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Supporting Gender Non-Conforming Youth in Dance Education by Creating a Gender Inclusive Environment

The dance world is constantly changing and evolving in terms of inclusivity and acceptance of people. There is a shift in the dance field as stigmatization of gender identity diminishes, and the gender binary construct in concert dance is challenged. Because of this change, dance pedagogy in studio settings should also be evolving to better support students' gender identities. Numerous studio dance settings fall into the traditional gender binary approach such as gendered movement vocabulary and expressive gestures, as well as gendered costuming. In most studios, dance students are expected to wear costumes and perform movements based on their sex at birth and/or how they are perceived within their gender division. As children develop and grow, they begin to explore their identity. Many children use their hobbies and interests, like dance, to help locate and define their identity. Dance is an art form that concerns the body and helps people find their identity and self-expression, therefore challenging the gender binary in studio settings can be beneficial to the growing youth. It is important for dance educators to facilitate healthy, inclusive environments and promote important changes in their studios in response to changes in the world. A general understanding of gender identities is the first step towards change in studio dance settings. The next step is relating the gender identity information to youth by analyzing gender identity patterns as they grow and develop. Dance, being an art

form that concerns the body and expression, can facilitate youth in finding their identity.

Therefore, dance educators must recognize the often hidden but present gender constructs in studio dance and find ways to once and for all challenge the binary approach. Challenging the binary approach will create an inclusive environment where students can express themselves in an honest and authentic manner. I argue that youth dancers can find their self-proclaimed identity through dance, therefore, culminating a gender inclusive environment in dance studio settings is key in supporting the growth of dancing children.

Everyone experiences gender in different ways throughout their life. There are three main levels of a person's gender. There is gender biology which is the sex of someone declared at birth. Next, there is gender identity which is how someone personally identifies themselves. Lastly, there is gender expression which is how one expresses themselves on the outside for people to see ("Creating Gender Inclusive Schools"). When someone investigates these three levels of gender within themselves, they are going through a process of finding their "true gender self" (Ehrensaft 341). People's true gender self has been challenged for years by a construct called the gender binary. The gender binary is "a way of considering people's gender in which all people are considered to be either male or female" ("Gender Binary"). The gender binary has been instilled for years, but "...a growing body of rigorous research shows that gender is more complex and multifaceted, directly challenging our cultural assumptions about the gender binary" (Diamond 111). In more recent years, people have become more open to sharing their gender identity and expression to the world around them. There are numerous gender identification labels such as agender, bigender, cisgender, gender fluid, genderqueer, gender variant, non-binary, third gender, and transgender ("Gender Identity Terms") that people use to define themselves. Dr. Diane Ehrensaft, PhD in psychology, states that even when faced with the

prescriptions of the gender binary, "...we strive to both establish and claim rights to our true gender self, which will include both our gender identity and our gender expressions, and which... may... shift over the course of our lives" (341). If true gender self is sought out throughout life, analyzing gender development and patterns in children could be beneficial in supporting gender non-conforming youth in dance education.

A child's understanding of gender is apparent in the early stages of life. Children begin to comprehend and affiliate gender to others as young as 18 to 24 months, or around the time their speech develops and strengthens (Diamond 111). During this stage of life, children start their journey of developing their sense of self, which is molded throughout the following years of their life (Diamond 111). As children progress through life, they enter many stages that help form their gender identity. They develop theory of mind, the cognization that everyone has their own unique feelings, beliefs, and points of view (Diamond 111). Theory of mind assists them in challenging the gender binary and gender constancy, the idea that gender is constant and not altered by play behavior or clothing attire (Diamond 111). The gender binary construct and gender constancy idea are instilled in early childhood through societal tradition. Naturally, children discover their identity, with gender being a component of it, throughout their development as their cognition expands and they are exposed to new ideas.

Shifts in our political and social world also link to recent changes in gender identity in youth today. Dr. Lisa M. Diamond, PhD in human development, claims, "In light of these historical changes in the availability of information about gender diversity, younger individuals are more likely than youth of previous time periods to adopt nonbinary rather than binary gender identities..." (Diamond 111). Not only are children more likely to acquire gender non-conforming identities, but children are also being "...introduced to ideas about alternatives to

binary categories by friends and family members who do have such identifications” (Paechter 618). Understanding the shift in gender identification amongst children and implementing ways to properly support them is essential for those who work with children. Dr. Ehrensaft claims, “living an authentic gender life is a particular challenge for children who experience an extreme discrepancy between the gender assigned to them at birth and the gender they know themselves to be, particularly if that discrepancy is not welcomed by the world in which they live” (Ehrensaft 342). These internal challenges with gender identity that children are facing, along with bullying and stigmatization, are reflecting higher rates of anxiety, self-harm (Diamond 111), and even suicide (Kawano, et al. 205). These statistics emphasize why it is important to support youth and their chosen identities. Peralta Elementary School in Oakland, California made a video that discusses how they work to create a gender inclusive school (“Creating Gender Inclusive Schools”). The kids in the video demonstrate a willingness and eagerness to learn about gender options and enjoy articulating with their peers about gender. By facilitating inclusive environments and encouraging open atmospheres to learn about gender identity, children enrich their empathy and relationships towards others. Children seek to discover their own identity and learn about gender. Dancing has proved to help facilitate them to make new discoveries about themselves and “find their voice”.

Many dancers say that they love dancing because it is an art form that allows them to express themselves creatively with their bodies. Children explore their bodies to determine their overall identity: their bodies are “...fundamental to their gender performances. How they dress, their hairstyles, use of makeup and nail varnish, are ways they indicate and perform gender identity...” (Paechter 613). Through dance, children can discover attributes about their body that identifies them. Additionally, children can discover their personality through dance because of its

endless opportunities for creativity. Creativity in life is essential because “Through creativity, the goal of life is to allow one’s true self and individuality to blossom” (Ehrensaft 341). Creativity is explored in everyday technique and with young children, some studios may choose to focus on creative dance. Creative dance allows for open ended exploration, in both their dancing and their identity, and gives children agency of their body, mind, and spirit. Agency promotes a feeling of self-worth, giving children the confidence to identify themselves. Creative dance is also a great time to implement “...a classroom climate wherein gender neutrality and the promotion of self-worth is the baseline experience for all children” (Muscat 22).

Luke Muscat from Ailey Arts of Education likes to use stories in creative dance classes to allow children to explore themselves and to facilitate gender neutrality learning. He specially curates his stories to include non-gendered characters, such as trees, elves, the ocean, etc. He says, “This way, children can project how they see themselves onto the characters in their play, rather than me prescribing who they are required to be” (Muscat 22). When he finds himself using “gender-loaded” characters, an example being astronauts, he purposely avoids pronouns to give students an open-ended viewpoint to the character. If a student says something along the lines of, “Women can’t be astronauts,” Muscat responds by educating the students about real life events in history that clear up any misunderstandings and facilitate a gender inclusive environment (Muscat 22). Dance allows for creative exploration in children which can assist them in finding their identity. To best facilitate identity finding and inclusivity, it is important to analyze dance studio’s gender binary tendencies.

There are many ways to create an inclusive environment in a dance studio setting. However, the first step into facilitating such environment is acknowledging “...that all of us are teaching gender as we teach dance or anything else” (Stinson 56), also known as the “hidden

curriculum” (Stinson 51). Next step is recognizing what in dance is gendered, and therefore challenging the binary to encourage a welcoming gender inclusive studio space. Gender is presented in numerous ways in dance education: images on dance studio walls and websites, who goes on stage and what they wear, the types of instructions teacher’s give, the comments used to approve students’ appearance and behavior, gendered greetings (Stinson 56). Even underlying expectations of behavior instills gender expectations in studios and limits the truest form of self-expression in dance, binding students in the gender binary. Often in dance studios, there is an “...emphasis on silent conformity...” (Stinson 53) and female children are encouraged to be silent and obedient as they “...learn to reproduce what they receive, not to critique or create” (Stinson 53). Male children also undergo the conformity of obedience, however, are encouraged to be powerful and bold (Stinson 53). Fortunately, these concepts are shifting within recent years as not all dance forms enforce this etiquette, such as creative dance mentioned before (Stinson 54).

In studio choreography and technique, there are taught gendered steps, movements, expressions, and performance qualities. Gender classification is seen amongst many dance styles: ballet, jazz, hip hop, etc. In ballet, female dancers perform dainty and pretty while boys are confident and powerful. Females are seen doing turn sequences and adagio combinations while males support the female dancers and perform big jump sequences. In jazz and hip hop, girls perform with swaying their hips and portraying a sassy attitude with smiles and pouty lips. Boys, on the other hand, perform with a cool and confident attitude. These scenarios are not the case for every studio and are not necessarily wrong, but if creating an inclusive environment in the studio is the goal, it is important to recognize these cycles.

Costumes and dress code are also gendered as well as the color of these things, such as pink ballet slippers for girls and black ballet slippers for boys. Even music picked for classes/recitals can be influenced by gender. In a survey conducted on dance/movement therapists about their attitudes and actions towards LGBTQIA+ and gender non-conforming individuals, participants were “Asked whether clients’ gender identity influenced choice of music, movement, or other interventions, 43% reported “not at all,” while 52% reported “a little” or “somewhat”” (Kawano, et al. 216). These percentages show an opportunity for growth in movement invention and music choices to be more accepting towards children’s gender identities. Gendered implications are inevitable in teaching, however recognizing them and challenging them as educators leads to a welcoming, inclusive studio environment.

Gender inclusivity is “...creating an environment in which children identifying with any and all genders are taught in a way that respects their gender identity and does not segregate them based on gender binary categories” (Feltham and Ryan 3). There are many ways dance educators can promote gender inclusivity. Visually, dance educators can use décor to promote gender inclusivity and “...create a safe space by displaying art, safe space signs, stickers, and other representative materials” (Kawano et al. 26) that encourage children to be who they are safely and comfortably. Dance studios can implement gender inclusive dress codes that do not assign certain colors and styles of clothing to genders. When creating a gender inclusive dress code, dance educators should be attentive of their wording. They should use terms that include all gender identities rather than specifying attire for girls versus boys. For example, a dance studio could request that students wear form fitting attire to their dance classes and provide examples such as leotards, tights, leggings, etc. By addressing the students as a whole, dance educators allow their dancers the freedom to wear what they choose based on their gender

expression. An important factor dance educators must prepare for when aiming for an inclusive environment is the parents of their students. Some parents may not want their child to be exposed to a gender inclusive environment or curriculum. A way to mitigate this situation is for dance studios to implement their guidelines and procedures toward gender inclusivity in their policy as clearly as they can. By putting this information in words and print, parents know ahead of time how the dance studio is supporting and educating their children.

Gender inclusivity can also be implemented in choreography and costume decisions. Teachers in a study analyzing pedagogical practices for boys in ballet suggest, “When discussing gender non-conforming children who do not identify as either solely male or female... maintaining similar choreography and costumes for everyone would be recommended” (Feltham and Ryan 5). Another teacher proposes offering all the children the choice of choosing their costume rather than teachers assuming the students’ preferences. They also suggest having multiple costume pieces for the children to choose from and combine to make their own unique costume. This approach is beneficial, since “having a range of pieces that all go together...presents some uniformity to the costumes, but it also reflects the individuality of the children” (Feltham and Ryan 6).

Compliments can also be shifted to culminate gender inclusivity. Luke Muscat from Ailey Arts of Education makes very important points when talking about compliments in the dance studio. He encourages dance educators to use “gender neutral adjectives like wonderful, sensational, exciting, detailed, smooth, clear, sharp, and energetic” as opposed to “words of gender connotation, such as beautiful, strong, graceful, and powerful” (Muscat 22). He also encourages teachers to compliment the dancers’ movement rather than the dancer’s body as “this moves the description onto the act of dancing, something that manifested out of the child’s

individuality, rather than labeling the surface of the child” (Muscat 23). He provides an everyday example of implementing this principle: “greeting children by acknowledging them rather than by commenting on what they are wearing” (Muscat 23). Saying phrases such as “I am excited to see you” versus “I like your shirt” prevents children from feeling as if they are defined by their clothing and appearance (Muscat 23). These actions implemented by dance educators and studios promotes self-worth and individuality in children while culminating gender inclusivity in the environment.

In summary, children now and through upcoming generations will continue to define themselves through their gender biology, gender identity, and gender expression. Dance can assist and encourage children in discovering their self-proclaimed identity. Therefore, culminating a gender inclusive environment in dance studio settings is key. It is crucial for dance educators to encourage implementation of important changes in response to the changing world. By promoting a gender inclusive space, dance educators healthily support their students through their identity journey. Dance educators that strive for inclusivity can also facilitate and teach lessons in a gender all-encompassing way to support students of all identities. An important step is for dance studios to recognize the hidden gender constructs and curriculum in traditional studio dance education. Next, they must find ways to shift the gender binary approach effective such as gender-neutral language and allowing students options for costumes. Once educators begin to challenge the binary in dance and begin implementing gender inclusive tactics, students can express themselves through their dancing, their dress, and their expression in their most honest, unique, and authentic manner.

For BFA Capstone II in the Spring 2023, I plan to correlate my research to my Studio Ownership and Dance Entrepreneurship concentration. I would like to create a workshop training

program for dance educators that teaches them how to promote gender inclusivity and diversity in their teaching. I would like to use my findings to structure the workshop(s). The workshop(s) would cover lessons on gender identities, gender in youth, inclusive language, gendered costuming, and more. When planning these workshop trainings, I will need to continue my research in this topic to include more gender inclusivity topics, and I will have to research what goes in to creating workshops. I think this creative project will be beneficial for when I teach in dance studios after graduating and when I eventually have a studio of my own. For the choreography portion, I will choreograph a solo and a group piece that relates to my research. The pieces will probably be modern dance based. I will explore diversity within my dancers and implement what their levels of gender identification (gender biology, gender identity, and gender expression) bring to the piece. I would like to implement movement vocabulary that defines each dancer by asking them to share movements they like to do and feel the most themselves when doing. I envision a collaborative process with my group to create this piece. For my solo, I will probably explore my own gender identity, since it is a concept I have yet to fully grasp myself. This process will reflect how dance can help someone discover their identity. It will be an intimate and vulnerable process for myself, but it will be beneficial for me as it implements my research and provides clarity for myself.

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