



Introducing A Feminist Pedagogy Blueprint for Recreational Dance

Louise Marshall, Dance and Accessible Arts producer at Eden Court in the Highlands of Scotland, prompted by a desire to dig further into the influence of recreational dance on adolescent participants, has developed an easy-to-use document that prompts other dance teachers to consider their practice in relation to gender, in particular those identifying as female.



Eden Court. Photo: Ewen Wetherspoon.

Within recreational dance it is widely accepted that the majority of participants identify as female. (1) I know this. All dance teachers know this. From 25 years+ working as a teaching artist in participatory dance I have overwhelmingly taught girls, despite all classes and workshops being open to all. Boys and men do attend, but usually it's one or two at a time, at the most.

Does this matter? There is often talk of how to get more boys dancing. What impact does this have on how we teach when boys do attend? How does this impact the girls in the same space

Approximately a third of adolescent girls attend recreational dance, often since childhood. (2) Therefore, these experiences, and the dance teachers that deliver them, potentially have a huge impact on these young people. Is this impact positive or negative in terms of their view of themselves, femininity and gender identity more broadly?

These are the questions that led to focussing my final research for an MEd in Learning and Teaching

in the Performing Arts (Royal Conservatoire of Scotland) on adolescent girls who attend recreational dance classes. Recreational dance, for the purposes of my research and this article, includes community classes such as youth dance groups; private dance schools that teach grades and syllabi; competition groups and crews. There is a lot of available research about professional dance training in further/higher education, but very little about recreational dance – the sector in which I work.

Throughout my dance teaching career, I have always wanted to create a positive experience for my – mostly female – participants with the additional aspiration that positive dance experiences may empower young women, giving them more confidence and a stronger sense of themselves. However, in the beginning, I definitely replicated the transmission model of teaching that I had experienced myself.

The transmission model of teaching encourages passivity and obedience on the part of the (mostly female) participants from a young age in the format >>

of an expert downloading their knowledge and/or skills to their students (3). In my classes I tried to be as nice as possible, make the classes fun, with plenty of variety, but I still replicated this traditional pedagogy. The movement content of my classes was not gendered, but my research led me to question the unspoken aspects of my pedagogy and the messages participants were receiving.

Think of a typical early-years ballet class... the type that so many small girls attend lots of 3-5-year-olds, dressed in pink, often with additional frills and skirts, expected to copy their teacher unquestioningly, provided with limited opportunities for self-expression or creativity or choice and often expected to be quiet. This is the message these girls are getting - be quiet, do as your told.

I wanted to dig further into the influence of recreational dance on adolescent participants and to develop an easy-to-use document that would prompt other dance teachers to consider their practice in relation to gender, in particular those identifying as female. (Oliver & Reisner have done lots of research on the experience of those identifying as male in the dance world). (4)

In addition, as my practice had developed it became more inclusive, drawing on a range of accessible practices, which I felt could be adapted across all ages and dance styles, regardless of the ability or 'disability' level of the group.

The research consisted of questionnaires completed by adolescents identifying as female who participated in recreational dance. All research was conducted online during the Covid pandemic. All the respondents were based in the Highlands of Scotland, so potentially not fully representative though the themes that emerged seemed widely applicable.

Questions included choosing words to describe femininity and choosing favourite photos of dancers from a selection offered. This data was further supported by in-depth interviews with adolescent dancers and dance tutors, all of whom also identified as female.

The questionnaires and interviews focused on the participants' views of femininity and whether this was influenced by their dance class experiences. (Unfortunately, Covid altered the research process and it was not possible to obtain data that could fully answer this question as precisely as hoped.)

I approached my research with an opinion that adolescent girls are conditioned by their dance experience, particularly in Ballet and Jazz; that they have to cultivate a look and movement characteristics that are historically and



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stereotypically female. This was borne out to some extent. Those who had done more Ballet and/or Jazz definitely made more comments about their bodies and 'getting it right'. Those who had attended more 'community' style dance classes, incorporating contemporary technique and creative opportunities had overwhelmingly positive experiences and were less concerned about the 'right' body shape.

My research was conducted within an unapologetically feminist paradigm and the resulting Pedagogy Blueprint heavily draws on critical feminist pedagogy. This does not exclude those identifying as male but rather centres the learner, whatever their gender identity, as central to the learning experience. It consciously rejects the traditional,



Eden Court. Photo: Dylan Morrison.



Eden Court. Photo: Ewen Wetherspoon.

authoritarian transmission model of teaching dance – I demonstrate, you do – still standard in Western dance training, particularly in the private dance schools. (5)

Some results surprised me

For example, the participants were not as negative about the studio mirrors as I expected. On the whole, they appreciated them as a tool to evaluate their own dancing and follow others when they were uncertain of the moves.

Over the years, I have moved away from teaching set material and moved towards creative tasks and sequences that allow for personal choices, seeking to offer opportunities for creativity and personal expression and allow for all abilities. My findings revealed, however, that all the adolescents expressed satisfaction and enjoyment when successfully ‘performing’ a routine with their peers. The sense of accomplishment boosted their confidence.

Another stand out piece of information was the comment that they enjoyed being in an all-female space (all had female teachers), particularly for a physical activity. They were less self-conscious, felt more confident to experiment with their movement and were uninhibited as there were no ‘annoying boys’.

My interviews with dance teachers generated fewer positive perspectives.

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Sadly, all had stories about negative experiences during their dance training, generally related to body shape and appearance. For two, this had led to eating disorders. In addition, all tutors interviewed said they would now reconsider aspects of their pedagogy, including roles for male and female dancers, use of inclusive language, costumes and opportunities for creativity.

Encouragingly, the questionnaires did demonstrate that adolescents identifying as female had a much different view of femininity from the stereotypical qualities and chose pictures of dancers that matched their definitions.

Despite the research not being as conclusive or expansive as I had hoped, it encouraged me to create A Feminist Pedagogy Blueprint for Recreational Dance: A resource for dance teachers. This document does not claim to have all the answers, but is structured as a provocation to encouraging consideration of teaching practice in relation to gender, especially unvoiced messages to girls and young women about their bodies and

expected behaviour. It also challenges teachers to not make assumptions about their students based on their presenting gender.

Throughout the research process, and since, I have been exploring and developing my practice to create a practical pedagogy that allows participants to explore gender identity through movement. This has been supported by non-binary colleagues through discussion and feedback, and trial sessions with adult participants. Ideally, we will move towards a non-gendered dance world. Already, some dance associations and examination boards are offering non-gendered pieces and professional dancers are choosing to ‘cross-train’ e.g. male dancers attending pointe classes and female dancers learning to lift. But as one young person eloquently said:

“I think the way men and women are taught to dance, and the way they’re trained for dance makes them move differently. But that’s not necessarily the way they might move if they were taught the same.”

Hopefully, the recreational dance sector can

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catch up with developments in the professional world, maybe even overtake, as we have all the tools from accessible dance practices promoted by companies such as StopGap. If recreational dance teachers can reconsider their pedagogy, then children, male and female and non-binary, can explore from an early age, all movement types and qualities, and choose their own preferences rather than conforming to historical and societal expectations.

“We need to teach from a young age that there is no ‘male’ or ‘female’ dance or action. There is only ‘dance’, only ‘action’.” (6)

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Info

A Feminist Pedagogy Blueprint for Recreational Dance: A resource for dance teachers can be found on People Dancing’s website in the Knowledge Bank. For the full research report please contact Louise directly: lfmarshall70@gmail.com



Eden Court. Photo: Ewen Wetherspoon.