.

The intensity of the time commitment not only made them better technical dancers, but also contributed to the development of time management skills for the participants.

Dedicated to Dancing

When discussing the amount of time that they committed to dance training, the participants described their commitment as a part of who they are, what they do, and what they consider normal. Mackenzie rarely questioned her commitment to dancing:

Like you never feel like you have to go to dance, you just always want to. It makes you feel good when you are there, and you just never want to quit, just because it's what you do and you just get used to it, but you still love it so much. It just never becomes a habit.

Mackenzie's perspective suggested that a habit was a meaningless aspect of someone's routine. For her, dance was very meaningful, and therefore it was easy to commit so much of her life to her training. Perhaps this commitment was rarely questioned because the dancers knew that full commitment was a non-negotiable expectation from their instructors. Commitment to the volume and intensity of the training was required for the participants in order to be for them to be successful in their technical training as dancers, as well as to be fulfilled by their experience.

Even in light of the more demanding times, the participants did not question their commitment to their training, or their love for dancing. As Elizabeth explained:

I know there are going to be times in my life where I am going to be frustrated, and there are going to be days where I am going to have a really off day and it is going to be hard, but I know that there are also those days that are going to be really good, and those times where I get to perform and you know play a character, and those are times that I am going to really treasure from dancing.

For Elizabeth, acknowledging and remembering the rewarding aspects of her dancing made the frustrating times more palatable. The moments of frustration were expected, and in a sense welcomed. Experiencing such adversity intensified the participants' love for dance and their sense of accomplishment in being successful. It seemed like acknowledging the commitment they made to dance suggested another measure of success and accomplishment for the participants.

Kate described times when she was frustrated or overwhelmed by her dance training, but she never wanted to quit or cut back her dance schedule because of the distress that inevitably accompanied her commitment to dance:

Like there are sometimes when I have been at the studio for a long day and I am just tired and I want to go home, then sometimes when I don't feel like going... and I have said to myself... I am not going to take as much next year... but if I think like oh I am going to cut back and then for example, over the summer or something when I don't dance, like I miss it, so then I want to do more... if I have a break from dancing or something I realize that I miss it and if I did [cut back] I would miss it.

The participants made an effort to compliment each comment about being frustrated or overwhelmed with a statement affirming their love for dance, or confidence in their decision to commit to such intense training. This was done in a self-assured manner that suggested that the participants interpreted the concept of commitment as a process of continually finding joy in a challenging situation.

Many dancers who reach the level of ability attained by the present study's participants consider attending private dance academies. These dance academies require the dancers to live on

site and participate in training even more intense than the dancers in the present study experience at their local studios. While some of the participants considered attending such schools at younger ages, as high school students, they felt confident that they had received appropriate training balanced with an appropriate high school experience at their local studios.

Hannah thought that attending a private dance academy would have been positive in the sense that other students would have understood her situation, however, she did not think that was reason enough to move away: “Going away would be good maybe in terms of having friends that actually understand why you are missing things and stuff... but I like being at the school that I am at.” Hannah was comfortable with her lifestyle of balancing dancing with the demands of attending regular high school. Although she was aware of personal sacrifices (e.g., less time with school friends, limited participation in school activities) made to accommodate her dance training, she achieved a personally satisfying balance in which she could enjoy both high school and dancing. Many of Hannah’s positive social experiences at school related to her identity as a dancer. This connection is discussed further in the second theme, the social world of the dancer.

Mackenzie felt that going away to a private dance school would have interfered with the social experiences she has had in high school:

I think regular high school [is the right choice for me] just because you get to make friends with people that aren’t just dancers and don’t all have the same interests, cause otherwise I think it would get boring and dance wouldn’t be as special... I don’t think it would mean as much and you wouldn’t get to meet as many different people.

A common stigma attached to elite dance training, is the criticism that dancers are limited in experience and perhaps one-dimensional because they do not have the time to engage in other activities or explore interests outside of dancing. Mackenzie perceived that the diversity of her high school experience as compensating for a life outside of school that was limited to dance training. Attending a private dance academy would have disrupted the balance that Mackenzie

had achieved between honoring her dance commitments and wanting to have a typical experience of high school.

Although Elizabeth had committed two summers to programs at such elite ballet schools, she was keenly aware that attending such a school fulltime was an extreme commitment, and one that she did not want to make:

I wasn't prepared to go away at [age] ten or twelve, and spend my whole teenage life away from my family and my friends, because that is what you have to do. You have to go when you are young so that they can mold you into the kind of dancer that they want you to be. And a lot of the times, in most cases, that doesn't work out. So, you spend all this time and all this money and then you don't get anywhere in the end. So, I enjoyed doing the summer programs a lot, because it gave me perspective and it exposed me to a different part of the dance world. And it's enjoyable, it is fun, I mean you get to do what you love... but I am happy with what I did... staying home and not going away.

Elizabeth commented on not only the intensity of such programs, but also their limitations. Such programs focus specifically on ballet training, which limits the dancers' exposure to other dance forms. The intensity of the programs also limits the dancers' social and academic experiences. Elizabeth recognized these limitations and also the challenges of becoming a professional ballet dancer. She explained that a dancer needed to train at a private academy to have a career as a ballerina, but that the training she received at her local studio had made her a well-rounded performer. Although a performance career as a professional ballerina was no longer an option for Elizabeth, given her decision to not attend a private academy, she believed that her commitment to elite training had provided her not only with the skills to perform professionally or teach dance lessons, but had also taught her valuable life lessons.

Lessons Learned

Each participant believed that she had found a workable balance regarding her dance schedule, academic work, and social life, and each participant attributed her ability to focus and be successful regarding school work to her experiences with elite dance training, specifically

skills that she learnt first through dancing, that were later reinforced during high school careers. For example, each participant described developing skills in terms of time management, organization, dedication, discipline and focus. Elizabeth described how these skills transferred between school and dance:

I have this discipline that dance has given me and I am able to sit down and study and do my work and not get distracted. I always want to do a good job of everything, and [dance] has given me, like, organization skills because I have such a big load of classes at dance, I really need to organize my time so that I have time to do my homework and get everything done.

The participants had difficulty deciding whether their aptitude for discipline was an innate personal trait, or something specifically developed through their dance training. As the participants considered dancing to be a part of who they were, it was difficult to separate aspects of their lives and personalities from dancing.

Grace credited her school success to a combination of personal traits, and skills learned through dance training:

I am dedicated, and because of that I work really hard at everything I do, not only dance. So when I have a project to do, like I do it to the best of my ability... It has also made me really focused, I think, like when I am at school I am like paying attention and trying my best.

Grace's comments suggested that a sense of dedication and discipline were prerequisites for engaging in elite dance training, but the training itself fostered their further development. For example, Hannah identified personal discipline as helping her achieve honour roll marks in high school, discipline that she attributed to lessons learned through dance training, especially ballet training:

The discipline through dance, I think, has definitely helped me through school. Especially like ballet, since it is so structured and disciplined, and it just teaches you to have more structure in your own life and stay, like organized... [Also] just determination in general.

Mackenzie thought that her school success reflected both the lessons of respect taught in a dance class, and also the way that dancers learn to use their memories.

The discipline part, like respecting your teachers... like we started out like long before anyone went to school really because like you [start dance lessons] when you are tiny... that and the picking it up and remembering stuff. Like I have a pretty good memory, so that's good for biology.

Many of the participants started dancing at the age of three, and all had begun dancing before the age of five. Mackenzie acknowledged this early training as beneficial in that it introduced her to the practice of having a routine, which she contributed to her school success as well as her dance success in later years. Even in their early elementary school years, the participants followed a weekly routine of attending classes two or three days a week. Within each class there were specific guidelines and expectations. Dancers were expected to learn by watching and memorizing combinations of steps from week to week. They were expected to pay attention to their teachers and refrain from talking or being disruptive during classes. In many ways the participants were treated like young adults when they were young children.

Kate, another honour roll student, thought that dance helped her school work, not only because it developed discipline, but also because of the way that dance exercised her brain: "I guess like dancing, it works your brain... because you have to remember choreography and stuff and I guess that all relates back to school". Developing such discipline and being mentally engaged in an activity helped the participant develop skills relevant to school work, specifically the ability to pay attention, remain focused, and conduct themselves in a mature manner.

The participants also described a growing sense of maturity that they had developed through dancing which they believed also contributed to their school success. Elizabeth described the independence she had developed through dancing:

It has given me a lot of independence, for example when I went away to [ballet schools for the summer] I was pretty much on my own... I had to kind of take care of myself and learn how to do things like my own laundry and be more organized.

Elizabeth welcomed independence at a young age. Attending ballet school summer programs was like a reward for years of hard work, but also a liberating experience that made Elizabeth feel proud of what she had accomplished. Elizabeth was proud not only of the fact that she had been accepted into such prestigious dance programs, but also that she had been able to handle the pressure and responsibility that accompanies such an experience.

Grace also felt that dance had helped her to be more mature, which benefitted her school work, as well as other her high school experiences: “I’ve chosen not to have a stupid lifestyle where I am like drinking all the time and doing drugs or partying.” Grace described different ways that her commitment to dancing had shaped the decisions that she had made about her lifestyle. Grace felt that dancing had given not only an alternative to a lifestyle that included drugs and alcohol, but also a reason to avoid substance use. Grace was aware that she needed her body to be healthy to dance and that substance use would have a negative effect on her training.

The participants not only described learning that contributed to their lives as high school students but also felt that this learning would be beneficial in their lives as adults. The participants’ spoke of utilizing these skills in their future academic experiences, professional lives, and in leading healthy lives. Mackenzie anticipated the challenges of balancing the lives of family members:

We’ve been disciplined so much so that will always be something... just balancing everything, like when you start to have like a family or whatever, you have to balance everyone’s life, not just your own.

The phrase ‘balancing everything’ suggested that skills of organization, structure, and discipline would inform all aspects of her life.

Looking towards her future, Elizabeth was also sure that the organizational skills and the ability to negotiate balance in her life will help her as an adult:

I think because I had to work so hard to balance myself out in high school with regard to dancing and schoolwork and then on the other hand, downtime, I think that I will still be able to do that when I am older, like I am not going to overwork myself so that I don't know how to take care of myself. 'Cause that is really important and I think I have found that balance for sure.

For Elizabeth, it was important to find an appropriate balance of not only school and dance but also her own personal wellbeing. She felt that it was important that she be aware of and attend to both her physical and emotional wellbeing to be successful not only as a dancer, but also to feel healthy as a person.

Theme 2 – The Social Life of a Dancer: School and Dance Separated

A second theme was identified that focused on the participants' social experiences. The participants spoke about how dancing had provided unique and intimate social connectedness with other dancers at their studios. Although the participants each had a circle of high school friends, they were sometimes frustrated that their school classmates did not understand their commitment to and passion for dancing. The participants focus on dance friendships during the interview suggested that these relationships held a more significant meaning to the participants in comparison to their school friendships.

We've become so close
We always support each other
We have a close friendship
They understand

We can do anything in front of each other
We are like brutally honest with each other
We like know everything about each other
They understand pretty much everything you are going through

We honestly tell each other everything
We get along even better than school friends
We are just as dedicated and we want the same things

They just understand everything about me

At Dance

The participants expressed significant bonds with the friends that they met through dancing. These dance friendships were much more intense and intimate than those developed at school. As Elizabeth described:

I think you develop something deeper than with people at school, I think it comes from kind of growing up together and knowing what each others strengths and what each others weaknesses are and what we get frustrated with...

The dancers shared a common history, which allowed them to learn about their fellow dancers in a way that was not possible at school.

Dancing is so much more emotional because it is a goal, and it is competitive and it is hard on you, but you are all kind of in it together. I think you develop a wider knowledge of each other what you are really like, because that really comes out in dance.

The intensity of the dance experiences reflected the intensity of the dancers' relationships.

Because dance is something experienced on an emotional level, it is natural that relationships among dancers are unique. Elizabeth experienced dance as an unspoken form of communication that facilitated these special friendships. Dancing helped the participants to develop a better understanding of themselves, which they also observed in the dancers around them. For example dancing helped Elizabeth convey her self to others, as well as to see and understand the dancers around her. There was a genuine sense of peacefulness and appreciation when Elizabeth described the connections she developed with other dancers, as if she knew that other dancers would understand her interpretation of these relationships. While many athletes become connected to their team members through shared experiences, Elizabeth believed dancing to be different, because of the element of self-expression present in dancing.

Other participants suggested that in contrast with school friends, the closeness between dance friends reflected understanding and respecting the commitment each dancer makes to their

training. The participants described many feelings, experiences, and situations that were unique to elite dance training (e.g., the hours committed to training and the experience of competition).

So they felt that only other dancers could truly understand and relate to their lives as elite dancers. As Grace explained:

We kind of have like a closeness that is hard to find outside of [dance] because we like have all the same things in common kind of. And they understand why I am there everyday and why I spend all my time doing that, and my friends at school are always like “why do you always have dance?”

Grace felt accepted with her dance friends; her school friends however, questioned her commitment and passion for dancing. When with dance friends, Grace never had to justify her love for dance. Her dance friends understood her love for dance, and contributed to her passion and commitment. Mackenzie echoed similar sentiments:

It’s just nice, cause my school friends don’t understand dance, and like they try, but it’s just not the same. So it’s nice to have those people who are interested in the same things as you, that can be there for you and they know like what you are going through and a lot of the time they’re going through it with you. Like, the first year that I did a solo it was a lot of our first years doing solos, and it was just nice because everyone was reacting the same way and we were all just there for each other.

Mackenzie knew that only another dancer could relate to the apprehension and exhilaration that she had felt while competing as a soloist for the first time. For Mackenzie, having a group of individuals who were going through the same thing at the same moment not only helped her make sense of her experience, but also provided a sense of connection between her and her fellow dancers. Mackenzie knew that she could not have this bond with high school classmates, as they had not shared such emotional experiences.

The participants also felt that they would not have sought or anticipated relationships with their dance friends had they met them at high school. In other words, dance facilitated friendships with individuals who were different than those in their high school social circles. As Elizabeth explained: “I have made some really close connections... that I would have never made other

wise... It has opened up opportunities for me with different friends, different circles of friends, it's good." Kate also described similar opportunities:

I find that at school there's way more people to make friends with, so like you usually make friends with people who are similar to you, but at dance, that's not necessarily the case. So there can be like different types of people in your friends, but you still like get a long like really good, but at school like you wouldn't think like people like that you might not become friends with... [at dance] everybody is friends with everybody, and like at school there are always people that you don't get a long with good, but at dance, like it doesn't really seem that people don't get along... it's like one big group.

On the one hand, Kate felt that she was more like her school friends; however, she described a deeper relationship with dance friends. In a sense, school friends were all alike on the surface, but the dance friends shared something more significant: a lifestyle, a passion, and a commitment. Kate felt that the high school social interactions were limited by boundaries between individuals with different interests, styles of dress, personalities, or ways of interacting. At dance, however, these things were not important. The participants connected with other dancers based on their experience of dancing, not on the social rules of interaction that high school enforced. Kate suggested that there was a greater opportunity for friendships to develop at dancing, despite there being more people to meet at school.

The significant relationships associated with the participants dance experiences extended past those with their fellow dancers. The participants also described special relationships with their dance teachers. Elizabeth described her relationship with her dance teacher to be much more personal than any relationship she had had with a school teacher:

[Relationships with dance teachers] are a lot more personal because you have your same dance teachers since you were a little girl, like I have had the same teachers ever since I was four, so they have seen you grow and they know who you are as a person and they know your strengths and weaknesses... Like dance isn't something that's mandatory, right, where school you go because you have to, dance is something you go because you want to, and I think that the teachers in dance, they see you grow and they see how you are reaching for that goal and they always want to help you.

Elizabeth felt that like her fellow dancers, her dance teachers understood her passion for dancing. Her instructors had endured similar experiences during their training and were now an integral part of her elite dance training experiences. Mackenzie particularly admired one of her instructors' passion for dancing:

She's just unbelievable; like she has a passion for dance like bigger than anyone I have ever seen. Like she just loves it, and love what she does... so it's nice when somebody has that kind of passion and like brings you into it.

Mackenzie felt that it was this particular teacher that had guided not only the technical aspects of her dance training, but also the emotional connection that she had developed to dancing and her fellow dancers. Mackenzie spoke of her relationship with this teacher as if it was a catalyst for her personal experiences as a dancer; as if her passion for dancing was a direct reflection of exposure to her instructors love for dance. Mackenzie's quote suggested that this relationship was reciprocal. Mackenzie described the teacher bringing her into the sense of passion, as if the teachers' goal was not only to teach a certain dance technique, but also to use relationship and social connectedness to develop passion and commitment in her students.

Although the participants all reported having positive relationships with their dance teachers, they were aware that some elite dancers did not have such positive experiences. For example, Mackenzie observed negative interactions at dance competitions:

Sometimes other teachers treat their students [negatively]. Like when some kids come off the stage and they are crying and then their teacher just comes and gets really mad at them... I don't think that's right; it's not something you want to see before you go on stage especially. It brings down your mood and I don't think some teachers treat their students with the respect that they should.

Although Mackenzie did not describe any negative interactions with her own dance teachers, she found that observing unsupportive student-teacher relationships negatively impacted her dance experience. All the participants thought that having negative relationships with their dance teachers would cause them to consider moving dance studios or quitting. The quality of their

relationships with their instructors was a contributing factor to enjoyment of their dance experiences.

Hannah felt that the close relationships that she developed with her dance teachers reflected the amount of time that she spent with them:

I probably spend more time with my dance teachers than I do with my parents! So, like I mean you just have bonds with them, you are with them everyday... I think just because you spend so much time around them, they become part of your family.

Other participants also referred to their fellow dancers and instructors as: “a second family,” or “an extended family.” The use of the term family illustrates the sentiment or importance of these relationships as well as the sense of ongoing development and growth. The dancers began working with their teachers and classmates at a young age; like a family they were able to grow and develop, both as individuals and together as a team.

However, relationships with dance friends were not without challenges. The participants acknowledged and openly discussed the competitive nature of dancing. The participants often felt in competition with their close dance friends. Elizabeth described competition in the dance studio as something that could not necessarily be avoided, but not as something that hindered her enjoyment of her dance experiences.

[Name of other dancer] and I'll have some laughs about it... we are the two advanced dancers in the studio, and everyone knows that. So there's kind of this idea out there that it is her versus me, and really it's not! It's just this idea that people create. Because that's what they think and we can have a good laugh about it, which just goes to show you that for me there wasn't a whole lot of negative competition. People try to set you up for it though, competition and stuff, and they'll try to get you to go against each other, but if you have a good strong friendship; it is usually not a problem.

Elizabeth felt that the competitive atmosphere was always present, but decided not to allow those pressures to interfere with her social or artistic experiences of dancing. Other dancers and their parents expected Elizabeth and this dancer to be rivals rather than friends. However, Elizabeth actually described this dancer who she was in competition with, as one of her closest friend at the

dance studio. She felt that coping with the pressure to be in competition with a close friend actually strengthened their friendship.

Elizabeth also believed that the competitive nature of her friendship with the other advanced dancer had actually helped her dancing:

I mean you can have competition that makes each person do their absolute best. So it can really bring out good in you and push you to your potential more. I know a lot of the times in dance, it's like, well okay, she can do it, so I can do it too, right? So it can bring out good stuff in you for sure, and it is healthy competition... it has to be a balance between competition and friendship.

Elizabeth perceived the competition as not with the other dancers as individual people, but as a standard or as a reference as to how she herself was performing and progressing. The talent and ability of the other dancers supported Elizabeth's own drive to work harder in her dance classes.

Hannah also felt that competition among dance friends had improved her dancing:

It's not a bad competition in anyway. Nobody gets jealous or like mad at each other when one gets a higher mark or whatever. It's just always really supportive... like it helps you grow on your own by competing with [friends]... because you are all just feeding off each other and helping each other grow... you are kind of trying to be better or at least as good as the other ones, because you want to just excel as much, but you help each other grow and get better.

For Elizabeth and Hannah, the balancing competition and friendship meant being motivated by their friends' achievements, being supportive and happy for each other as they progressed.

Mackenzie described the competition among dancers at her studio as something that she was aware of, but that did not bother her:

You really have to look at each others strengths and weaknesses... there isn't one [dancer] that is like amazing at everything. There are people who have strengths in different disciplines and stuff. I guess you really have to analyze that and make sure you don't cut yourself down too much with what you aren't good at but realize what you what you are good at and compare that with other people too.

Competition had helped Mackenzie identify not only her weaknesses, but also her strengths as a dancer. It helped her to celebrate her own achievements and recognize the success and

development of others. At times competition was difficult to cope with; however, the participants had made sense of it in a manner that contributed positively to their experiences.

While Elizabeth and Hannah thought that the competition had made them better dancers, Mackenzie felt that coping with this sense of competition had made her a better person.

You have to deal with it... we all get rewarded for stuff we do and we and then we just have to accept the other people will get rewarded too... There's usually a balance, if you do really good one year, then you might not do so good the next year... It will just make you a better person, 'cause you have to be happy for someone when you aren't so happy and it's a lot of character building.

Mackenzie's quote suggested that there were times that coping with the competitive atmosphere at her own studio was challenging. For Mackenzie, the most difficult aspect of the competitive experience she dealt with was that the times when she was feeling the most defeated, were often the times that her close friends were experiencing success. Mackenzie felt that by overcoming this challenging experience, she became a better friend and a more mature individual. Mackenzie had been exposed to the competition long enough that she could see patterns developing over the years. She also presented a long-term perspective, suggesting that her learning had taken place over time. Kate also felt that the sense of competition was a positive influence on her friendships with other dancers:

I think you just put into perspective that it isn't the end of the world if you don't get that part or if they beat you in a solo or something. Like you learn to be happy for them... and if you have a strong friendship, then that's more important... because sometimes if they succeed over you and you can still be happy for them it strengthens your friendship.

Like Mackenzie, Kate felt that navigating a friendship through a sense of competition was a challenging but positive aspect of her relationships with dancers.

At School

Time was acknowledged as the key factor in the participants' social experiences at school. The participants found that high school classmates questioned the long hours that they spent dancing and the sacrifices that they made for dancing. As Grace commented:

[My friends can get] frustrated that I don't have enough time to hang out with them, and that I spend all my time doing this... and like if I am ever stressed about dance and then I talk to them about it, then they are like why do you do this?

Grace found that her friends did not understand why she invested so much of her life into dancing, especially as it caused her anxiety at times. For Grace, the stressful demands and challenges were part of the experience, part of what she loved. Her school friends; however, could not appreciate this sense of sacrifice, as they were not dancers. They did not understand the apparent contradiction of liking something that was also, at times, a hardship. Grace felt that her school friends did not recognize dance was more than a hobby; it was a passion and a way of life. Elizabeth had similar experiences:

Well your friends in high school, like I think no matter how you would try to explain it and how much they try to understand, they would never really understand they would never really know kind of what dancing is like and the world that it is and the different things that you experience, different emotions that you go through and the situations you are put in.

While Elizabeth also found that her school friends did not understand her life as a dancer, she did not expect them to. Elizabeth described dancing as a world separate from her high school experience. She felt that only another dancer could understand and appreciate the physical and emotional experiences that a young dancer endures.

While at times this separate world of dance isolated the participants, they believed that dance ultimately contributed to their social identity at school in a positive manner. The participants described being known as "dancers" in high school. While each participant ascribed a slightly different interpretation about what it meant to be known as a dancer at school, the

descriptions were all positive. Elizabeth thought that being identified as a dancer was associated with commitment and dedication:

I think people know who you are a little more, like when you would say my name, maybe you would think of dancing, right, and that give you some identity... It shows that I am kind of doing something with my life... like a goal that I am focused on ... and I have other things in my life that are really important to me and I want to work towards them.

Grace echoed Elizabeth's point of view and added commentary regarding the lifestyle of a dancer:

[Being a dancer]... it is like a way to say, I am not going to do that... that wouldn't be good for me, or you know, just making some smart decisions in my life because I am a dancer and like those would effect my dancing poorly and stuff... like smoking... partying too much, or like, hanging out with a bad crowd.

Grace and Elizabeth suggested that high school classmates recognized maturity in an elite dancer. The participants felt that being known as a dancer helped them deal with negative peer pressure, and justified the decisions that they made to avoid negative behaviours and maintain a healthy lifestyle. For Grace, dancing not only influenced how others viewed her socially, it also influenced how she behaved in a social context. Her decisions to avoid drinking and smoking were a direct reflection of her dance experiences and her commitment to elite training.

Hannah noted that all dancers have different personalities and traits; however she felt that her social identity in high school as a dancer was associated with having an outgoing personality:

It's definitely a big part of who I am, that's pretty much my life... Everybody just kind of identifies my dancing with being a happy and outgoing person... they just identify dancers with being peppy, friendly people.

Hannah believed that dancing made her more socially approachable, someone that her high school classmates identified as being a friendly person. While Hannah assumed that she would have been a friendly or nice person had she not engaged in elite dance training, she was certain that she would not have been as confident or outgoing in social situations. Although she could

not articulate the specific aspects of her dance experiences that contributed to her sense of social confidence, she did feel that she was more comfortable around new people and in social situations because of dancing.

While dancing gave Hannah the confidence and outgoing personality to make social connections in high school, Kate felt that dancing had helped her make social connections with other dancers that were not from her home studio:

It's really fun cause you get to meet like a lot of different kids who have the same interests as you... there are a lot of opportunities like variety night [musicals and dance teams].

The examples Kate provided described the different ways that she integrated her life as a dancer into her social experiences in high school. She found that having a place or opportunity to share dance experiences with other dancers, such as school musical performances or talent shows, facilitated positive social interaction. Kate enjoyed socializing with other dancers at school because they understood her commitment and her life as a dancer.

Although it was evident that the participants appreciated the deeper understanding and shared experience present in their dance friendships, there was a certain sense of balance that their school relationships provided. The participants relied on their dance friends to provide an unconditional understanding of their passion for dancing. These relationships provided a sense of normalcy in terms of their commitment to dancing. School friends, on the other hand, provided the participants a connection world outside of dancing and a sense of normalcy as a teenager.

Summary

This particular group of adolescent dancers spoke in a very mature manner regarding their experiences of dancing throughout high school. While they identified and described negative aspects of engaging in such intense training; they were able to rationalize, make sense of, and identify resulting personal growth regarding each adverse situation. For example, while much of

the academic literature questions the risks of being involved in the competitive atmosphere of the dance world, these young women described the competitive atmosphere as something that contributed to the strength of their friendships, their commitment to dancing, and the lessons that they learned through their experiences.

The adolescent female dancer is someone who is faced with many challenges. She must make sense of a competitive atmosphere, which involves some of her closest friends. She must be prepared to commit many hours a week to training, therefore missing out on social and extracurricular activities in high school. When high school ends, she must decide whether or not she will continue dancing, or follow an academic or alternate path.

Despite said challenges, the adolescent dancer finds her closest friends through dancing and also develops important relationships with instructors. Dance provides her a safe haven, a centre through which she can express her self, come to understand her own emotions better, and find support from others sharing similar experiences. The self-esteem and self-concept of the dancer is strengthened by a sense of accomplishment she feels through mastering new skills, improving her technique, and achieving goals.

In many ways the experiences of an adolescent dancer are quite complicated and complex. However, to the adolescent dancer it is quite simple. It is what she does, what she knows, and most importantly, what she loves.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of the following chapter is to summarize and consider the research findings in terms of the existing literature on adolescent development, elite dance training, and extra-curricular activity, as well as discuss the implications of the findings for educators and counsellors. The strengths and limitations of the present study are also discussed.

Summary of Findings

In discussing their dance experiences, the participants described a world of challenges, accomplishments, relationships, personal growth, learning, and passion. The shared meaning of their experiences suggested a common sentiment of mastery, accomplishment, and an appreciation for dance as a coping mechanism or resource. The participants' favorite moments involved external validation (recognition from teachers, adjudicators, and examiners) as well as internal validation (achieving personal goals and mastering new steps, and enjoyment). The participants thrived on and were motivated by being recognized and having someone (preferably someone with more experience than themselves) acknowledge their skill, talent, or hard work. Dancing was also a means for self growth and coping for the participants in that their experiences helped them express themselves and process challenging experiences.

The dedication and discipline that the participants applied to their dance endeavors was also applied to their schoolwork. The participants described a sense of perfectionism in regards to their schoolwork; they always wanted each assignment to be completed to the best of their ability. Even when dance demands were high and they were not able to spend as much time on homework assignments, the participants still made an effort to produce high quality school work. As with dancing, their academic efforts were validated by high marks. The participants all happened to be very successful students achieving honour roll marks in their high school classes

(grades above 80%). All but one participant, Grace, had aspirations of completing academically demanding university programs such as medicine, pharmacy, or law.

Although there was a definite focus on mastery, the participants also described a genuine passion and enjoyment for the art of dancing. The participants appreciated the integration of physical and emotional expression and release in dancing. Dancing functioned as a coping mechanism as the participants were able to use their bodies to tell stories and express emotions during stressful times, and be focused in the moment. Dancing was a mode of self-expression and a venue for self-exploration. Portraying a character, or telling a story that was not their own allowed them to explore different aspects of their own selves. When they were feeling overwhelmed by demands or experiences at home or school, the participants felt that the integration of emotional, physical, and cognitive aspects in dancing helped to process, make sense of, and cope with such challenges. Dancing also offered a reprieve by letting them engage fully in the present moment rather than being distracted with preoccupations of the past or worries of the future.

It was interesting that although the participants were articulate about the integration of the body and emotions in dancing, when asked about their specific favorite moments, their answers unanimously related to mastery, recognition, and accomplishments. The participants provided rich descriptions of their experiences with dance self-expression and their use of dancing as a coping mechanism when faced with challenges; however, when asked to be specific about their favorite moments; the descriptions were particularly achievement oriented.

The female adolescent dancers' school and dance lives were integrated in terms of the skills that were transferable from one context to the other. For example lessons in managing responsibilities and commitments, discipline, and dedication the participants learned in dance training were transferred to their academic experiences. On the other hand, the social experiences

of the participants remained separate. The participants described their “school friends” and “dance friends” differently. “Dance” friendships were much deeper and had developed through extended shared experiences of dancing, and the expression of self that happened in the dance studio. “School” friendships provided the participants social connections at school that were separate from dance. Although these “school” friends did not understand or appreciate the participants’ commitment and love for dancing. The participants perceived their dancer identities as contributing positively to their social experiences at school.

Integration of Findings with the Existing Literature

Present in the findings, but not the literature

The research literature reviewed provided guiding interview questions. However, topics arose in conversations that were not emphasized in the literature. For example, it was clear that the participants enjoyed the mastery and recognition of accomplishment they experienced from dance. In fact, it seemed that the experience of accomplishment was one of the primary reasons the participants in this study remained committed to their elite dance training. Nevertheless the existing research literature does not appear to investigate and report on this aspect of the dancers’ experiences.

The sense of mastery and accomplishment that the participants in the present study continually referenced was reflective of the discipline that they had developed through their dance experiences. Discipline is inherent in ballet training. Ballet students are expected to adhere to a specific dress code and have their hair in a proper ballet bun for all weekly classes. Whereas when practicing or taking classes in other dance forms dancers generally have more freedom in terms of their dance attire. Talking is not permitted in a ballet class. When given either a compliment or a correction during class, dancers are expected to say thank you and continue working. As the participants were accustomed to and enjoyed the regimented ways of a ballet

class, this way of working was readily transferred to their school where their work was completed in a similar productive manner. A disciplined dancer is one who has the mental and physical control to attend to the task at hand (learning and mastering technique, steps, and choreography), over an extended period of time (classes that last for entire evenings, and a training that develops over a course of multiple years). In terms of school work, this discipline helps the dancer to focus on academic tasks (studying and completing assignments), and complete the task to the best of her ability.

For an elite dancer, discipline and focus is necessary to survive the training process. Dancers must be aware of the movement and positioning of their entire body at all times. Immense amounts of strength and control are necessary for dancers to achieve such body awareness. Dancers must be able to hear and process music in both a technical and artistic manner. They hear the technical features of the music, such as rhythm and tone, which shape the physical movements of the dance. Dancers must also hear the artistry in the music, interpreting the story or picture that the artist or composer has produced with sound, and represent it with their bodies. They then must integrate these concepts with a sense of personality, performance, and personification. Dancers' must also remember what they have learned from one experience to the next. These memories must be specific and account for each detail of the dance that they have been exposed to. Focus, discipline, and determination are required to simply rehearse such skills.

Stinson and associates (1990) reported that young dancers did appreciate and value such aspects (e.g., social connections, accomplishment, and enjoyment) of their dance training. However, when discussing reasons for staying committed to dancing throughout high school, the participants referenced feelings of wanting to dance, and wanting to remain busy, and dance as a habit (Stinson, et al., 1990). In the present study the participants were much more passionate in

describing the manner in which all aspects of dancing were so much a part of their lives that their commitment was never questioned.

Larson (1994) suggested that social connections were an important aspect of extra curricular activity involvement; however, the participants attributed a deeper meaning to their social connections than what was described by Larson (1994). The participants felt that their dance friendships were unique and deeply meaningful because they shared a passion for dance, and also because dancing provided a venue for self-expression and vulnerability, which lead to a greater intimacy and understanding of fellow dancers. The participants also relied on their dance friendships to cope with overwhelming and challenging moments in dancing. For example, Mackenzie felt comfort from knowing that her dance friends could relate to what she was feeling during different dance experiences, such as the first time she danced a solo. As the camaraderie among dance friends made the challenging moments easier to cope with, the social connections also made the enjoyable moments more valuable. For example, the participants appreciated being able to share their achievements and accomplishments and love for dance with other dancers who understood and could relate to these experiences.

Larson (1994) did not investigate the influence of extra-curricular social experiences on academic social experiences. The participants in the present study perceived dancing to have a positive influence on their social identity and experiences at school. Dancing helped them to become more confident and friendlier in social situations at school. The participants suggested that their dance experiences contributed to their social interactions outside of dancing in that it gave them something that set them apart from other high school students. For example, Kate commented that other students noticed and acknowledged her dancing after she performed in a school production. Elizabeth and Grace suggested that their dancer identities contributed to the way that other students viewed them, in that it showed the other students that they had a life

outside of school. They also thought that their dancer identities showed others that they had goals, aspirations, and that they had accomplishments outside of school.

The participants also benefitted emotionally from their dance experiences. For example, they discussed how dancing allowed them to not only express their own emotions, but to also experiment with other emotions. Grace described dancing to have the same emotional sensation as physically crying when she felt anxious. Other participants described how dancing helped them cope with tension from school and family. For example, they described dancing as an escape, or a separate world in which they could focus on their training, their social connections, and enjoy being in the moment of the physical act of dancing.

The participants' experiences of dance as a coping mechanism are reflective of the transactional model of stress and coping presented by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The model suggests that stress is a result of how an individual appraises his or her resources to cope with a specific stressor. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) go on to explain that if a stressor is perceived as a positive challenge, rather than a threat, and the individual believes that they possess strategies to cope with the stressor, stress from the potential stressor may not occur, or may not be inhibiting. In other words, if an individual is able to make sense of a potential stressor in a positive manner, and believes that they are able to cope with the potential stressor, they are less likely to feel stressed. For the participants, dancing was an antecedent resource that reduced their vulnerability to stressors, as well as a coping strategy in times of stress.

Absent in the findings, but present in the literature

Specific topics (e.g., passion for dancing, relationships with other dancers, accomplishment, and dedication) were richly presented by the participants. However, I was struck by the absence of topics such as family life, body image, eating disorders, and negative experiences in our conversations.

Little mention was made of family or parental relationships. The participants noted the financial support they received from their parents, and suggested that their parents were also supportive because they enjoyed watching dance performances. Interestingly, the participants did not describe the nature of this parental support, or how their relationships with parents influenced their overall dance experiences. Perhaps the participants did not feel that their commitment to dancing required anything extraordinary from their parents. As adolescents, a stage of development characterized by self-focus, it is possible that the participants did not realize, or feel it necessary to discuss, how their commitment to dancing impacted their family members. During her first interview, Mackenzie commented that at times she felt somewhat guilty because dancing was so expensive. However, this realization did not have any specific impact on her continuing to dance at an elite level. It is also possible that the participants were so immersed in discussing their personal experiences dancing, that they did not feel it necessary to bring in additional topics, such as family relationships.

The majority of dance related research reviewed focuses on students enrolled in professional ballet academies (the participants for the present study were enrolled in local dance studios) and topics such as premature sexuality, body image, and eating disorders are common. Buckroyd (2001) suggested that the style of dress and costuming involved in dancing was damaging to the developing sexuality of an adolescent girl. I introduced this concept to the participants by summarizing existing literature and asking probe questions such as: “have you ever felt uncomfortable in a dance costume;” “do you think boys think of you differently because you are a dancer?” and “do you feel uncomfortable with the choreography you perform?” These questions did not generate conversation and were answered in a manner that suggested that the topic of sexuality was not relevant to their experiences of dancing during high school. It could be that the participants were not comfortable talking about their sexuality (at their current

developmental stages) or perhaps that such topics were not significant issues for this specific group of individuals, as they all described successful and positive dance experiences.

Other research has suggested that self-esteem is lower in dancers than their non-dancing peers (e.g., Buckroyd, 2001). Barnett (2006) suggested that self-esteem in dancers was dependent on their success. The five participants in the present study were quite accomplished in terms of their success at dance competitions, in dance examinations, and in terms of achieving their own personal dance goals, as well as academic endeavors. Perhaps, investigating individuals who have not been successful in their dance endeavors would support the referenced research.

Body image and eating disorders are often discussed in dance-related literature in regards to self-esteem (e.g., Buckroyd, 2001; Slater & Tiggerman, 2002; Sundgot – Borgen & Tortsveit, 2004). It was interesting that the participants did not discuss, at length, experiences with disordered eating, pressures to look a certain way, or deflated self-esteem in reference to their body. When the issues of body image and the pressure to be thin as a dancer were presented to the participants, they acknowledged that such problems existed in the dance community, but did not discuss such topics in terms of their own personal experiences. In regards to body image, Grace suggested that being an adolescent female, going to high school, and being exposed to popular culture were more likely to make her feel self-conscious about her body than dancing. She felt that dancing provided her a certain appreciation for her body, as it was her instrument. Elizabeth felt that the pressure to be thin was most likely greater at private dance academies. When considering dancers at the professional level, she was perplexed to think that a dancer, someone who used their body like an instrument and as a mode of communication and expression, would consider hurting it through disordered eating.

The remaining participants did not articulate ever feeling specific pressure to look a certain way or to change the way that they looked because of their commitment to dancing.

Again, it is possible that the five individual's interviewed for the present study were content at their local studios (rather than attending a private academy) and that individuals who were less content at their local academies or who attended private academies might have different experiences with body image. It is also possible that they were not ready or willing to discuss this topic with me.

In general, the participants described their experiences in a very positive manner. The few negative comments made were paired with rationalizations or observations as to how enduring the negative aspects of the experience contributed to their love for dancing and the lessons that they learned through dancing. Perhaps the participants described their experiences in such a positive manner because optimism, or having a positive perception, served as a protective factor for the dancers when faced with adversity. By not focusing on the negative aspects of their dance training, the participants were better able to appreciate the positive aspects of their training experiences. In other words, it was as if the participants, intentionally or subconsciously, chose to focus on the positive aspects of their experiences for fear that dwelling on the negative aspects would spoil their passion for dancing. Perhaps acknowledging the negative aspects of their experiences would introduce an element of complexity to their understanding of their dance commitments, in turn undermining their ability to be as successful as they are in dance and school.

As the objective of the present study was to describe the academic and social experiences of adolescent females engaged in elite dance training, from their perspective, I did not want to inadvertently coerce the participants to explore the specific negative aspects of their experiences. Although encouraging the participants to discuss in more detail the negative aspects of their dancing may have provided a more thorough description of their experiences, I felt it would also have put them at risk for questioning their commitment and their choice to continue dancing.

Furthermore, dictating how the participants were to share their experiences may have influenced their own understanding or interpretation of future experiences. For example, if the participants were encouraged to discuss in detail a negative interaction with an instructor, it might influence their opinion of that instructor. Coercing the participants to focus on negative aspects of their dance experience would have been unethical.

The limited amount of negative incidents provided by the participants could also reflect the participants' success in both school and dancing. The participants all described academic success, success in their dance endeavors, as well as a sense of satisfaction in that they were able to balance the responsibilities of school and dance. Perhaps had the participants been less successful, or less satisfied with their accomplishments, they may have been more likely to encounter and identify negative aspects of their experiences.

Dance Training

Research presented by Stinson and associates (1990) was the most applicable to the present findings. The present study elaborated and enriched themes (social connections, validation, accomplishment, enjoying challenging aspects of dance) presented by Stinson and associates (1990) by providing a richer description of the experiences of five adolescent females engaged in the phenomenon. The most obvious difference between the two studies was the absence of negative discussion regarding body image in the present study.

In contrast, much of the literature reviewed (Buckroyd, 2001; Raval di, et al., 2006; Sundgot - Borgen & Torstveit, 2004) focused on negative aspects of dance training, such as body image. Other negative aspects associated with dancing (e.g., competitiveness, sexualization, limited social experiences) were neither brought forward by the participants in the present study, nor did they generate noteworthy conversation when introduced in conversation.

Social Integration: Exposure to Adult Models, Peers, and Subculture

The research literature reviewed suggested that extra-curricular activities expose adolescents to adult role models and mentors, as well as a peer group and subculture outside of their educational experiences, which can be positive or negative (Larson, 1994). It has been suggested that the environment of competitive dancing does not provide positive experiences in that dance teachers are often thought to be too critical and the level of commitment required by the adolescents is too great (Buckroyd, 2001).

Although adult role models were not the primary focus of the research interviews, participants did comment that they respected and appreciated their relationships with their dance teachers because of shared experiences. Specifically, the participants described a sense of understanding that their dance teachers had of the challenges that they faced as elite dancers. They also appreciated their teachers' demonstrated passion for dancing. It should be noted that although the participants themselves did not describe any negative experiences with their dance teachers, they were aware of, and had witnessed such relationships. For example, one participant described demeaning and unsupportive interactions between dancers and their instructors at a dance competition.

Buckroyd (2001) suggested that dance teachers are often too over-involved, critical, and unaware of the students' needs, especially dancers attending private dance academies. Although the participants did not have such experiences in their local studios, they acknowledged that it was not out of the ordinary for dancers to have negative experiences with their teachers. The participants in the present study described a sense of familial-like relationships among both their fellow dancers and their dance teachers. Because the participants all started dancing before the age of five, they felt that their teachers not only watched them grow, but had also grown with

them. This experience of relational and individual growth in reference to their dance teachers contributed positively to the participants experiences of dancing.

The current findings suggest that the social integration with peers was very positive for the participants. The participants described a unique and meaningful connectedness to their dance peers based on shared experiences. The relationships that they developed through dancing were more meaningful than school friendships because these individuals understood, appreciated, and respected their commitments to dance training. While the literature suggested that the demands of elite dance training prevent adolescents from making social connections outside of their dance peers (Buckroyd, 2001), these participants made connections with friends at their high schools, and believed dancing to be a contributing factor to the success of these interactions. For example, they described their dance experiences to give them a unique identity at school as well as the confidence to engage in social interactions at school.

The third aspect of social interaction Larson (1994) described, subculture, was the ongoing role of as “adolescents who participate in an activity are often still connected to that activity and its subculture in adulthood” (p. 49). The participants’ experience of subculture was evident in their descriptions of their relationship with other dancers, but also in the nature and tone of their discussions. For example, the participants described their experiences and relationships with an attitude of normalcy. Although school friends challenged and questioned the participants’ lives as dancers, the participants were connected through experience to other individuals who understood their lives as dancers. This connectedness extended to their instructors as well as their fellow dancers and validated the participants’ passion, commitment, and enjoyment of dancing. The participants described the subculture of dance as requiring intense commitment, dedication, and determination. In return, the subculture of dance provided relationship, passion, and accomplishment.

As Larson (1994) suggested, the participants anticipated being a part of the subculture of dancing throughout their lives. For example, Hannah wanted to teach dance when she enrolled in University and is no longer training so many hours, and Elizabeth intended to attend dance and music performances as a way of staying connected to performing arts. The lessons learned and skills developed through dance training (e.g., discipline, achievement, focus) will also continue to be a part of the participants' lives after they stop training at an elite level.

In fact, it could be suggested that dance functioned as an actual culture, rather than a subculture for the participants. Macionis, Jansson, and Benoit (2002) described “culture” as the “beliefs, values, behaviours, and material objects that constitute a peoples way of life” (p. 30). “Culture” is the shared way of life amongst a group of people, such that “culture not only shapes what we do, but also helps form our personalities” (p. 30). These authors referred to four components of “culture”: symbols, language, values, and norms.

A symbol is “anything that carries a particular meaning recognized by people who share culture. A high-five, a nod, a tattoo, a veil, a salute – all serve as symbols” (Macionis et al., 2002). The culture of dancing makes use of symbols in many different ways. In classical ballet, the curtsy or bow is a symbol of appreciation to an audience or an instructor at the beginning and or end of class. In my personal experience, as well as in discussion with other dancers and participants, it was reported that the act of clapping at the end of a class or workshop is a common practice to show appreciation.

Language, the second aspect of culture described by Macionis and associates (2002), was evident throughout the interview processes. Various terms are used to describe different dance styles and disciplines (e.g., lyrical, contemporary, jazz), types of movement (leaps, turns, tricks), and specific steps (e.g., plie, pivot, flap), as well as the various aspects of dance experiences (e.g., rehearsal, studio, audition).

The third aspect of culture, values and beliefs (Macionis et al., 2002) was evident in the manner in which the participants discussed their commitment to dancing. The participants described being committed to their training in that they were constantly focused and disciplined while in classes and rehearsals. They also commented that they appreciated these qualities in their fellow dancers.

Macionis and associates (2002) described the fourth and final aspect of culture, norms, as a guide to individual behaviour, and a bench mark for evaluating our own behaviour. The participants described their commitment to dance as if it was normal behaviour, despite their school friends not understanding this commitment. The participants saw the same level of commitment and dedication in their fellow dancers, and therefore evaluated it as a norm within the dance culture.

Personal Integration

The second aspect of Larson's (1994) model suggested that extra-curricular activities facilitate the personal well being and development of the adolescent because these activities provide an environment for self-explorations in that the adolescent feels safe and competent. Larson (1994) suggested that because extra-curricular activities are self-chosen (opposed to school being an obligation), involvement provides the individual a reference group for self-definition.

Confidence and self-knowledge was evident in all interviews. However, the participants attributed this to the emotional expression required in dancing, rather than extra-curricular activity involvement. Dancing provided the participants' an opportunity to express their personal thoughts and feelings, tell stories through the integration of music and movement, as well as experiment with conveying emotions and stories that were foreign to them. The participants felt that dancing not only helped them to better know themselves, but also to be better able to express

themselves to others. A similar process is described by Nicol (2006). Referring to musicians, rather than dancers, Nicol coined the phrase “me-making-music, music-making-me” to capture the opportunities for self-exploration and self-knowledge that accompany one’s study of music, or in the case of the present study, dance.

Although the participants did not specifically describe their dance peers as a reference group for self-definition, they did appreciate that they shared their dance experiences with close friends. The participants developed self-understanding through both the artistic aspect of dancing, as well as the challenges that their training presented. The experiences that contributed to their own self-definition were the same experiences that contributed to the unique bond that they developed with their fellow dancers. The findings of the present study support Larson’s (1994) idea of self-definition through a peer reference group; however, the participants’ dance friendships functioned as more than a reference group. Dance friendships facilitated self-growth, self-understanding, and self-awareness, while providing a sense of camaraderie and connectedness.

Fredricks and associates (2002) survey results suggested that individuals involved in extra curricular activities generally continue with these commitments during high school for reasons related to feelings of accomplishment, enjoyment of the activity, and the social network that the activity provided. Unfortunately, the researchers did not specify the activity that those surveyed were involved in, or the level of training (whether it is elite or recreational). The results of the present study confirmed and extended the findings of Fredricks and associates (2002) because the participants described both the social aspect of dancing, as well as the sense of accomplishment and mastery the found through dancing to be some of the primary reasons that they stayed committed to their training. The descriptive nature of the present study provided a more thorough detailing of the experiences of adolescent females engaged in elite dance training. For example,

the survey results presented by Fredricks and associates (2002) do not capture the significance of the social connections that dancing provided the participants in the present study. The participants in the present study also described their enjoyment of dancing to be reflective of their accomplishments. The results of the referenced study suggested that enjoyment and accomplishment were separate entities. The participants in the present study also described the commitment to dancing to be like a way of life, or a lifestyle to which they were accustomed to; therefore, discontinuing their training did not appear to be an option. The descriptive nature of the present study provided a more thorough look at the experiences of adolescent females engaged in elite dance training.

Although the results of the current study do not dispute the results presented by Fredricks and associates (2002), the referenced study does not fully encompass the meaning of the social connections or feelings of accomplishment that the participants in the present study described.

Strengths of Current Study

Several strengths were present in this research. Primarily, research in the area of adolescent dance experiences is limited. The existing literature is focused specifically on either the negative aspects of dance training or dancers who attend private dance academies (Barnett, 2006; Buckroyd, 2001; Lee, 2001). The present research described the experiences of adolescent females involved in elite level training, while completing regular high school programs. This is an important distinction because the experiences of individuals attending professional academies can not necessarily be generalized to those who are attending local studios. Hopefully, this step in broadening the scope of dance-related research will inspire other researchers interested in this type of research to further explore this area, or other areas of the dance experience that have yet to be examined.

I also believe that my personal connection to the dance community, as a former dancer, and the fact that I had been introduced to the participants through the dance community before their interviews, contributed to the quality of the data. My personal experiences as a dancer provided me knowledge of this subculture and its language. The fact that the participants were able to identify me as not only a researcher, but also a dancer, provided a common ground on which we could relate. I believe that this common ground and common understanding of dance made the participants more comfortable while sharing their stories with me, which contributed to the richness of the data.

Limitations of Current Study

The present study details the experiences of a highly homogenous group of high achieving adolescent girls. The participants were all Caucasian adolescents from middle class homes. Although they did not all dance at the same studio; they did dance in the same city and attended the same competitions and workshops and were connected through the dance community. The lack of diversity restricts the transferability of these findings. A larger sample would have provided a broader picture of the experiences of elite dancers, and a more diverse sample would have provided more range of experience.

The conversational tone of the interviews was intended to make the participants comfortable and to maintain ethical standards. As the participants were still heavily involved in their dance training, I did not want to encourage them to dwell on the negative aspects of these experiences. For example, I did not want to force the participants into considering the issues of body image that young dancers are often faced with because if the participant had not been effected by such issues in their personal experiences, discussing body image could make them become more aware of the issue and possibly have a negative effect on their future experiences. Had I taken a more active role in questioning the participants, the findings may have presented

more of the negative aspects of dancing; however it could have also changed the manner that the participants view their experiences. Although it could be assumed that the inclusion of such negative experiences would have made the results richer, the purpose of the study was to describe the experiences of these young women from their own perspective.

The interviews for the present study took place during the end of summer and the beginning of the school year. The participants described an annual pattern in terms of their dance experiences. The participants found that they often became more stressed in the spring, when the demands of dance competitions and performances increased, but that during the summer they begin to miss dancing and anticipated starting their training again in the fall. Perhaps had the study included multiple interviews at different times during the year, the results may have provided more variant attitudes towards their commitment to dancing.

Implications for Future Research

The present research was unique in focusing on individuals involved in elite dance training and attending regular high school programs, in contrast to the majority of dance-related literature that focuses on individuals attending private dance academies. The present research was also unique in that it did not focus on specific aspects of dance experiences. The literature reviewed focused on aspects of the dance experience that are often perceived to be negative, such as the competitive atmosphere of dancing, issues surrounding body image, and eating disorders. Although the present study provided new information in terms of dance-related research, there is still much that is unknown or not understood about the experiences of female adolescents involved in elite dance training.

The findings of the present study provide a basis for future research. For example, the participants in the present study were very focused on the future when talking about their academic aspirations, how they would utilize the skills they had learned through dancing as

adults, and how dancing would always be a part of their lives. It would be interesting to follow individuals, like the participants in the present study, into their adult lives to explore the long-term influences of dance experiences.

The participants in the present study appeared to be well adjusted and comfortable with their dance commitments, but many dancers quit before reaching the elite level and many of those who reach the elite level struggle with time management, body image issues, and do not appreciate the competitive atmosphere of dancing. Further research into the experiences of the individuals who quit dancing before reaching elite levels of training, as well as those who are not successful in managing the demands of elite dance training would complement the present research by providing a broader understanding of the full range of female adolescent experiences of elite dance training.

Implications for Counselling and Educational Professionals

The current study provided a rich description of the experiences of five adolescent females who were involved with elite dance training while attending regular high school. The participants described many experiences, feelings, and challenges unique to their dance training. Understanding these experiences, from the perspective of the adolescent dancer, is important for those interested in this area of research, as well as professionals (e.g., teachers and counsellors) who work with individuals involved with elite level activities. Although the participants shared their stories as if such experiences were exclusive to elite dance training, there were many aspects of their experiences (e.g., time management, competition, social connections) that are present in other elite level activities (e.g., gymnastics, figure skating, team sports). Three specific topics present the findings are pertinent to counselling and educational professionals: competitive nature of the activity, time management skills required to be successful in the activity, and the transition from participating in the activity as a high school student to experiences post – high school.

The participants in the present study described a competitive atmosphere at their dance studios; however, they were able to cope with such experiences in a manner that contributed to their friendships and their technical development as dancers. The notion of shared experience provided the participants with a common ground or common understanding with those that they were in competition with. This experience of shared experience contributed to friendship, not rivalry, for the participants. Elizabeth found talking to the other dancers at the dance studio helped her to make sense of the competitive atmosphere at the dance studio. Although the participants did not indicate that speaking with a professional, such as a counsellor, would be helpful in coping with this competition, it is possible that the competitive atmosphere of elite dancing could be a source of stress for a young person. If a counselling professional were to work with an adolescent involved in elite dance training it would be important that they understand or are aware of this aspect of the experience and be prepared to help athletes and dancers to negotiate and make sense of the experience.

The challenges of balancing school responsibilities and dance commitments were also described at length. The participants suggested that their social experiences and their schoolwork were at times neglected when the demands of their dance schedules became too much. The participants also suggested that their ability to balance school and dancing successfully was something that had developed over time, as they started dancing at a young age. The participants foresaw these skills being useful in the future (as university students, professionals, and mothers) which suggests that individuals who are not involved in any elite training activity could also benefit from learning such skills. It is important that educators are aware of such challenges, not for allowances to be made, but rather as a rationale for encouraging and teaching time management skills.

Understanding and awareness of the experiences of adolescents involved in elite level activities is also relevant to counsellors working specifically in the area of career counselling and transition planning. It was evident that this group of young women thrived in an atmosphere that encompassed competitiveness, an avenue for both self-expression and mastery, as well as the opportunity for external validation through ongoing evaluation. In terms of career counselling, it is important that the counsellor be aware of this in terms of what type of work or post-secondary training such individuals would enjoy and find rewarding. Specifically, the counsellor would need to help the student articulate and imagine a vocational or academic environment that also provides self-expression and mastery, as well as the opportunity for external validation through ongoing evaluation. There was a certain attitude or understanding presented by the participants, that once they had finished high school, they would either attend university, or continue dancing with the aspiration of a professional career. In a sense it seemed as if the participants' lives had been limited to a future in school or dance. In terms of career counselling, the counsellor must be able to introduce alternative options to the dancer, as she has been focused on only her dancing and her academics.

Perhaps one of the most significant implications of the present studies findings was a topic not discussed during interviews. What would happen if you these individuals, who are so committed to dancing were no longer able to dance? The participants described a very meaningful connection to their dance experiences: the physical act of dancing, the opportunities for achievement and success, and the social connections fostered with dancing. In the case that someone committed to an activity in such a manner had to suddenly discontinue that activity, because of illness or injury, or any other uncontrollable circumstance, it is likely that individual would experience grief and loss. Counselling professionals must be aware of the various changes that would occur in such circumstances, for example, the individual would suddenly have an

excess amount of spare time, could potentially lose contact with important social connections, and would no longer be able to access a significant coping mechanism.

Conclusion

The most prominent themes in the data focused on the participants' social connections made through dancing, the way that they thrived on achievement and mastery in dancing, and the skills and lessons learned through dancing that were applicable to other aspects of their lives. Underlying all themes and discussions was a reciprocal relationship that the participants had with dancing. The participants gave their time and energy, and their hearts and souls to dancing. In return, dancing provided a means for coping, achievement, meaningful social connections, and experiences that helped shape who they were. In this relationship dancing functioned as a friend, a teacher, and a source of entertainment and self-discovery. I created the following data poem by integrating quotes from the five participants to describe dancing through high school. Unlike the data poems presented in Chapter 4, I have integrated my own words and experiences into this final poem. Participant quotes are in italics.

I always thought ballet was very pretty, very beautiful
I liked the dresses, the tutus
 Over the years, dancing became a part of me
 And I became a dancer

It just kind of feels right; it is what I do
 There is so much to do and sometimes so little time
It can be really hard
But I can balance everything

I had a lot of goals and aspirations in dance
I always wanted to achieve
 On the stage, in the studio, and at school
 Dancing let that happen

Dancing can give you an immense sense of freedom
Using my body and putting all my emotions into dancing
It just like clears my mind of everything

It just makes you feel good inside

I look back and I know

That dancing made me who I am and brought me to this place

I am a dancer, dancing is what I do

I will never fully break away from it

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Appendix A: Call to Participate

Are you a female high school student who has committed to competitive dance training?

Are you willing to share your experiences in confidential research interviews?

As a graduate student researcher in Educational Psychology and Special Education at the University of Saskatchewan I am interested in the experiences of female high school students who are engaged in elite dance training. Under the supervision of Dr. J.A.J. Nicol (registered psychologist) I am seeking volunteers to participate in two – 1hr. interviews.

In order to participate, you must:

- e) be female;
- f) be enrolled in a regular high school education program (or have recently graduated from a regular high school education program);
- g) be currently enrolled in competitive/elite dance training (8-10 hrs/week) in disciplines such as classical ballet, jazz, and tap; as opposed to recreation dance programs (1-2 hrs/week);
- h) have been involved in dance training for at least 5 years

For more information, please contact Sarah Friesen:

sklfriesen14@hotmail.com

Appendix B: Consent Form

Your child has been invited to participate in a study entitled “Dancing through High School”. The following form outlines the purpose and procedure of the study, potential risks and benefits, issues of confidentiality and data storage, as well as their right to withdraw from the study and to ask any questions that you might have.

Researchers: Sarah K.L. Friesen, M.Ed Candidate (email: sklfriesen14@hotmail.com, phone: 220-4797) & Dr. Jennifer Nicol (Thesis supervisor), Department of Educational Psychology & Special Education, University of Saskatchewan (email: jajnicol@usask.ca, phone: 966-5261).

Purpose and Procedure: The purpose of this study is to describe and understand the experience of adolescent females who are engaged in elite dance training during high school. Your child is being asked to participate in two interviews designed to provide a general idea of their experiences of elite dance training during high school, and how such dance experiences have shaped or influenced their educational and social high school experiences. The interview will be conversational, and the participants are encouraged to share whatever information they feel comfortable or interested in sharing. Interviews will last approximately 45-90 minutes, and take place on the University of Saskatchewan campus. Interviews will be audio taped and transcribed. Tape recordings and transcripts will be strictly confidential and your child’s name will be kept anonymous. Interviews will be scheduled at the convenience of the participant. Transportation or parking fees will be provided if necessary.

Potential Risks: Any risk associated with this study is minimal. Participation is strictly voluntary, and your child is free to withdraw from the research at anytime, or chose to not answer any of the questions asked during the interview. If your child experiences feelings of anxiety, uncertainty or any other negative outcome as a result of participation, they are encouraged to contact the Kids Help Phone Line, toll free, at 1-800-668-6868. At the time of the interviews, the researcher will also provide your child with additional resources. You may also contact the researcher at any time for more information regarding counselling services, or with any concerns you might have.

Potential Benefits: Talking about their experience of the academic and social aspects of high school in relation to their commitment to elite dance training may be beneficial for your child. Taking part in this study will also enable educational and counselling professionals, as well as parents, to understand the experience of adolescent females who are committed to intense extra-curricular activities during high school.

Confidentiality: To protect your child’s confidentiality and privacy, pseudonyms will be used in place of their real names. Signed documents will be stored separately from transcripts and audio tapes to ensure that the participants’ names cannot be associated with any particular responses. Excerpts and quotes from the interviews will be included in the final presentation of this study; however no identifying information will be used. Your child will have the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview, and also add, alter or delete any information.

Storage of Data: To ensure confidentiality and privacy, all data collected will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Following the completion of the study, Dr. Jennifer Nicol will be responsible for the data. All data will be kept for 5 years in a locked filing cabinet in Dr. Nicol's University of Saskatchewan campus office.

Right to Withdraw: Your child may withdraw from the study at any time, refuse to answer any question for any reason, or request to have the tape recorder turned off throughout the interview process. If your child chooses to withdraw from the study, all existing data will be destroyed.

Questions: If you or your child has any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the researchers at the contact numbers provided. This study has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Sciences Research Ethics Board (date of approval). Any questions regarding the ethics of this researcher, or participant rights can be forwarded to that committee at the Office of Research Services (966-2084). If you are interested, you may obtain the results of the study by contacting myself, or Dr. Nicol.

Consent to Participate: I have read and understood the description provided above. I have been provided with an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered in a sufficient manner. I consent to participate in the present study, understanding that I may withdraw at any time. A copy of this consent form has been provided for my personal records.

(Signature of Participant)

(Date)

(Signature of Researcher)

Appendix C: Assent Form

You have been invited to participate in a study entitled “Dancing through High School”. The following form describes why I am doing this research, what you will be asked to do, and what you can do if you have questions or don’t want to be in the study anymore.

Researchers: Sarah K.L. Friesen, M.Ed Candidate (email: sklfriesen14@hotmail.com, phone: 220-4797) & Dr. Jennifer Nicol (Thesis supervisor), Department of Educational Psychology & Special Education, University of Saskatchewan (email: jajnicol@usask.ca, phone: 966-5261).

Why is this study important?: The purpose of this study is to describe and understand the experience of adolescent females who are engaged in elite dance training during high school.

What do I need to do?: I would like you help me to understand what it is like for you to be committed to dancing while going to high school. I will ask you some questions about things that happen in your daily life, you can tell me as little or as much as you would like. There are no right or wrong answers and you can talk about anything that you want.

What if I have questions?: You can ask questions at anytime throughout the interview. If you have questions after we have finished the interview, you can contact me (sklfriesen14@hotmail.com). If the things that we talk about make you feel uncomfortable, you can tell me and we will stop the interview.

What will happen after the interview? After the interview, I will transcribe everything that we have talked about, and write a few paragraphs that describes what you have shared with me. I will then ask you to look at both documents, and tell me if you agree with the things that I have written. I will then ask you to sign one more form to authorize use of the transcript.

What if I want to quit?: If you want to stop the interview at anytime, just let me know. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. If you tell me that you want to quit, we will stop the interview and I will destroy all of the information that you have given me.

If you want to be in this study, please sign your name below.

(Participant)

(Date)

(Researcher)

Appendix D: Interview Protocol 1

- Introduction to the research
 - The purpose of this interview is so that I can hear your experiences of high school, dancing and what those experiences are like for you.
 - There are no wrong answers to the questions that I ask and you can talk about anything that you want.
 - If you have any questions for me during the interview, please don't hesitate to ask.
- Dance experiences
 - Tell me what it is like to be involved in dance while you are in high school?
 - How did you become involved in dancing?
 - What's kept you committed to dancing?
 - What are some of your good experiences of dancing?
 - What are some of your negative experiences of dancing?
- High school experiences
 - What are some of your good experiences?
 - What are some of your negative experiences?
 - Has dancing ever interfered with your school work? And visa versa?
 - Can you describe away that dancing has had a positive impact on your school work? And visa versa?
 - Has dancing has influenced who you are in social situations?
 - Do people ever assume things about you because you are a dancer?

Appendix E: Debriefing Form

Thank you for your participation in the 'Dancing Through High School Study'. The purpose of this study was to describe and try to understand the experience of high school females who are committed to elite dance training during high school. Your cooperation and participation are greatly appreciated.

If talking about your experiences has caused you to feel anxious or uncomfortable please consider accessing some of the resources listed below, contact one of the researchers, or call the Kids Help Phone Line, toll free, at 1-800-668-6868.

If you have any further questions regarding the research, please feel free to contact me at 220-4797, or sklfriesen14@hotmail.com.

Participant Resources

Kids Help Phone Line 1-800-668-6868

-Free anonymous counselling services provided over the phone

<http://www.girlpower.gov/>

-A government sponsored motivational website for young girls

<http://www.citizenship.gov.on.ca/owd/english/youth/bodyimage.htm>

- A government sponsored website promoting positive self image

Family Services Saskatoon 244-0127

- Local counselling services

Appendix F: Interview Protocol 2

Friendships

- Double edged sword – there is a sense of competition between friends, but at the same time everyone described their dance friendships to be so much closer and different then school friends.
How do you make sense of that sense of competition and those friendships?
 - Do you ever talk about the competition?
 - Do you ever feel that the competition between friends gets out of hand?
 - Does the competition contribute to the friendship in a positive way?

Competition

- When participants talked about competition, there was kind of mixed review as to whether or not it was a good thing.
 - What do you think the good things are?
 - What are the bad things?
 - What makes it a good experience?
 - Why do people on the outside think it is so bad?

Time

- One of the things that everyone identified as a negative aspect of dancing so much was the time commitment and having to miss out on other things
 - Do you think it would be better if you attended a private school like RWB or National?
 - Would you consider going away? Why? Why not?
 - What are the risks and benefits?
 - Could dancing be as good if you didn't do it as much?
 - What would be an ideal balance?
 - What do you think you will do when you are older and you don't dance so many hours a night?

Commitment

- Everyone I have talked to is obviously very committed to dancing, what makes other dancers quit before they get to that level?
 - Do you think talent has a lot to do with it?
 - What has made you question that commitment?

Relationship with the body/ sexualization

- Some say that dancing is a good emotional release and it involves both the mind and the body – but at the same time body image is something that a lot of dancers are expected to worry about?
 - Can you describe your relationship with your body?
 - Does using your body for that emotional release help you appreciate it more?
 - When you have those good feelings, the emotional release, what else can make you feel like that?
 - Have you ever felt uncomfortable in a costume or with the choreography you do?
 - Do boys ever think differently of you because you are a dancer?

Appendix G: Data Release Form

I, _____, have reviewed both the summary and the complete transcript of my personal interview for the ‘Dancing Through High School Study’, and have had the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my interview with Sarah Friesen. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Sarah Friesen to be used in the manner described in the consent form. I have received a copy of this Data release form for my own records.

(Participant)

(Date)

(Participant)

(Date)

Appendix H: Ethics Application

Information Required:

1. **Name of researcher(s)** and/or supervisor (s) and related department(s).
Dr. J. Nicol (Educational psychology)
- 1a. **Name of student(s)**, if a student study, and type of study (e.g., B.A., Hon., M.A., Ph.D.)
Sarah K.L. Friesen (M.Ed Candidate)
- 1b. **Anticipated start date of the research study (phase) and the expected completion date of the study (phase).**
Start: July 2007
Finish: September 2008
2. **Title of Study**
Dancing Through High School: The Experiences of High School Females Engaged in Elite Dance Training
3. **Abstract (100-250 words)**
The proposed study will use a basic interpretive qualitative research approach (Merriam, 2002) to investigate the experiences of adolescent females engaged in elite dance training while attending regular high school programs. Participants will be recruited from the local dance community through call to participate letters. Data will be collected through two 45-90 minute individual semi structured interviews. Interviews will have a conversational tone. Anticipated topics of conversation include: positive and negative experiences, influence of dance training on social and educational experiences, and experiences of identity development in relation to dance training. Data will be analyzed using Kearney's (2001) concept of shared pathways and descriptive categories
4. **Funding**
The graduate student will fund this project.
5. **Expertise**
The graduate student is a former dancer and has experience as an assistant dance instructor. She is currently studying in the School and Counselling Psychology Master's program and has interview and communication skills that will be useful for this research project.
6. **Conflict of Interest**
The researcher may be acquainted (through the dance community or as a former assistant instructor) with those that will potentially participate in the study, however; she is no way in a place of power within that relationship. Specifically, the research has no influence or authority regarding the potential participants academic or dance related experiences.

7. **Participants**

Participants will be recruited through “Call to Participate” letters that will be distributed via e-mail to individuals who the researcher is acquainted with through the local dance community. These individuals will be invited to forward these e-mails to their friends and acquaintances who might also be interested in participating. Interested individuals will be invited to contact the researcher via e-mail and to provide a phone number, and date and time that they can be reached. During this phone conversation the researcher will then screen the individuals using the criteria presented below. This conversation will also provide potential participants an opportunity to ask questions regarding the research process and the nature of the study. Interviews will be scheduled with those who are interested and willing to participate and who meet the participation criteria.

In order to participate, participants must meet the following criteria:

- i) be female;
- j) be enrolled in a regular high school education program (or have graduated from a regular high school education program within the year);
- k) be currently enrolled in competitive/elite dance training (8-10 hrs/week) in disciplines such as classical ballet, jazz, and tap; as opposed to recreation dance programs (1-2 hrs/week);
- l) been involved in dance training for at least 5 years

Please see attached call to participate letter (appendix A)

8. **Consent**

The Informed Consent Form will be in accordance with the guidelines set out by the Behavioural Research Ethics Committee, and include a statement that this particular study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Saskatchewan Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioural Science Research.

Participants who are under the age of eighteen at the time of the interview will require a parental signature on a consent form that outlines the purpose and procedures of the research as well as the individuals’ right to withdraw at anytime during or after the interview (Appendix B). Parental consent forms may be signed at the time of the first interview, or if preferred consent forms will be delivered to the participants homes to be signed before the first interview. These underage participants will be asked to sign a similar document, an assent form, (Appendix C) before the interview begins. The researcher will read through this form with the participant to ensure that they understand all aspects of the research. Participants who are eighteen years old at the time of the interview will be able sign their own consent forms. Participants will be informed of their right to withdraw from the study during the assent process as well as during the introduction to the interview.

Please see the attached Consent form and Assent form.

9. **Methods/Procedures**

Participants will meet with the researcher for an individual interview, to take place in a research office on the University of Saskatchewan campus. The University of Saskatchewan campus is an ideal location for interviews as it will provide a quiet space with minimal distractions or interruptions. Interviews will follow a semi-structured format and be approximately sixty to ninety minutes in length. Bogdan and Biklen (2003)

defined semi-structured interviews as “interviews in which the same general questions or topics are brought up to each of the subjects involved” (p. 261). The general format of the interview, such as themes and topics to be discussed will be pre-established, however, participants will have the freedom to interpret these questions, and introduce new concepts as they see fit. A conversational tone will characterize the interviews.

Please see attached interview protocol.

At the end of the first interview, arrangements for a second interview will be made. Second interviews will follow a similar format to the first interview. At the beginning of the second interview, participants will be provided a transcript and summary of the first interview. They will be asked to read these materials so that they can respond to the perceived accuracy of them, offer any clarification or corrections they see as necessary, and then sign a data release form (see Appendix D). There will be a short third meeting in order to ensure an agreement on the transcript’s content and the participants’ intended meaning, as well as to obtain release authorization or transcripts regarding the second interview. In order to protect the individual confidentiality and anonymity of each participant, they will select their own pseudonym. Participants will indicate their final approval by signing a data/transcript release form (Appendix E).

10. Storage of Data

All data will be securely stored and retained by Dr. Jennifer A.J. Nicol at the University of Saskatchewan for a minimum of five years in accordance with the University of Saskatchewan’s guidelines. The data will be destroyed after the five-year period.

11. Dissemination of Results

The results of this study will partially be used to complete the requirements for the degree of Master in Education in School and Counselling Psychology made available through the department of Educational Psychology and Special Education and the University of Saskatchewan library system. Furthermore, the results may be published, and/or presented at seminars and/or conferences. Pseudonyms will be used to preserve the anonymity of individuals participating in the study. The results section of this study will be made available to research participants at their request.

12. Risk, Benefits, and Deception

Risks: Potential risk with this study is minimal as there is no deception involved. During the introduction to the interview participants will be informed of their right to withdraw, as well as their right to not answer questions that they feel uncomfortable with during the interview. Participants will be provided resources (e.g. counselling information, kids help phone line) in case they feel uneasy after the interview process. Participants and their parents will be encouraged to contact the researcher should they have any concerns. Should a participant become distressed during the interview, they have the choice to continue or not, and are free to turn off the audio recorder should they wish at any time. In the unlikely event that significant distress is experienced, I will use my judgment and training as a School and Counselling Psychology Master’s Student, as well as the advice of my supervisor who is a trained, registered doctoral psychologist in order to determine appropriate follow-up support.

Benefits: Talking about their experience of the academic and social aspects of high school in relation to their commitment to elite dance training may be beneficial for participants. This study will also enable educational and counselling professionals, as well as parents, to understand the experience of adolescent females who are committed to intense extra-curricular activities during high school

13. Confidentiality

To protect the participant's confidentiality and privacy, pseudonyms will be used in place of their real names. Signed documents will be stored separately from transcripts and audio tapes to ensure that the participants' names cannot be associated with any particular responses. Excerpts and quotes from the interviews will be included in the final presentation of this study; however no identifying information will be used. Participants will have the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview, and also add, alter or delete any information.

14. Data/Transcript Release

Participant will have the opportunity to review the final transcripts and interview summaries and acknowledge that what they said or intended to say is accurately reflected. Quotations that might appear in written or oral presentations of the research will be included in the summary and participants will be asked to grant permission for the inclusion of these quotes. A data release form will be signed (Appendix E).

15. Debriefing and feedback

Following the interview, participants will both verbally debriefed and provided with a debriefing document. The debriefing document will outline the research in general, as well as provide the participants with information regarding counselling services and resources, should they feel the need to further discuss any of the topics raised in the interview or want further support. This form will also provide the participants with both phone and email contact information for the researchers, should they have any questions or concerns

Please see attached debriefing form.

16. Required Signatures

*Sarah K.L. Friesen, Master's Student
Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education
College of Education, University of Saskatchewan*

*Dr. Jennifer A.J. Nicol, Supervisor
Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education
College of Education, University of Saskatchewan*

*Drs. David Mykota/Brian Noonan, Co-Department Heads
Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education
College of Education, University of Saskatchewan*

17. Required Contact Information

Sarah K.L. Friesen
22 Kindrachuk Cr.
Saskatoon, SK
S7K 6H5
Phone: 306-934-8034
Email: sklfriesen14@hotmail.com

Jennifer A. J. Nicol
28 Campus Drive
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, SK
S7N 0X1
Phone: 306-966-5261
Email: jaj.nicol@usask.ca
Fax: 306-966-7719

Appendix I : Ethics Approval

05 Jun 08 11:34a

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UNIVERSITY OF
SASKATCHEWAN

Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Beh-REB)

Certificate of Approval

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Jennifer J. Nicol

DEPARTMENT

Educational Psychology and Special Education

BEH#

07-142

INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CONDUCTED (STUDY SITE)
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon SK
STUDENT RESEARCHERS

Sarah Friesen

SPONSOR

UNFUNDED

TITLE

Dancing Through High School: The Experiences of High School Females Engaged in Elite Dance Training

APPROVAL DATE

27-Jul-2007

EXPIRY DATE

26-Jul-2008


APPROVAL OF:
Application
Consent and Assent Forms
Interview Guide
CERTIFICATION

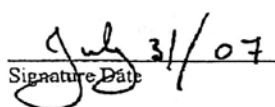
The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above-named research project. The proposal was found to be acceptable on ethical grounds. The principal investigator has the responsibility for any other administrative or regulatory approvals that may pertain to this research project, and for ensuring that the authorized research is carried out according to the conditions outlined in the original protocol submitted for ethics review. This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above time period provided there is no change in experimental protocol or consent process or documents.

Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair for Research Ethics Board consideration in advance of its implementation.

ONGOING REVIEW REQUIREMENTS

In order to receive annual renewal, a status report must be submitted to the REB Chair for Board consideration within one month of the current expiry date each year the study remains open, and upon study completion. Please refer to the following website for further instructions: <http://www.usask.ca/research/ethical.shtml>


John Rigby, Chair
University of Saskatchewan
Behavioural Research Ethics Board


Signature Date: July 31/07

Please send all correspondence to:

Ethics Office
University of Saskatchewan
Room 306 Kirk Hall, 117 Science Place
Saskatoon SK S7N 5C8
Telephone: (306) 966-2084 Fax: (306) 966-2069