Fear, Coping and Peer Support in Male Dance Students' Reflections

Kai Lehikoinen and Isto Turpeinen

K. Lehikoinen
Center for Educational Research and Academic Development in the Arts (CERADA), University of the Arts Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland
e-mail: kai.lehikoinen@uniarts.fi

I. Turpeinen
Arts Promotion Centre Finland, Helsinki, Finland
e-mail: isto.turpeinen@taike.fi

Introduction

The gender politics of "desissifying," first introduced in dance education for males in Finland in the late 1950s, gained new impetus in the early 1980s as dance teachers brought games, martial arts, and sports training into dance for boys. Discussions about male dancing resonated with late 1950s perspectives that opposed homosexuality and male performances of effeminacy, regarding them as detrimental, a view that persisted into the early 2000s in basic dance education.[1] Such a body politic, which strove toward maintaining a relatively narrow male identity and subjected male dance students to hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity, encouraged performances of athleticism, heroism, militarism, patriotism, and warrior masculinity (Lehikoinen, 2006).

As dance entered into vocational and higher education systems in the 1980s and early 1990s, Finland's concert dance scene witnessed a male dancing boom. However, in the basic arts education system, which was established in 1992, male participation in dance has remained remarkably low despite the active measures taken by many dance schools to attract more boys. By the end of the twentieth century, less than 5% of students attending basic dance education programs were male (Lehikoinen, 2006; Turpeinen, 2017).

Twenty years later, no significant change has occurred; the Finnish National Agency for Education reports that male participation in basic dance education is 6–7% at the beginning of the study, with less than 4% in advanced studies (Luoma, 2020). Meanwhile, social, cultural, political, and legislative changes have increased attention on gender and sexual diversity in society (Lehtonen, 2018), arguably preparing the way for gender fluidity and providing a broader range of masculinities for males to identify with. Considering these more general societal changes, we find the persistently low numbers of males enrolled in basic dance education a conspicuous trend, prompting us to ask: How do males who participated in gender-specific basic dance education in Finland from the 1990s to 2008 reflect

upon their dance experiences? How does that relate to their well-being?[2] To address this, we explore reflective accounts concerning fear and coping. We also discuss the role of gender-specific peer groups as a safe space[3] for males in dance and consider how such groups contribute to "supportive masculinities" (Gough, 2018, p. 57). Here, we assess the constitution of a network of former peers connected by their dance involvement and a sensitive and caring environment that extends in space and time beyond the dance school—a peer network that we call *the extended dancing family*.

Investigating the reflections of men in dance education

To understand the complexities of dancing as a marginalized art form for males in Finland, we have expanded our previous research on dance and masculinities (Lehikoinen, 2006; Turpeinen, 2015) by listening to seventeen men reflecting on their experiences as students in gender-specific dance education in their youth. In their early twenties, five of them had participated in *The Lost Boys* (2010), a staged dance performance and artistic research process (Turpeinen, 2015). They had shared their experiences of their time in basic dance education and searched for their lost dance. While they had given up dancing as a hobby and lost contact with the gender-specific peer group as an "extended dancing family" they had in the dance school, dancing as a "lived experience" survived, nonetheless, as knowledge in their flesh (see Varto, 2012).

In our latest study, we used a brief questionnaire, two focus groups, and eleven in-depth interviews—a semi-structured approach with open questions—to reflect on the same topics ten years later with five of the "lost boys" and twelve of their peers (see Table 10.1). The data collection took place as part of a workshop series in the fall of 2019. We targeted the workshops to adult males who, in their youth, had started in a gender-specific basic dance education program in contemporary dance in the 1990s and completed their training by 2008. All participants we talked with had attended the same dance school in Finland and had experience dancing with each other. We applied terminology and definitions from the online dictionary of Seta, a central organization of LGBTI associations in Finland, to talk about gender and sexual orientation: a ten-option classification was used for the interviewees to define their gender, and a five-option classification was used for sexual orientation. Also, the interviewees were given an option to use their own words to define their gender and sexual orientation. Further, they had an option to not reveal how they identify themselves. In Table 10.1, "male (juridical)" refers to one of the two categories in the gender binary that appears in the personal identification number of the person registered in Finland's population information system.

Table 10.1 Participants in the study (all pseudonyms)

Pseudonym	Age	Occupation	Gender	Sexuality
Aadolf	28	choreographer	male (cis)	heterosexual
Benjamin	34	freelance dancer, performance artist, producer	male (juridical)	heterosexual
Daavid	32	planner	male (cis & juridical)	gay
Edvard	31	freelance musician, odd jobs	n.a.	n.a.
Felix	31	HVAC planner	male (cis & juridical)	heterosexual
Gabriel	30	physiotherapist	male (juridical)	heterosexual
Hannes	27	taxi driver, musician, broadcast host	male (cis)	heterosexual
Iikka	27	researcher	male (cis)	heterosexual
Jaakkima	35	freelance dancer	male (cis & juridical)	heterosexual
Kaapo	31	dance instructor	male (cis & juridical)	heterosexual
Lari	29	dance pedagogue	male (juridical)	queer
Mainio	28	account manager	male (cis & juridical)	heterosexual
Nestori	31	software developer	male (cis)	heterosexual
Ohto	30	dancer	male (cis)	heterosexual
Paavali	30	transport coordinator	male (cis)	heterosexual
Raafael	30	marketing expert	male (juridical)	heterosexual
Sakari	30	student	male (juridical)	n.a.

Inspired by Wasser and Bresler's (1996) idea of an "interpretative zone," we regarded our qualitative analysis as a zone for multiple perspectives that were kept "in dynamic tension" (p. 6) as we collaboratively sought to make sense of the data. Topics and themes emerged from the intertextuality (Allen, 2000) between our data and our theoretical lenses. Our lenses included gender as performative (Butler, 1990), hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), coping (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2000; Greenglass, 2002), well-being as capability (Sen, 1999), safe space (Flensner and Von der Lippe, 2019; Coleman, 2016), and supportive masculinities (Gough, 2018). Our process was dialogical, as we struggled with ambiguities, tried to find words to ascribe excerpts from our data, and did our best to understand each other's points of entry. For example, we acknowledged the need to challenge the cisnormative assumption that a person's gender identity matches their biological sex and is fixed. Yet, to save space, in this chapter, we decided to use "boy," "male," and "man" as shorthand to refer to people who are *socially assumed, based on appearance, to be male*.

In the first round of our analysis, we used the data from the focus groups and the in-depth interviews interchangeably to construct categories such as: (1) experiences of dance education, (2) the meaning and meaningfulness of dance, (3) the power and impact of dance, (4) stereotypes and identities, and (5) dance and empowerment. The second round—establishing a dialogue between the close reading of the data and the theoretical lenses that the data called for—resulted in us identifying recurring themes such as "fear of harassment," "coping," and "the peer group as a safe space" that we will explore later in the chapter.

We realized there were no easy answers concerning the significance of adolescent dance experiences as we listened to our adult interviewees reflect on their youth. Nevertheless, listening to the thoughts helped us understand some complexities associated with masculinity's social constructions in Finland's basic dance education context. They made us see our obligation to communicate the challenges that can complicate boys' participation in artistic dance pursuits and that can negatively impact their well-being. Traditional dichotomous values have been reconsidered as masculinity has become more diversified in Western societies. Yet, the effects of "boy code" (Pollack, 1998) and the social stigma still attached to males in concert dance (Burt, 1995; Lehikoinen, 2006; Risner, 2007, 2009; Turpeinen, 2015) continue to subject young males in dance education to bullying and harassment (Risner, 2014). Furthermore, the effect of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) as a "straitjacket" still circumscribes the lives of many males in dance (Lehikoinen, 2006). It also undermines the well-being of men more generally (Gough, 2018). From this perspective, we focused on the peer group as a positive source of "supportive masculinities" (Gough, 2018) and examined some of the "coping styles" (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2000; Greenglass, 2002) utilized by males in basic dance education in Finland.

The peer group as a safe space

The men in *The Lost Boys* (2010) reflected upon the traces of their lost dance and the meanings of dance for themselves (Turpeinen, 2015). Ten years later, Hannes recalls the gender-specific peer group in the dance school: "It was a wonderful support group … it was always a relief [from school] when I went there. There was … company and friends … every time, it was such a good experience."

The excerpt above shows peer support playing an essential role for boys in dance education (see Turpeinen, 2015). In this case, the boys had been dancing together for 8–13 years in the peer group, a place where they did not have to worry, as it was "really uncomplicated" (Daavid). Or, as one of the interviewees recalls:

> From the age of seven, I had the same group. It was the same agenda and idea in the dance studio. Everyone was in the same boat … the teacher stays the same … [and] can learn to know us. Dancers. Boys. That's it. It's better for everyone. It's much more personal … At least, if you compare primary school and dance class. (Gabriel)

The safe social space, as described above, contributes to what some scholars in Finnish dance education research call a "ceiling-atmosphere" (Turpeinen, 2015; Turpeinen and Buck, 2016; Turpeinen, 2017). Empathy and shared experiences are critical ingredients in nurturing growth in such a low threshold social space: a place that is easy for young people to enter and be who they are without social anxieties. It is a fearless atmosphere described as "homely … easy to come [to] … really positive and meaningful" (Kaapo), where "you could be yourself, didn't have to pretend anything" (Felix).

Almost all our interviewees regarded the dance studio as a safe space when compared to the school environment. As Daavid noted, "I think it compares to the fact that dance has been so important to me. It was a safety valve and a counterweight to something horrible [at school]." We would like to argue that the dance studio as a safe space, together with the peer group and the "ceiling atmosphere," can allow a person to have a relationship with one's own body, other bodies, and dance in time and space. It is a space to maintain dialogical relations with others, as you are (Anttila, 2003). Belonging to such a dialogical network contributes to the "ceiling atmosphere," which Benjamin articulates by saying, "Dance classes created the kind of group or team spirit that provided the experience. It was also accompanied by artistic creativity. There's something about the combination of these two: art and the group."

As the relationships within the peer group evolved, by the time of puberty, it had become a space where "you could be at peace" (Turpeinen, 2015, p. 120). Or, as Hannes puts it:

> I didn't enjoy any [exercise at school] … I skipped school days to avoid going to swim [with the school class] … I was distressed. But I was able to get into situations where the boys were dancing. In retrospect, it felt funny why I did it. I still don't understand. It may have been the second home we came to. It was a family, different, but that's how I experienced it.

As the excerpt above suggests, Hannes regards the gender-specific peer group in basic dance education as an extended family or a second home, where it was easy to enter. Indeed, the dancing peer has been identified as one of the critical sources of motivation for many boys in dance education (Turpeinen, 2015, 2017). Although the peer group was important for many of the men we interviewed, some appreciated the actual dancing more: "I always come up with the first thing that dancing itself was fun" (Kaapo).

The Lost Boys process provided young males an opportunity to return to dance as a hobby and regain their peer group. Did the gender-specific peer group in *The Lost Boys* create the potential for dancing boys to construct themselves free from social anxieties and constraints? At the least, it seemed to provide them a state of becoming and growing, where they were able to be themselves, wonder, and reflect on their being in the world as males and also as dancers.

Turpeinen (2015) recognizes the dressing room as a place where boys in dance have their own space to share their lived experiences. It is generally one of the sites where young males construct their gender and sexuality (Lehtonen, 2003). For our interviewees, the dressing room seems to have been a safe space where they had the opportunity to be sensitive about and open to revelations concerning their everyday challenges as teenagers. It was a secluded place for caring practices such as peer support that contributed to well-being and the individual development of maturing young men in dance. We regard such a space as a relevant part of the ceiling atmosphere, embracing the peer group and helping the dancing boys generate a shared "we"—experience that boosts their motivation toward dance as a meaningful hobby.

Philosopher Juha Varto (2012) refers to the assumption that artistic activity can function as a state of freedom in which the oppressive nature of cultural petrification does not apply. Generalizations and societal ideals are often disregarded in artistic practices such as dancing because dance itself is a "good thing," as many of the "lost men" pointed out (Turpeinen, 2015). Dancing was also seen as a good thing

in our data. Aadolf notes, "I think dance has saved me from a closed mind. I would imagine that without dance, I would have far more militant values, that I would somehow have a militant attitude towards duty and responsibility."

As Aadolf's account shows, dance can provide capabilities that strengthen young males' ability to consider and respect others and empathize with other people's circumstances. Thus, we would like to claim that the interaction and expression in creative artistic processes and performances foster communality and provide a safe space to share meanings.

Since leaving basic dance education, the men in our research have kept in touch with each other to varying degrees. Dance has become a profession for some of them. It has remained as a hobby or vanished from life for the others. Now, almost thirty years later, their relationships with each other and the peer group varied. At minimum, their extended dancing family relationships entail occasional informal encounters to exchange news, which sometimes includes uncertainty, as peers have changed considerably. However, soon the common past opens up through familiar bodily gestures, gazes, and voices. At the opposite extreme, some of the men kept meeting each other in weekly dance sessions and other social events, such as game nights or dance performances. Often, the men regarded relocation to a new residence as an opportunity for a casual reunion with their extended dancing family; the assistance they gave each other exemplifies their continued bonding. Despite differences in the intensity of their encounters, the peer group had remained a safe space for them. Or, as Gabriel describes:

> Twenty years have passed, and the same boys are still in my life … the same network, the safety net. Everyone has gone in different directions. And we are quite different in character and personality. Together we have the path we've danced … and we started at the age of seven.

Marginalization, social stigma, and fear

While sharing insights in the peer group helped the boys expand the horizon of their meanings about growth, dance, and being in the world as a male, they nevertheless had to confront stereotypical social codes and gender norms at school—even at the dance school.

The core curriculum for basic education in the arts considers the learner's personal and cultural background and needs (Opetushallitus, 2017). It acknowledges the right of every student, regardless of gender and ethnic background, to experience inclusion and highlights that dance schools need to critically examine gendered attitudes and practices. Indeed, the possibility to participate in dance education, or the arts and culture more generally, without fear and prejudices, can be regarded as a basic need and a human right (Lehikoinen and Rautiainen, 2016). How can such needs be nurtured and rights fulfilled, for males in dance education, when the social environment stigmatizes them and when this stigma marginalizes their hobbies?

Young people who experience marginalization can be pushed to the brink, as described by Hannes, who gave up dancing due to social pressure:

> I had to think for myself, whether true or what those at school were saying. It was difficult to explain why you want to do something that others can't understand. It made me feel like I was doing something wrong.

His words exemplify the inner fear and shame that many young males in dance experience due to social stigma and marginalization (Lehikoinen, 2006; Risner, 2007; Turpeinen, 2015). Fear and anxieties concerning gender and sexuality in dance education can be detected even in a relatively safe environment, such as the in-depth interviews in our research, where we provided anonymity to our participants. Daavid, a self-identified gay cis-man, remarked that he was "genuinely glad that there were multiple options, or that there was a whole spectrum to choose from, and that it was based on the idea

that one can subjectively define these things" when he spoke about reporting his gender and sexuality in our questionnaire gathering personal data.

Daavid's reply shows an appreciation that our questionnaire, rather than imposing a gender binary perspective, gave room for him to define his gender and sexuality from a subjective point of view. However, he also found our questions concerning his identity to be "strange" and "meddlesome," as well as potentially dangerous:

> Meanwhile, it felt a bit strange and meddlesome to answer questions on sexuality and gender identity … because of my experiences in life … that you have to conceal your own identity. When you … need to mark it down somewhere, the first effect or a kind of reaction … is that … can this be used against me somewhere?

The excerpt illustrates how the fear of exposing one's gender and sexual orientation—if it differs from the dominant heterosexual norm in society—creates tension and uncertainty. Based on Daavid's previous experiences in life, he is apparently concerned that revealing intimate details about his identity can jeopardize his career, friendships, or perhaps even his safety. The threat of adverse reactions seems to have instilled in Daavid the fear that someone will record his identity. For us, this moment of hesitation demonstrates the operations of an internalized social control mechanism similar to Foucault's (1977) development and adaptation of Bentham's panopticon—a late-eighteenth-century architectural idea used in prisons to cause constant uncertainty in the prisoners about being observed to modify their behavior with self-control in fear of being punished.

Heteronormativity refers to "the normative status of heterosexuality which renders any alternative sexualities as 'other' and marginal" (Jackson, 1999, p. 163). We would like to argue that the panopticon—or prison—of heteronormativity may make some boys and men hesitant to speak openly about their dance hobby outside the dance community. Or as Daavid puts it:

> It is nevertheless a kind of unusual hobby for men, so you are forced to justify it and do a bit extra work for it … I have to talk about that [dancing], and people see [it] as effeminate, and you are forced to explain … so … I have kept it a secret. For me … in elementary school and high school, I kept it a secret that I am gay until the very end … [and] that at least not yet will I tell [to my schoolmates] that I dance … that would be the very last thing.

Daavid's reminiscence would seem to illustrate a double closet in which he hid during his entire youth, hesitant to come out not only as gay but also as a dancer. The need for men who dance to "justify" and "explain" their gender-atypical hobby while confronting stereotypical prejudices about dance as effeminate required extra mental effort. Daavid's words appear to suggest that dancing created an additional stigma adjacent to homosexuality, which he had to keep secret for fear of a double emasculation: becoming identified not only as gay but also as an effeminate gay.

While the self-concept of young males in dance education varies, it is often fragile. It can involve low self-worth because of anxieties and feelings of shame that are socially constructed. In our latest data, this topic was mentioned repeatedly. Even those males who worked professionally in dance had doubts about how to talk about their profession in social situations outside the arts field:

> The articulation of the socio-economic status of dance is quite tricky. And people have a stereotypical idea of what dance is. But it can be terribly difficult to tell others what it would be in a non-stereotypical way. Yes, I have encountered people outside the arts field, and they have not been overly judgmental. Mainly ignorant, to be honest. Or they try to guess what it [dance as a profession] might be. (Aadolf)

Coping

Aligned with Risner's (2009) research, some reflections in our data suggest that despite the complexities, males in dance education find ways to cope with the social resistance they encounter. For example, when Jaakkima said, "It is not my problem," he appeared to externalize the dilemma of people not appreciating males in dance by locating the problem in that other person, who can then also be constructed as "worthless" and treated indifferently (Turpeinen, 2015). With such coping styles, students in dance education can expand the dressing room's safe space into a mindset that helps them maintain their pride and self-worth.

Some coping styles for males in basic dance education may involve complex self-control and interplay of discourses, as the following excerpts from one of our interviewees exemplifies. First, Kaapo, a 31-year-old dance instructor who identifies as a straight cis-man, elaborates the fear of embodying the social stigma of homosexuality due to his engagement with dance:

> Although I felt that, of course, all sexual orientations are entirely okay … the environment had somehow taught me that you have to avoid stereotypically gay characteristics if you don't want major challenges. And, although it was not a problem for me that I would have behaved somehow stereotypically, the idea was there, nevertheless.

The excerpt shows how the internalized surveillance of socially dominant heteronormative discourse operates in the male dancer as a self-control mechanism for self-protection. Following Judith Butler, we argue that the operation of such a mechanism is a response to the social acts and the utterances that assign a sex and a gender to the male dancer's body, compelling him "to 'cite' the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject" (Butler, 1993, p. 232). Such compelling utterances operate as a doxa—an intertextually constructed stereotype that claims what it says is neutral, natural, and representational (Allen, 2000)—as they circulate in the social realm. Or as Kaapo testifies:

> At school, from some relatives, and surely also something that I have read between the lines from the world of ice-hockey. Although, when I was young, you didn't talk about it in that way. In general, when you walk on the street and you hear older people talking. And some of the comedy programs on television.

Moreover, the doxa as a social control mechanism imposes heteronormative values despite Kaapo's liberal views on sexuality and forces him to embody, even later in his life, a socially learned coping style and acceptance of stigmatizing jokes:

> When I grew up, I learned that … these jokes are not funny … I have also had stereotypical prejudices, and on some issues, I might still have. And even if they are no longer prejudices, they may come from old ways of coping. For example, I might laugh at something even though it's not necessarily funny, smiling next to someone who rants and raves some bullshit.

Here, his words show how laughing with others as they tell offensive jokes constitutes a coping style for a male dancer in a heteronormative realm. He plays "the chameleon" (Risner, 2009, p. 151) as a coping style to fit in. Simultaneously, the nonserious levity of a social situation, where laughter and smiling encourage those who tell stigmatizing jokes, tends to facilitate what Saucier et al. have termed "radical humor" (2016, p. 76). They argue that such humor "is used to attack groups … to belittle, marginalize, and stigmatize the individuals belonging to the groups targeted by the humor" (2016, p. 76). Thus, radical humor works as a mechanism of exclusion as it "reinforces and perpetuates negative stereotypes … [and, when] … antisocially intended … [it can] produce antisocial effects by reinforcing the status hierarchy" (Saucier et al., 2016, p. 76).

With its bitter tone, sarcasm is a form of radical humor that Kaapo uses to position himself favorably in relation to hegemonic masculinity:

> I am in many ways a stereotypical man and masculine, so it is normal for me, of course, that everybody wears trousers, and why would anyone put on make-up, as it is annoying, and high heels, they are the last thing because your toes go to crap. So, I can't really understand such things, although if you wish to wear [high heels] and paint yourself, you are welcome. Surely, it is a fun pastime.

Fusing sarcasm with normalization (Foucault, 1977, 1990) in the above excerpt, Kaapo justifies not only his gender performance but also his social position regarding what appears as "abnormal" to him. He uses the normal/abnormal binary to differentiate himself from the undesired "other," which he constructs through a stereotypical belief about cross-dressers. Then, he continues to define his gender by referring to favored pastimes, as follows:

> So, I do stereotypical things like fiddling with computers, playing war games, painting plastic figures, and [laughs] things of that sort. Such stuff that you could right away make a check on your list, like okay, you know nothing about any other cultural realm other than this one.

In the excerpt above, Kaapo lists stereotypically masculine spare-time activities as a limited gender category. However, he then distances himself from the masculine stereotype of an active, physically fit, and ambitious male, using irony and the rhetoric of indifference:

> I am … very non-competitive, which is seen stereotypically as an unmanly feature … I find it more interesting to do some collaborative things … rather than [care about] who is going to win … I don't care. You were fast, wow, good. You are well-trained, great. But that's it [laughs] … I'm like I can't bother … I have permitted myself to … be indolent in my masculinity [laughs] … I don't have to have shoulders braced in a defensive position … to show that I can be aggressive.

Thus, we suggest that by utilizing this blithe indifference as a coping style, Kaapo claims a space for his gender that can be more playful, fluid, and dialogical. Or, as he puts it:

> For me, it's like I don't care. If I want to cross my legs, I cross them and whatever. If somebody finds my behavior odd, and as long as it doesn't make them afraid so that they need to turn aggressive, it's like okay …. We can discuss, and hopefully, we both can find new sides of each other.

Yet, performing gender is not a matter of indifference for many males who participate in dance education. For some, it is a lifetime predicament that requires self-reflection, which can eventually help them accept themselves without a need to accommodate socially dominant gender stereotypes. As Hannes describes below, dance education can provide a springboard for such self-reflection, which leads toward resilience and empowerment concerning gender norms:

> [Dance] has cultivated me to think about various aspects of how men can be different from one another … that it is okay to be anything … I have tried to get rid of the stereotypes … because … it is a redundant mindset…. But there are those guys who simply cannot. Guys who belong in a stereotypical box and think about me in a certain way … I've been playing with this idea all my life.

Despite extensive self-reflection, which can build resilience to social gender norms, concerns about the social acceptance of one's gender performance remain present as the voice of an "invisible speaker" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 197): the other who, in Hannes' imagination, sees him "in a certain way." Furthering Bakhtin's work, the words of the invisible speaker "are not there, but deep traces left by these words" (1984, p. 197), and by the discourse of hegemonic masculinity they represent, "have a determining influence on all the present and visible words" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 197).

Supporting boys in dance education

Researchers have presented critical approaches for supporting adolescent male dancers (Risner, 2009, 2014; Bassetti, 2013). Sympathizing with their ideas, and considering the complexity of sexual orientation and gender identity as regards social norms, we could argue that a gender-specific peer group can provide support for male dance students, who otherwise might feel stigmatized in a social realm that has a significantly high proportion of female peers and teachers. Benjamin, who self-identifies as a straight cis-man, reflects on that:

> Growing up in the [gender-specific peer] group … there is that particular kind of a lad group formation … reaching puberty together and everything that relates to that. It's not something that art education can necessarily solve. All that happens alongside … pressures that arise from [the questions] … am I masculine enough … and how do I approach the opposite sex.

While a gender-specific peer group may strengthen feelings of inclusion, such a group does not guarantee an entirely safe and supportive space to discuss fears about the social credibility of one's gender performance, as the hesitancy in Benjamin's reflection suggests:

> Dancing in the all-boys' group has not in any immediate way solved my own question about masculinity. It may have emphasized … collectiveness, team spirit, and … certain masculine features … I had positive experiences concerning my masculinity, and that I am part of this [peer group] … Later, I have reflected on that, and [come to realize] that it had … such features, that it perhaps did not quite … [succeed in providing the support that I needed].

Contrasting his time spent in the peer group with his years in a more academic environment—where his engagement with gender studies helped him challenge the heteronormative regime—gave Benjamin the means to accept that he does not need to fit into gender-stereotypical expectations:

> I have only later been able to say to myself that I do not have to be a certain kind [of] a man … to act in a certain way, and that's okay. For me, this has constituted a sort of a personal, political agenda … which is, partially due to the master's degree perhaps, that I got engaged with feminist theories and so on. Therefore, I've been able to reflect on all this afterward.

Benjamin's words make us ask why young people in dance often need to wait until university to be acquainted with theoretical tools that can help them reflect critically on gender and sexuality. Their well-being calls for such tools early on in their engagement with dance.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we have shed light on the disproportionately small number of males in dance education by listening to the reflections of men who engaged in basic dance education in contemporary dance in Finland from the mid-1990s to 2008. By utilizing selected transcript extracts from focus groups and in-depth interviews, we have illuminated the complexities that are involved in understanding the constructions of masculinity in basic dance education: the fear that such complexities may generate, the coping styles that they may force students to adopt, and the role of gender-specific peer groups that can serve as a safe space for "supportive masculinities."

Many of the excerpts discussed here exemplify a rejection of effeminacy and homosexuality, which can be understood as the result of a heteronormative body politic operating in basic dance education in

Finland, as it does in the history of Western concert dance more generally (Burt, 1995; Risner, 2009). This body politic, which draws boundaries regarding what constitutes "real" or socially acceptable forms of masculinity, creates tensions regarding how males who dance can address and perform gender and sexuality.

Gender as performativity refers to the idea that gender is *not* an innate or fixed quality in people. It is assigned to our everyday practices, learned through socialization, imitated based on cultural norms and ideals of femininity and masculinity, and regulated by social standards such as heterosexism (Butler, 1990, 1993). Some of the excerpts from our data suggest the omnipresence of heteronormativity as a panopticon, which—when internalized—generates uncertainty about one's gender performance and forces males in dance education to take up coping styles to avoid social stigma and punishment. Some coping styles—for example, showing approval for radical humor that stigmatizes homosexuality and male performances of femininity—contribute to actions that reinforce the hetero-normative status hierarchy in the dance community, and the fears and uncertainties concerning the social performances of masculinity. Further, they force men who dance to perform gender within an often very narrow register and limit their agency both inside and outside the dance educational context.

In the light of our research, the socially constructed — and maintained — discourse of hegemonic masculinity, which subjugates women and non-heterosexual men and identifies dance education as a feminine realm, stigmatizes male dance students and contributes to their social fears and feelings of shame. The fear of being harassed and the difficulty that many males have in articulating their dancing exemplify this effect. Here, we propose that the difficulty in verbalizing dance is not first and foremost due to the bodily and ephemeral nature of dancing, but more importantly, perhaps, because the cultural stereotypes concerning dance remain narrow, and gender norms constitute, at worst, a health risk (Blum et al., 2017). Further, culturally prevalent heteronormative hate speech and socially prescribed gender norms threaten cultural rights to participation in basic dance education.

Our interviewees share a common history in engagement with dance in their youth despite different educational statuses, occupational backgrounds, sexual orientations, and a range of relationship statuses. A shared history with peers can generate social bonding and construct a safe space, which provides the means for young males in dance education to experience belongingness and inclusion while helping them cope and mature as individuals. Furthermore, a gender-specific peer group in dance education can empower males to resist militant views of hegemonic masculinity and help them maintain a space where they can explore their identity. In other words, a gender-specific peer group in basic dance education can yield "supportive masculinities" (Gough, 2018) that contribute toward the social and mental well-being of males who dance. Peer groups such as extended dancing families can provide support for their members even later in life.

In conclusion, we acknowledge that while understandings of gender and sexuality have changed over the past 30 years—just as the range of socially accepted performances of masculinity has broadened—no radical changes have taken place when it comes to males and basic dance education in Finland. However, the Finnish National Agency for Education clearly states the need for gender equality and respect for gender diversity in the national core curriculum that educators in basic dance education are expected to follow. The core curriculum asserts that each student's individual learning strengths, abilities, and premises need to be acknowledged. Every student—regardless of gender or ethnic background—has to have the opportunity to experience inclusion through the content and provision of teaching. In addressing teaching approaches, the guidelines underscore the need to pay attention to the identification and change in gendered attitudes and practices (Opetushallitus, 2017). Despite its good intentions toward gender equality, we are concerned about a possible backlash if dance schools misinterpret the core curriculum to endorse *gender-neutrality* instead of *gender-sensitivity*. As our research suggests, young males underrepresented in basic dance education may need affirmative action support from a gender-specific peer group.

Based on our research, we argue that gender-specific peer groups in dance education can provide valuable support for young males. However, such groups are not self-evidently *safe enough* spaces, and

more specifically, not places to perform gender and sexuality fully without fear and concern. The cisnormativity and heteronormativity in peer groups, dance educational institutions, and society more generally still seem to be constraining many dance students. Acknowledging this problem and subscribing to gender-sensitive and inclusive teaching in dance schools provide the first steps in creating safer spaces for young people to be themselves and celebrate the choices they genuinely value (see Risner, 2009). To accomplish this goal, dance schools must achieve an in-depth understanding of intersectionality concerning gender and sexuality. In higher education, dance teacher programs call for upgraded curricula that acknowledge the social, cultural, and psychological complexities of gender and sexuality.

Basic dance education, or basic education in the arts more generally, should provide a safe space for young people to reflect upon topics such as gender and sexuality that are relevant to adolescent identity development. Yet, we argue that it is the compulsory educational system's responsibility, together with the basic education in the arts, to provide the means for young people to deal with the diversity and complexity of identities without value hierarchies.[4]

Notes

1. Basic education in dance is extracurricular training provided primarily for children and young people in dance schools in Finland. The tuition follows the approved curriculum, which is based on the core curriculum determined by the Finnish National Agency for Education. Goal-oriented training progresses from one level to the next. It provides skills for the students to express themselves and apply for vocational dance training and higher education in dance (Opetushallitus, 2017).
2. We consider wellbeing related to political safety (see Note 3) and "capability" as "the ability—the substantive freedom—of people to lead the lives they have reason to value and to enhance the real choices that they have" (Sen, 1999, p. 293).
3. Deriving from the 1970s feminist and LGBT movement, "safe space" refers to a politically safe space where marginalized people can meet among themselves and share their experiences without the danger of being harassed (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019; Coleman, 2016). In educational contexts, it refers to "classrooms where students can speak freely, without being afraid of their peers or their teacher" (Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019, p. 276).
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