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Using Dance/Movement Therapy to Bridge the
Disconnect Between Mind and Body in Elite Competition Dancers

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May 2019

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my family, friends, and students who continuously push me to find the best version of myself. To my Grandma Linda, thank you for your unconditional support throughout my educational career. You were my personal editor and none of this could have been accomplished without your help and support. I am eternally grateful to have had the experience of learning with you. To my students, thank you for teaching an old dog some new tricks. Thank you for reminding me what it is like to be a kid, that the world is our oyster. I urge you to follow your dreams no matter how big and to remember that there's always rain before a rainbow. To the dance competition world, thank you. Thank you for empowering me with endless skills and experiences that have shaped me into the person I am today.

Abstract

This thesis focuses on elite dancers who participate in dance competitions across the United States. The elite competition dancer's entire world revolves around dance. There is an intense training environment, where these dancers are pushed to their limits not only physically but mentally. These elite dancers face endless pressures and expectations set by their parents, coaches, peers and self. Unrealistic goals can be set for, and by, these dancers adding onto the heightened anxiety they are already exposed to. A disconnection of mind and body occurs during training. Disconnection is especially highlighted during competition weekend, moments before performance, and when the elite dancer is performing. When this disconnection occurs, it inhibits their main communication tool while also negatively impacting their score and training. Dance/movement therapy is a psychotherapeutic use of movement which focuses on the mind-body connection. Dance/movement therapy can positively impact the elite dancers whole being by introducing the conversation of the mind-body connection.

Keywords: dance, elite athlete, mind-body connection, dance/movement therapy, anxiety, dance competition, coach, body mind centering, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen

Dance plays an intricate part in the elite athletic world. Dance holds two forms; it is considered an art used for pleasure or entertainment and as a sport for competition (Jones, 2011). Competition dancers are a part of the corporate sport which at this level can become “systemized, with a subsequent loss of autonomy and pleasure for athletes” (Sage, 2019 p. 21). Dancers in these competitions are under stress to perform to perfection and win by whatever means necessary. The goal of winning is more important than the individual’s mental state. By infusing the elite competition world with the art of dance, these dancers take on all aspects of what it means to fit in the suit of an elite athlete. The pressures an elite dancer faces are inhibitions towards the goals they are trying to accomplish. Most research on this population focuses on the pressures of competition and the drive for perfection leading to eating disorders. There is little research on the impact of other pressures and expectations. A dancer needs to obtain an understanding of the mind/body connection to give a fulfilled performance and gain coping skills to counteract these pressures and expectations that can translate into use in their lives during and after exiting in this elite status. (Sage, 2019).

Recreational dance studios from around the United States attend competitions to showcase choreography to be adjudicated, and compete for trophies, prizes, and bragging rights. The adjudicators are professionals in the field of dance who have been on Broadway, in commercial videos, or are owners of studios. Their purpose is to provide feedback through a live verbal recording or hand-written notes that will be reviewed by the dance teacher. Dancers are divided by age, level of experience, size of the group, and style of dance. There are three levels of competition novice, intermediate, and advanced that reflect the hours of training and skill level. Dancers who compete at these competitions range from ages 4-18. Danny Vasquez, a regional director for Starpower National Talent competition and studio owner, comments that

dancers are either homeschooled or attend school before and after practice (D. Vasquez, personal communication, February 18, 2019). The goal of a dance competition is to gain a perfect score and win the biggest prize, even though many competition companies state fun as the main goal (Starpower, 1988). Michele Guida, a current competition dancer, says, “I compete, and I continue to still compete because being on the stage is the greatest feeling in the world” (M. Guida, personal communication, February 6, 2019). The goal to be victorious outshines any other group or personal goals (Sage, 2019). Dancers face pressures which become ingrained throughout their competitive careers and can transfer into their post-competition lives. These pressures can be beneficial or detrimental. Dancers are expected to embody the characteristics, such as mental toughness, of an elite athlete which have positive and negative associations. (Starpower, 1988).

There is a strong urge in American society for a child to quickly become skilled in one specific sport (Normand, 2017). By choosing to specialize in one sport from a young age, it increases the likelihood that one will become an elite athlete. This choice can give the athlete various positive benefits, such as scholarships to university or training clinics. An elite athlete may be given the opportunity to advance in education or gain public sponsors. In present-day North America, young athletes are asked to select one sport to pursue versus alternating sports with seasonal change (Sage, 2019). Participating in youth sports has a direct influence on the healthy development of the participant, but the psychological, social, and physical risks are not taken into consideration when choosing to specialize in a singular sport at a young age (Normand, 2017). Participating in competitive dance has a significant impact on a child’s development. Specialization can have positive and negative physical and psychological effects on young athletes. There is a belief that “sports builds character” (Sage, 2019, p. 202). The

competition world is a great platform for young athletes to express themselves. Life skills are taught and learned from participating in elite sports (Sage, 2019). The life skills learned from being a part of elite sports aides an athlete in dealing with difficult situations they may face in everyday life. They are gaining skills in team building, sportsmanship, understanding of criticism, and the opportunity to explore a passion. These skills develop into characteristics that shape the dancer over time. Lifelong friendships and mentorships are developed through this experience. According to Sage, “learning attitudes, values, and moral behavior is a core aim of youth sports” (2019 p. 202).

Athletes in specialized programs who reach elite status face various pressures that can taint their ability to perform (Normand, 2017). There are risks from choosing to start specialization at a young age. There is a risk of pushing oneself to excess where the physical body and the mental capacity can no longer support the athlete, known as becoming a ‘burn out’ (Normand, 2017). The risk of injury from overuse and loss of motivation are other negatives of specializing in one specific sport. Along with these risks, in many instances, elite adolescent sports become consumed by overbearing parents, peers, and coaches who have unrealistic expectations. They act as a negative factor leading to heightened anxiety, fear of failure, a questioning of self-worth, and a decrease in enjoyment of participating in the activity. A young athlete must develop coping mechanisms, such as mental toughness, to help manage the pressures of competition (Sage, 2019).

Coaches, parents, and peers hold great power in the role of mental toughness and how this competitive mindset will affect the elite dancer. Many coaches or parents view the success or failure of the elite dancer as their success or failure (Sage, 2019). They were not able to accomplish goals set for themselves and therefore put unimaginable pressure on their children to

complete these goals. The expectations of coaches can act as a major point of anxiety for dancers because they hold their relationship with the coach in high regard. There is a general disconnect between teachers and coaches and their own body which translates to their students (Sparks, 1990). Many physical education teachers and coaches are disconnected from their physical body based off of the concept that the body is a representation of the self and is always changing. They are not happy with how their physical body looks, therefore, coaches do whatever they can to pull themselves away from their bodies (Woodman, 2001). This insecurity can be a reason why coaches put an unhealthy amount of pressure on their dancers to succeed and have a chance at a lifestyle they could not reach themselves. How students' value or show a lack of knowledge about body-mind connectivity can be mirrored through their coaches' actions. Trust is a huge part as to why the relationship between a coach and dancer is valuable. Trust is placed in the coach from the dancer that they will be able to teach them what is needed to succeed, and trust is placed in the dancer from the coach that they will be fully committed to the sport. This trust is a strong piece of the bond built between the dancer and coach. Jeff Cilento, a former competition dancer, and current dance coach comments, "My philosophy is simple: always give 100% and always know there's something to work on, no one is perfect" (J. Cilento, personal communication, February 8, 2019). The relationship between the coach and athlete is held in high regard and impacts whether the athletes will reach their potential (Woodman, 2001).

Cilento reminisces back to whole studio team huddles throughout the competition weekend. These team huddles included empowering pep talks, and school cheers led by teammates and teachers (J. Cilento, personal communication, February 8, 2019). Dancers respect their coaches and push themselves over the top to impress and earn respect. There is a desire to be the best, and, by whatever means necessary, to be recognized by their coach. Elite dancers

participate in private lessons, that can cost hundreds of dollars, on top of group training, which allows for the relationship with the coach to strengthen. Once established, there is stress placed on the performance of the dancer because they want to please their coaches and fill their high expectations. The strong relationship between the dancer and coach is weight hanging over the dancers as they perform not to disappoint. A coach is a role model, and the dancer(s) they are training want to emulate their coaches' characteristics and lifestyle. Favoritism, or the projection of favoritism, can heighten emotions or act as a negative stressor, pushing the dancer to develop self-doubt, deformed awareness of self-image, and allow the fear of failure to expand (Woodman, 2001). The relationship between the coach and dancer is vital and impacts the dancer's preparation for the competition, which ultimately affects their overall performance (Woodman, 2001).

Overbearing parents are a key factor when discussing the stress of expectations put on elite dancers. Parents are a grounding factor when beginning to engage with sports on an elite level (Baxter-Jones, 2003). They are the people who take care of the financial obligations, the people who bring the dancers to practice, and can be the loudest fans in the stands. Overbearing parents in the dance competition world are commonly known as stage moms. Stage moms are known for living vicariously through their children. These stage moms unconsciously participate and enable negative rituals followed by the elite dancer during the competition weekend, such as not eating during the day of competition. Parents act as the initial bridge between young athletes and elite sports, but then the coaches take the lead in exhibiting high and sometimes unrealistic expectations (Baxter-Jones, 2003).

Peers can also negatively impact the weight of expectations through verbal and physical bullying, body shaming, acting egocentrically, and betraying friendships for personal gain. Peers

can impact and alter expectations set by oneself. Dancers spend a significant amount of time together during training, rehearsals, and socializing. They learn what each other's flaws and strengths are while also becoming completely vulnerable and exposing their own. It becomes an embodied nature for the dancer to not only to want to win but need to win to fulfill all of the expectations surrounding them. Dancers can unconsciously and consciously set unrealistic goals to please their overbearing parents, highly intense coaches, or themselves.

There is an overarching goal of winning, along with individual goals set by each competitor, their coaches, and parents. These goals can range in scale but are a crucial component for elite dancers. The concept of goal setting has three purposes: to arouse motivation for the athlete or coach, encouragement of learning and redefining skills, and to increase the ability to focus on a task (Stratton, 2005). Goal setting allows for a dancer to focus on one aspect of their performance without becoming overwhelmed. It is an important skill to obtain and helps to develop positive coping mechanisms, which help the dancer to execute skills during a performance. Goal setting can be directly connected to success, placing an unprecedented amount of pressure on the specific goals set. If a dancer sets goals that are not personally obtainable, they are setting themselves up for failure. It is then the coaches' job to help the dancer to select goals that fit their individual needs, but this is not usually the case. Many coaches have similar goals for groups of dancers which hinders the dancer's ability to complete the goal and stops them from completing the overarching goal of winning, adding on more self-doubt, anxiety, and negativity to the dancer's self-image.

One can prepare and perform to the best of their ability but has no physical power over their opponent, and therefore it is impossible to control or take into account all of the possible conclusions (Stratton, 2005). Self-doubt can formulate from this inability to control outcomes

and fear of failure of performance regarding fulfilling expectations. When formulating goals, there is a time constraint placed into motion that acts as an added pressure. The goals that they choose to set can force the dancer into tunnel vision, which extracts the mental self from the physical body. The focus on the physical body expresses the need to form this separation of mind and body to reach success (Stratton, 2005).

A dancer needs to embody and embellish specific characteristics to reach success in this competitive world. Mental toughness is the ability to develop a psychological edge that allows for one to cope better than opponents within the intense demands of a sport. It can help one sustain determination, focus, confidence, and control under pressure (Sagar, 2004). Essential components of mental toughness are pushing through difficult moments and having the ability to continue to perform under significant amounts of pressure (Cowden, 2014). Athletes are grown in a harsh environment that aims to give them the characteristics of "high-self-control, a strong determination to succeed, moderate to high risk-taking, the ability to control one's emotions during adverse and high-pressure conditions, and the ability to quickly recover from negative events and failures" (Cowden, 2014, p. 222). The qualities of mental toughness can vary depending on the requirements of the specific sport (Sagar, 2004). Concentration and perseverance are considered core elements of mental toughness. Coaches play a huge part in helping an athlete to access mental toughness (Cowden, 2014). Mental toughness allows dancers to use negativity as motivation to better themselves for future performance (Sagar, 2014). The development of mental toughness and the impact of these pressures allows dancers to mature at a young age (Mandel, 2018). This mindset allows for dancers to build and actively engage with coping systems that allow for their statistics during performances to rise. Elite dancers can narrow their focus in a moment of high intensity, which helps them to stay one step ahead of

their opponents. A study completed on Professional Soccer players by Segar (2004) focused on the role mental toughness plays in their performance. The results highlighted the necessity of this mindset and how it overlaps with success. It pointed out the importance of having a belief of self-worth and the ability to achieve, having a quick reaction process, remaining calm when under pressure, and having the ability to stay focused disregarding all distractions (Sagar, 2004). The ability to control the impact of emotions during a performance enables dancers to stay on task. This control is seen through the lens of a dancer moments before being called to the stage when a dancer vomits during a performance, unable to complete a routine, but is seen moments later on the stage performing as if nothing happened. Control can also be seen when a dancer is having a panic attack backstage, unable to control the breath, but hears their number called and musters the ability to go on the stage and perform as if they were not under duress.

The competitive mindset occurs and is necessary because of the role and impact of mental toughness (Cowden, 2014). Mental toughness and a competitive mindset go hand in hand. For an athlete to gain a drive to succeed in harsh training environments, they need to develop a direct way of thinking (Mandel, 2018). This mindset is a coping or a defense mechanism for young competitors. Competitive dance reinforces behavior that is demanded by social construct. The heavy involvement in sports impacts the social and moral characteristics of athletes. They are taught to hold the shape of their body in an attractive way of reputation and to disregard what the body might be saying to stay on the track of success. They are ignoring any negative implications of living in a competitive mindset because success is engraved into their minds as the only acceptable outcome. The idea of always being seen and that one is a representative for an organization is embedded at a young age. Everything can be related to the organization. Negative acts and behaviors are typically not condoned. Owning a competitive mindset is an

extension of having mental toughness. A competitive mindset is needed when involved in this elite world of sports to define a sense of professionalism (Mandel, 2018).

The concept of acting professional is engraved into the daily routine of an elite athlete, which puts an abundant amount of stress on dancers to be perfect at every given moment. This mindset is used not only during performances but during training. The competitive mindset gives competition dancers tunnel vision on winning, putting aside any outside distractions. The competitive mindset is put in motion by overbearing parents and self-willed coaches who may have unresolved memories or experiences from their own time as athletes (Cowden, 2014). Coaches help with the physical application of an athlete, but they also help to shape the mental mindset (Cowden, 2014). Coaches can help to shape a strong, balanced, healthy mindset unique to the dancer. Having multiple coaches can hurt the dancer's overall performance regarding preparation for competitions. Having multiple coaches can be helpful to the dancer by allowing there to be different opinions, but it can also act as a distraction and a leading cause of excess stress (Woodman, 2001). Living in this mindset for too long can be detrimental to the psychological development of the dancer. While there is potential for positive personal-social growth from obtaining this mindset, there is also the "winning-is-the-only-thing" framework which outweighs the positives (Sage, 2019, p. 212). This framework of thinking for organized sports is directly linked to social culture. Many slogans used in the organized sports culture instill the importance of winning and associates negative connotation with losing. The words success and anxiety carry stigmas and expectations in the elite competition world. Success and positivity are commonly linked together, but the actions needed to be considered successful in the elite competition world can be detrimental mentally to the dancers (Woodman, 2001). The pressure placed on success can allow for some dancers to become obsessed with the concept,

causing them to take actions which push them towards a dissociation of mind and body. If dancers are overly worried about what peers, coaches, spectators, and parents think of them, these stigmas are set too bold in the dancers' minds and act as distractions, impairing them to complete the tasks needed to reach their goals. Dancers are subjected to standards and goals set by themselves, parents, coaches, peers, and teammates. If they do not reach the standards or goals, the dancers can become self-critical and show signs of performance failure leading them to push away from dance entirely (Woodman, 2001).

The factors that lead to the disconnection of mind and body regarding elite dancers are anxiety, the fear of failure, goal orientation, and questioning of self-worth (Rice, 2016; Sage, 2019). These factors hurt performance and are intertwined within the characteristics built through the process of training. The way an elite dancer reacts to these stressors consciously and unconsciously can be detrimental to their mental health and have a powerful impact on their success as an athlete. These factors are themes associated with mental toughness. The themes embody high expectations, past failures, desire to please parents and coaches, and the opponent's good reputation. Mental health holds a negative stigma in the elite sports world that is connected to showing weakness, which leads to the minimization of the importance of mental health (Sage, 2019). This negative connotation is built into the elite sports world and is a learned behavior. Elite dancers are put on display for society by their teams, coaches, and parents to seem perfect, and any thought of something that can ruin that image is brushed to the side and considered irrelevant (Anshel, 2009). These dancers are expected to be perfect one-hundred percent of the time, and any imperfection that minimizes this image is a weakness. The culture surrounding the elite athletic world does not support the exploration of mental health. Therefore, it is not discussed (Rice, 2016).

The feeling of a tightened chest, inability to make quick decisions, and second guessing every decision one makes are only pieces of how anxiety can feel. Anxiety is not the same for each person but acts as an imaginary blockage that negatively shatters one's ability to push through and achieve the original goal (*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 1999). How an elite dancer manages anxiety affects the strength it has on impacting performance (Rice, 2016). Anxiety produces stress that separates dancers' minds and bodies, especially in an environment that puts a spotlight on the physical body, neglecting the psychological. The performance level becomes in jeopardy as the anxiety heightens. When an elite dancer's anxiety is high, it coincides directly with having a negative self-image and the idea of maintaining perfectionism (Rice, 2016).

Perfectionism can be defined as setting extremely high and almost unreachable standards for oneself, while also harshly evaluating one's performance (Rice, 2016). There is stress to reach perfection throughout the entire performance, which weighs heavily on the elite dancer. Perfectionism can be beneficial, or it can be negative, depending on the approach. "As dancer's, we feel that we must dance a certain way and follow specific guidelines, there is comfort in the mastery of choreography" (M. Guida, personal communication, February 6, 2019). The majority of elite dancers engage in maladaptive perfectionism. Maladaptive perfectionism

"describes the tendency to set excessively high standards, be overly self-critical, and be extensively influenced by the approval of significant others, such as parents, teachers, and sports coaches. Individuals characterized as maladaptive perfectionists exhibit exaggerated expectations, have a high fear of failure, and are less capable of coping with challenging situations". (Anshel, 2009, p.396)

The concept of perfectionism pervades young dancer's minds, pulling them farther from having the ability to form a connection between mind and body.

In Northern America, young athletes are placed under extremely high standards where failure is not an option (Sage, 2019). The fear of failure can occur across the board for young elite athletes, no matter the sport. For elite dancer's, the fear of failure is highlighted during performances and training. Elite dancer's train vigorously and obey specific diets. Many believe that there is one frame an elite dancer should fit in and there is pressure on the physical appearance. It is believed that if you do not have a particular body type, you will not be able to gain the skills needed to develop a winning routine (M. Guida, personal communication, February 6, 2019). The fear of failure is constantly surrounding the elite dancer. The roots of this fear come from low self-esteem, overbearing parents, coaches, and peers. Many dancers are also self-critical. Thoughts of one's performance directly after hurt the dancer mentally. Coping mechanisms such as positive self-talk can benefit the dancer's performance and begin to bridge this gap of disconnect. Sagar (2004) explored the fear of failure in young elite athletes and focused on their experiences during training and performance. A repertoire is built during training which is repeated until it becomes second nature. Muscle memory builds over time, allowing the body to move through the movements with little to no thought. Sagar's research directly connects to the importance of understanding the disconnect of mind and body in elite dancers because they train similarly to those participating in this study (Sagar, 2004). A lack of connection to their performance occurs due to this fear. The dancer is focused on technique and translating the choreography perfectly, which allows for them to forget to breathe, strengthening this disconnection (Anshel, 2009).

From a young age, dancers have high expectations for their physical body, as it is perceived as the tool that will allow them to reach their goals (Rice, 2016). Dance culture focuses on lower body weight and the need to look lean. This mindset causes the dancers to look at their bodies from the outside in, pulling their imperfections to the surface and examining them under a microscope. The focus is on the ability to fit a physical frame rather than the skills of one's ability. Injury and the unknown can be worrisome to elite dancers as they age. The worry of injury due to overuse of the physical body can lead to performance failure. Athletes push through pain to avoid disappointment. The risk of injury has increased as society pressures the idea of choosing one specific sport to excel in at a young age. Young elite dancers fall into the risk of injury because their bodies are growing and changing. Warming up before practice or a performance is a key factor when trying to avoid injury. There is pressure from coaches and parents to have instant success, and this momentum around the dancer allows for them to forget about the precaution of warming up. Overuse of the body can also cause the dancer to lose interest in the sport. The separation of mind and body can be physically and psychologically detrimental to the dancer even once they no longer associate with the sport (Rice, 2016). All of these pressures and expectations are the leading causes in the disconnection of mind and body in elite dancers. If elite dancers gain knowledge of the mind-body connection, they may be able to overcome these pressures and expectations (Rice, 2016).

One's emotions, feelings, and spiritual practices directly impact the physical body as well as the mind. This is known as the mind-body connection. The mind-body connection manifests throughout one's whole life. It is a continuous feedback loop, one directly affecting the other (Acolin, 2016). Guida comments that "the mind-body connection is the way our feelings and thoughts have an impact on the way our body moves" (M. Guida, personal communication,

February 6, 2019). The mind and body coexist and are in continuous conversation. Without being cognitively aware, it is showcased to those observing the dancer, that the body is treated as an abstract object (Sparks, 1990). They are moving through space without acknowledging what their body is asking of them. This can be seen in overstretching of distal limbs. Like Guida, many current competitive dancers can define what the mind-body connection is from experience with yoga and meditation modalities, but do not implement it in their performances or training. The body is set into motion moving through space, performing plays or routines engraved into the dancers' minds. An elite dancer's physical performance can be affected by the state of one's mind. Having a balanced sense of self can lead to a stronger sense of self (Acolin, 2016). Having a strong sense of self can be useful during performance or training because an elite dancer can acknowledge what their body is telling them and act on those feelings or emotions. An elite dancer can use this skill of maintaining a balanced mind and body connection to excel. Awareness of this connection and the impact it can have on performance is a leading step. An elite dancer has various emotions internally which impact the external behaviors. One's emotional state can either act as positive empowerment or negative inhibition on one's body during training. Tension in the body can affect the breath support which can cut off circulation, raising anxiety. The emotional state and the degree to which one is experiencing tension are key when viewing accuracy during exercise and training drills (Rice, 2016). The body reacts to the emotional state while also tending to the physical. There are cognitive strategies used to increase one's ability during training. An example of one strategy is disregarding pain or discomfort of the physical body at the start of training. This is a coping mechanism called dissociation (Peterson, 1993). Elite dancers are consciously choosing to neglect what their minds and bodies are saying to perform the tasks being asked of them by parents, coaches or peers. This

dissociation infringes on the mind-body connection by putting up blocks to the signals sent through the body. They are rewiring the communication system between the body and mind to fit the needs set forth by the training. (Peterson, 1993).

Communication is a crucial contributor to an elite dancer's training — specifically, nonverbal communication which relates to the expression of emotions and empathy (Sandel, 1993). Mastery of nonverbal communication is vital to find success as an elite dancer. Nonverbal communication is beneficial for elite dancers because when they can access the mind and body connection, they can fully internalize their purpose for that given moment (Acolin, 2016). Movement is another form of communication. Movement acts as a passageway to understanding what is happening internally. Many choreographers create dances based on challenges from their personal lives or societal issues. When a dancer channels into the mind-body connection, their movement can open doorways for an observer to gain access to thoughts, feelings, and emotions expressed throughout the movement (Levy, 2005).

The mind-body connection is disregarded by mainstream culture, and there can be detrimental effects physically and emotionally due to this ignorance (Sage, 2019). Society holds expectations that can negate the importance of the mind-body connection (Sage, 2019). An example of this is seen in educational classrooms where children are asked to sit still in their assigned seats while expected to work their minds and learn. They are reprimanded if they cannot abide by this precedent when, in reality, this norm is a major contender towards disconnection of mind and body. Movement aids in learning through the mind-body connection and helps to lower stress and anxiety. It also increases blood flow throughout the body which boosts oxygen to the brain. Our bodies are a key access point to where we can manifest and express our thoughts, emotions, and feelings. For elite dancers, the body is used as a tool to

execute learned skills and embrace natural talent which can be a barrier to the mind-body connection. Elite dancers need to honor the mind-body connection throughout their exploration of movement and performance. However, with all that is ranked against the mind and body in our day to day lives, there has been a scientific push from various genres of education to learn more about this connection and the importance it holds within our society. (Acolin, 2016).

One of the many skills an elite dancer is aiming to gain is to participate in improvisation successfully. Improvisation is incorporated in many auditions and conventions. Teachers feel that mastery of improvisation allows the dancer to connect to the music and movement. Improvisation allows for open space to move freely without judgment, strictly expressing oneself through movement (J. Cilento, personal communication, February 8, 2019). Improvisation asks the elite dancer to feel the music, embody the rhythm, and to express emotion without staged choreography. Although improvisation is meant to be a judgment-free space, many elite dancers do not want to mess up and consciously experience feelings of anxiety of being judged during this process (M. Guida, personal communication, February 6, 2019). Improvisation can allow for anxiety to build up within the mind and body due to the exploration of being in the body. When elite dancers perform choreography, they are being asked to formulate this connection to the piece and portray the storyline, and this is where improvisation can help. Improvisation forces the dancer to be in their body fully. Throughout this process, there is a discussion going on between the unconscious and the conscious which is related to impulse control (Reiter, 2003). Improvisation can be a vulnerable way of sharing one's expression through movement, which can be scary. Improvisation may come easier to those not involved in the competitive world or who are less groomed (Hahn, 2013). "When you improv it just needs to come from your body without any restrictions, which is not something elite dancers are accustomed to" (J. Cilento,

personal communication, February 8, 2019). A dancer will overthink during the improvisation exercise and exemplify the fear of failure. They may have physical insecurities that surface, which were hidden when performing previously set choreography. Set choreography allows the dancer time to analyze and perfect the skills needed to meet all of the requirements needed to succeed during a performance. Improvisation tests the skills of the elite dancer and forces them to be in the present moment (Reiter, 2003). Their bodies are being asked to move through space with little to no direction, but the expectation of success and perfection is still in the air.

Improvisation forces a dancer to have a conversation between their body and mind.

Improvisation is currently being incorporated throughout competitions and conventions to invite the dancers to engage in this skill. (Kloppenber, 2010).

The physical body is the main focus of study in the sociology of sports (Sparks,1990). The stability of the physical body and the mind are both important when striving to live a healthy lifestyle, especially when continuous high demands are placed on the body and mind. Exercise is healthy for the body and mind. Many coaches focus on the physical body during training and completely disregard the mental aspect. Healthy athletes have access and knowledge about both. Many athletes are pushed to their physical limits but are not given time to explore their mental limits. A dancer can enter a stage of fatigue during training, which can negatively impact the mental process and physical performance (Peterson, 1993). When involved with elite sports, it is especially important to understand both aspects to be truly successful, due to the pressures that help to form a disconnect between an individual's mind and body. Many elite dancers may find it difficult to connect their mind and body, while others may be in denial that there is any disconnection occurring. (Sparks,1990).

The ability to live in the body and the opportunity to feel in its entirety is the ultimate goal of Dance/Movement Therapy (Levy, 1966). Dance/movement therapy (DMT) is a branch of expressive therapies that focuses on using movement to express unconscious thoughts surrounding an individual's emotional, social, cognitive, and physical self with the hopes to improve one's health and well-being (Acolin, 2016). This psychotherapeutic process is founded on a range of principles, one of which is the mind-body connection. Dance/movement therapists use and observe movement as a form of communication. When observing movement, it is not necessary for the participant to be conscious of their actions. They are welcomed to move freely through space. Dance/movement therapists give verbal and nonverbal prompts to guide the mover during a session. Each movement performed, consciously and unconsciously, is meaningful and holds a purpose. (Acolin, 2016).

Dance is a form of communication that allows an individual to express emotions through nonverbal actions (Caldwell, 1996). Every action taken has a purpose and a meaning that can be translated differently to those observing. Intent and environment are central factors in translating the purpose of the movement. In many cultures, dance is a source of communication (Lihs, 2009). These same principles are seen in dance movement therapy sessions. Communication and socialization are two examples of goals to be explored during a dance movement therapy session. Movement profiles are often used in dance/movement therapy to observe and organize movement.. One system used to develop a movement profile is Laban Movement Analysis (LMA). LMA focuses on a mover's body, space, shape, and effort. It is a way of documenting movement. LMA is directly linked to Bartenieff fundamentals, which focuses on breath and early developmental patterns. (Hackney, 2002).

When embodying choreography, dancers focus on body, time, space, and effort (Lihs, 2009). Time is about what accents of the music are highlighted, forming smooth transitions or syncopated movements (Lihs, 2009). For dance movement therapists using Laban Movement Analysis, time references phrasing, which focuses on the origin and dissipation of a movement. Space speaks to the physical area of motion a dancer is involved in, such as moving upstage or downstage, how close they are to the ground or the height a dancer reaches. Negative space, which is space not filled by props, is filled with carving of the body (Lihs, 2009). Carving is an LMA term which reflects how a mover shapes around the space (Hackney, 2002). Effort reflects a dancer's intensity and force towards a movement. Effort gives a choreographed piece texture. The same movement can be done sharply or smoothly, giving different meanings to the movement (Lihs, 2009). These different nuances of dance help when using movement as a form of communication. (Hackney, 2002).

The overlapping connection of mind and body can be seen as a mover is asked to be present in the 'here and now', to be grounded to the physical earth in their stance, and to connect experiences of the outer to the inner self to be expressed with each movement (Yalom, 2005). Dance/movement therapy holds value within the connection of mind, body, and spirit. (Acolin, 2016). To express oneself through the skills of the art of dance holds a significant personal satisfaction for today's dancers. The hope is that those who have formulated a disconnection or lack of ability to form human relationships use the therapeutic setting of dance to escape their internally focused space and expand socially through the use of movement. Dance/movement therapy can use rhythmic patterns as a rehabilitation tool to re-engage participants in the present day. Dance/movement therapists use verbal and nonverbal communication to access emotions, work on building self-esteem and positive self-body imaging, and relationship building. This can

be helpful when working with the elite dancer to gain access to their mind-body connection and begin to unravel the factors of their disconnection. (Sandel, 1993).

Breath is a framework of the mind and body connection (Hackney, 2002). Having access to one's breath is helpful when trying to gain a sense of self. Breath is instilled in the practice of dance/movement therapy as a way to find one's core and remain grounded when there is a lost sense of self. Breath is utilized because all living humans actively participate in this action, and it acts as a common denominator between participants during a session. Breath is connected to rhythm, happens automatically, and can be used as an empowerment for the self. This empowerment can help to calm oneself during moments of high stress and anxiety. Having access to one's breath helps to regulate the whole body. The rhythm of one's breath can reflect current emotions or feelings, allowing the breath to feel like a source we cannot always control. Breathing happens unconsciously, but can be accessed consciously and be an active tool when in stressful situations. The breath is a very sacred idealization in this practice. The exploration of breath can be intimidating. Being aware of one's breath brings attention to a person's internal experience which can be extremely difficult for some because, by honoring this aspect of oneself, we can become vulnerable. Vulnerability is asked and almost required for elite dancers to succeed, but the pressures of competition get in the way of allowing this vulnerability and connection of mind and body. Breath can be used as a key asset to the exploration of one's self and support for someone who is constantly surrounded by situations of high stress. Breath moves through the body, as it runs through one's entire body through the circulation of blood. The circulation of breath is needed to perform (Hackney, 2002). Breath is connected to the Mind and Body (Hackney, 2002). Many elite dancers are aware of the importance of breath, sharing that they feel powerful when they breathe during a routine, but find it a struggle to accomplish

incorporating breath into their performance (M. Guida, personal communication, February 6, 2019).

Dance/movement therapy's core principle of mind and body connection is currently missing from the young elite competition world, and specifically, the dance competition world. Although dance movement therapy is not intended for the performance world, this discipline can positively impact elite dancers involved in this sport (Sandel, 1993). The principle of body and mind connectivity is embedded in the roots of dance movement therapy and can also be seen in the foundation of dance competitions but is forgotten or misdirected through the lens of competition. By implementing this principle, elite dancers will be able to find groundedness through breath support, lessen the impact of the countless pressures surrounding them, and showcase their authenticity through the choreography. By gaining access to the connection of mind and body, elite dancers can give a fulfilled performance and leave the competition world with skills to have a fulfilled life (Alcolin, 2016).

Body-Mind Centering (BMC) is a beneficial source for elite dancers facing disconnection of their mind and body. The embodiment and application of psychological, anatomical, physiological, and developmental principles which focus on the use of touch, voice, and mind is an approach known as Body-Mind Centering (Caldwell, 1996). BMC is an experiential study developed by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen. Body-Mind Centering techniques focus on body systems and how each contributes to our movement (Cohen, 1990). BMC is a method used by dance movement therapists to help explore the body. The organs of the body act as a 'keystone' which is the main point of access for the movement (Caldwell, 1996).

Organs help to shape the body. Awareness of this affects one's posture when in movement. Cohen developed the term keystone, which represents the organ that supports the

specific movement. The keystone helps to discuss the placement of the body and understanding of levels during movement. In an interview, Cohen spoke about the development of her work. During one seminar at a college, she expressed that she wanted to explore “how movement in our inner space supports our movement through space (our outer space), and how our movement in the outer territory travels to the body” (Cohen, 1990). Highlighting that the outer space and the inner space are interconnected is a core principle found in the work of Bartenieff and used in DMT. If outer space and inner space are not supported by one another, chaos can occur. Cohen views the alignment of body parts and uses this observation to reference the intent of the movement. The idea is that when one’s body is aligned one is able to move through space with less effort (Cohen, 1990). Conflict can develop in the spirit, formulating stress in the area of focus. The tension in the body is potential energy not being expressed through space. This energy is then looking for other places to go, pressing stress on the inner space. Knowledge of this can also help with injury prevention. If dancers have an understanding of how or where the movement initiated from, they can have a better understanding of how to support oneself through their movement and portray the story through the choreography (Cohen, 1990).

Body-mind centering uses embodiment for self-discovery. Somatic work references acknowledging self in a set environment and using factors to find a way of self-regulating (Gomez, 1988). When a competition dancer is placed in environments of high stress, there is a disconnect between body and mind that removes oneself from having the ability to self-regulate (Gomez, 1988). Self-regulation is a piece that can be missing in many competition dancers. They are in the competitive mindset, which allows them to narrow their full attention on a goal, allowing them to push through long trainings, possible injuries, and have a lack of mental self-care. An example from my personal experience is that at one competition there was a dancer

performing solo on the stage. She was about 14 years old and had beautiful lines and choreography. During her performance, she vomited across the entire stage. When questioned afterward she reported that she ate, was hydrated, and did not feel in control of her body during her performance. She was seen nearly ten minutes later performing on the stage as if she did not just have that prior experience. This dancer was focused on her technique and being perfect, but her body was trying to tell her something, and she was not listening which led to her vomiting. If this dancer had an understanding of the importance of breath support, where the movements initiated from, and what body systems were incorporated to allow for her movement she would have had a better understanding of her body and might have seen signals before performing that could have avoided this episode. Her body unconsciously self-regulated when she vomited during her performance. (Gomez, 1988).

To be in the here and now is an important aspect of dance/movement therapy and is a large part of performing and competing (Sage, 2019). Cilento finds that the body-mind connection is when the body has the ability to continue moving in motion without having to think about it, it is natural. We need to be present to give a fulfilled performance. (J. Cilento, personal communication, February 8, 2019). To be in the here and now consists of having access to the mind-body connection. Being in the here and now can help facilitate the discovery of self in the present moment. Those in the athletic world can find this to be very difficult because they are multitasking between thinking about plays and choreography, impressing their parents and coaches, and the possible consequences for not being the best. Dancers are not living this one moment when on the stage. The here and now allows for a feedback loop to occur between the self and the actions one was just involved in. If a dancer performs intending to be in the here and now, then they will be able to form a personal connection to the movement they are

presenting. If the judges can feel and connect to a dancer while they are performing, then their score will most likely rise. Being in the here and now and understanding what it means to be in this process allows for the dancer's performance to be rich but also allows the dancer to take the experience with them. Although the here and now is used mainly for the therapeutic group, there are aspects of the here and now that can be translated to elite dancers that can help fill the void of disconnection developed from the pressures of competition. (Yalom, 2005).

Exploring body-mind centering, breath, the here and now, and how each of these entities is connected with the mind-body connection can be extremely beneficial to elite dancers. Having an understanding of the mind-body connection heightens a dancer's ability to move through the space. Elite dancers will have the ability to move with a purpose while having an understanding of their bodies. Having this understanding is helpful because the elite dancer can perform and share through the movement while also hitting challenging technical moves. It is important for all teachers/coaches, judges, competition staff, parents/guardians and elite dancers to have an understanding of the mind-body connection and the impact it has in the competitive world. Teachers and coaches can help to engage the dancers in the practices following the framework set forth by dance/movement therapy's core principle of mind-body connection. The coaches can provide reminders in class to access the breath, to dance in the here and now, and to formulate discussions about the origin of the movement. Weekly rituals can help support the mind-body connection and allow for it to become a natural entity of the elite dancer's experience. Parents/guardians can aide in following through with these practices outside of the studio. If the parents/guardians are informed of the disconnection and inhibition they are forcing upon their children through high expectations, they may be able to show support in a different way. They can join their children by participating in daily rituals at home that focus on body awareness.

Parents/guardians can also develop self-care routines before a competition weekend to help alleviate anxiety. By being hands-on in the experience, parents/guardians can show positive support towards their dancer. While giving corrections, judges can add comments that bring attention to the mind-body connection. Competition staff are hands-on during competition and are in constant interaction with the dancers. By knowing about the mind-body connection, the staff can help remind the dancers to breathe and pause during moments of heightened anxiety. They can aid in bringing the elite dancer back to the here and now.

The mind-body connection is a core principle of dance/movement therapy but is also related to the core values of dance competitions. Dance competitions are places to showcase choreography that are graded based upon the dancer's performance at that given moment. The environment moving through the air of the auditorium during competition weekend is filled with eagerness, questioning self-worth, anxiety, excitement and more. The core values are related because both encourage a search of the self. Self-reflection is needed, as is accessing the breath to search within and play with this intertwined connection of inner and outer connectivity (Hackney, 2002). An elite dancers' entire competitive career can be shaped around the disconnection formed between the mind and body.

Formulating the connection of mind and body and keeping in constant interaction with this core principle, one's whole dance experience can become richer. The dance world teaches one to take hold of every moment and squeeze out all one can from an experience, because the future is unpredictable no matter how hard you train (D. Vasquez, personal communication, February 18, 2019). Having an understanding of the mind and body will help to make this possible. Dance competitions are about winning and being the best. They are filled with countless moments of self-reflection and personal growth. To be fully connected through your

mind and body you are able to perform in a professional manner, using movement to express thoughts and emotions.

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