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#### How to cite:

Clegg, Helen; Owton, Helen and Allen-Collinson, Jacquelyn (2018). Challenging conceptions of gender: UK dance teachers' perceptions of boys and girls in the ballet studio. *Research in Dance Education*, 19(2) pp. 128–139.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/14647893.2017.1391194>

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# **Challenging conceptions of gender: UK dance teachers' perceptions of boys and girls in the ballet studio**

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## **Abstract**

In the 'Western' world, dance is generally considered a feminised activity and gender traditionally tends to be drawn along binary lines. Traditional notions of idealised gendered bodies in dance are often valorised. Psychologically, girls are expected to be passive, by unquestioningly accepting the instructions of the dance teacher, whereas boys are encouraged to be challenging, energetic and daring. Dance educators have an important role in influencing such attitudes but to date have been under-researched. To understand their perceptions of boys and girls in the dance studio, 10 female dance teachers from across the UK participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, from which two key themes emerged: 'Performing Masculinity' and 'Boys' Challenges to Traditional Dance Pedagogy'. Within the ballet studio, teachers encouraged the performance of masculinity in boys and femininity in girls. However, there was some reflection by the teachers on such traditional conceptualisations of gendered physicality. Boys were perceived to challenge the traditional, authoritarian pedagogy by not conforming to behavioral expectations of docility. Whilst teachers were found to respond by changing their pedagogy, this paper calls for the use of a model of pedagogy that is gender neutral, fosters creativity and empowers all genders.

Keywords: dance, dance teachers; femininity; gender; masculinity; pedagogy

## **Introduction**

Although there are differences across dance genres, dance is often considered a feminised activity which can lead to boys who engage in dance being bullied and having to manage the 'gay male dancer' stereotype (Polasek and Roper, 2011; Risner, 2014). Such traditional societal perceptions appear to be constructed from narrow and rigid interpretations of masculinity and femininity. Although it has been suggested that it is easier for girls to perform masculinity than boys to perform femininity, due to the valuing of masculine above feminine attributes (see, for example, Risner, 2014), such attitudes restrict both boys and girls in their expressions of their dancing gendered selves. Whilst such attitudes derive from wider society, Stinson (2005) identifies that such attitudes are also prevalent within the dance studio in specific forms. In ballet, in particular, young students are encouraged throughout their training to value a physicality that embodies traditional masculine and feminine ideals, with males seeking to be strong and muscular, and females being petite and graceful (Pickard, 2013). Although dance teachers may be promoting such gendered physicality in boys due to professional expectations in the dance-performers' world, it may also be part of a 'make it macho' strategy that has been advanced within the ballet world to challenge some of the barriers encountered by boys entering dance (Fisher, 2007). This strategy constructs a heteronormative narrative that masculinises dance for boys by focusing on traditional notions of masculine physicality and the potential for heterosexual conquests. Such discourses, however, promote a very restrictive conceptualisation of gender and sexuality.

Behavioural and psychological characteristics are also drawn along gendered lines within the dance studio. Lehtikoinen (2006) found that dance teachers experienced boys as more likely to experiment within the dance studio, as needing different motivations for their physical expressions, as being more volatile in temperament, and being cognitively slower than girls. Explanations for such differences were often situated in biological essentialism and hence a biological-deterministic discourse regarding such differences was constructed. Thus, dance teachers position boys as 'other' within the dance studio.

Although this othering can position boys as 'deviant' (Lehikoinen, 2006), within the dance world boys can be seen as privileged (Risner, 2014; Wright, 2013). Indeed, some dance educators have called for the traditional, authoritarian approach to dance pedagogy to be transformed so as to better meet the needs of boys (Lehikoinen, 2006). The traditional, authoritarian pedagogic model in dance focuses on technique, and can create binary concepts of right and wrong (Barr, 2013; Pickard, 2012). The power dynamics appear to be deeply ingrained, and expectations within such a model are that students are passive, docile and unquestioning, and that the teacher is powerful and all knowing (Alterowitz, 2014; Barr and Oliver, 2016). Such an approach has been argued to stifle creativity and disempower students, which has led to calls to move towards more empowering pedagogies that listen to and respect the student voices and treat students as individuals (Alterowitz, 2014; Barr and Oliver, 2016). The authoritarian model is, however, rarely challenged within the dance studio, as females and males are often institutionalised into such ideals at a young age. Only when boys come to dance with a stronger sense of identity developed outside of the dance studio do the expectations of the pedagogy come under scrutiny (Stinson, 2005). When it is exclusively males who present such a challenge to the authoritarian model, this is of concern as it suggests the introduction of a masculine discourse to dance pedagogy that excludes females, rather than a move toward a more empowering pedagogy for all (Lehikoinen, 2006).

Dance educators play an important role in developing the skills and attitudes of the children they teach. Whilst reflective practice is key within dance pedagogy (Stevens and Huddy, 2016) dance teachers are not immune to the predominant discourse of gender and dance. However, there is little research that directly focuses on dance teachers' experiences and perceptions of the children they teach in relation to gender. Thus, there is a need to further the work of researchers, such as Stinson (2005), and render visible the 'hidden curriculum' of gender in dance education. Since dance teachers are predominately female, and boys are the minority in the dance studio (Risner, 2014), our primary aim is to consider the experiences and perceptions of female dance teachers in relation to the boys they teach.

However, to understand how boys are perceived it is also important to consider dance teachers' perceptions of girls, since conceptions of one gender can be a reflection of perceptions of the other gender, and so this research study will address and provide original analysis of the following research question: what are the perceptions and experiences of female dance teachers in relation to the boys and girls they teach?

## **Method**

### ***Participants and data collection***

An Ethical Review Application Form was authorised by a UK University, and prior to the interviewing process, participants were required to provide fully informed consent. Via convenience and snowballing sampling, participants were recruited; researchers contacted private dance schools<sup>1</sup> and advertised on the One Dance UK website (<http://www.onedanceuk.org/>). Participants met the following criteria: (i) a female dance teacher, and (ii) currently teaching/taught dance to both girls and boys. By means of this approach, 10 full-time professional dance teachers in the UK, with ages ranging from 24 to 71 years (mean = 37.8 years) were interviewed (see Table 1 for demographic information). Pseudonyms were employed to safeguard participants' identities. Whilst participants seemed to have a dance genre specialism, many taught a variety of styles (e.g. ballet, contemporary, street jazz, and modern). However during the interview participants focused primarily on the genre of ballet. The length of time participants had worked as a dance teacher varied (3 to 30 years) however, many of the participants had started helping in dance classes as a teenager, and had taught dance alongside completing their dancer teacher training. Indeed, their experiences varied and extended beyond their acquisition of formal dance teacher qualifications. This small sample size is consistent with other in-depth qualitative studies.

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<sup>1</sup> Only private dance schools that provide after school, part-time dance classes were contacted. Full-time, vocational dance schools were not contacted as the female teachers in such schools may have a different experience of dance teaching and a relatively homogenous group of female dance teachers was required for this study.

Table 1: Participants' demographic information

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age (years)</b>	<b>Genres of dance taught</b>	<b>Type of school participant teaches at</b>
Melanie	71	Ballet	Private dance school
Eva	25	Contemporary	Freelance dance teaching company
Claire	62	Ballet	Private dance school, recently retired
Freya	41	Ballet, Modern, Greek, Lyrical	Private dance school, primary schools
Anne	29	Ballet, Contemporary, Street, Commercial	Private dance school, primary and secondary schools, local theatre
Avril	27	Ballet and modern	Private dance school
Caitlin	24	Contemporary, musical theatre	Primary and secondary schools
Laura	39	Ballet, tap, modern	Private dance school, secondary schools, FE college
Heidi	31	Ballet, modern theatre, tap, lyrical jazz	Private dance school, FE college
Esme	29	Contemporary, street, Bollywood	Secondary school

In order to focus the semi-structured interviews, an interview schedule was developed via salient findings from the literature and included the following themes: (i) dance background; (ii) life experiences; (iii) experiences (and challenges) of teaching dance to boys and girls. Interviews were conducted at venues chosen by participants to ensure that they felt comfortable and relaxed. Commensurate with Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) description, the interview style utilised was conversational, and designed to obtain descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee. The semi-structured nature, therefore, allowed us to guide the conversation, whilst remaining open to our

interviewees' introduction and development of their own areas of discussion.

### ***Data Analysis***

Firstly, interviews were transcribed verbatim and then subjected to Braun and Clark's (2006) six-phase guide to undertaking thematic analysis. To ensure familiarity with the data, Authors 1 and 2 immersed themselves in the raw data. This involved moving back and forward between the entire data set, the coded extracts of data and the analysis of the produced data. In an attempt to understand the participants' perceptions, experiences and meanings associated with teaching dance, identified patterns of interest and meaning were identified. An initial discovery sheet of recurring words, concepts and ideas that emerged from the data were developed in order to generate codes (Braun and Clark, 2006). Then authors searched for themes, reviewed themes, and defined and named themes (Braun and Clark, 2006). Author 3 took on the role of "critical friend" (Sparkes and Smith, 2014, p.182) which involved scrutinising and critiquing the results of the data analysis and in providing a more "distanced" perspective. She was not directly involved in the data collection which meant that she brought a fresh, analytic eye to bear in an attempt to provide a degree of research bracketing to the research process (Author 3, 2011), encouraging critical reflection on any pre-existing assumptions, and on initial interpretations that Authors 1 and 2 may have had/held. Therefore, all authors were involved in the rigorous process of data analysis. To enhance trustworthiness and credibility, member checking was employed; participants were sent a copy of their interview transcripts, and later a draft of the paper, with a request to contact the authors should they have any comments. No participant wished to alter or make comments on either document.

### **Results and Discussion**

Two themes were identified that encapsulated dance teachers' perceptions of boys and girls in the dance studio: 'Performing Masculinity' and 'Boys' Challenges to Traditional Dance Pedagogy'.



## *Performing Masculinity*

When dance teachers were asked to discuss their experiences of boys and girls who danced, strong binary concepts of male and female emerged. Differences in both physicality and psychological attributes were drawn along binary gendered lines. Traditional notions of the strong athletic male dancer and the delicate, sylph-like female dancer were highlighted, with dance teachers having expectations of the children they taught developing towards these ideals. Melanie (71 years), for example, describes such ideals and how she helps boys in class to develop their strength:

...they're [boys] more physical. And you have to teach them sort of like, each grade that I teach, the Royal Academy of Dance, has boys' exercises separate from girls, some of them. So they're done with different arms. So it's stronger arms and they do a lot more jumps. So from an earlier age, they do technical jumps, more than girls will. So you've got to concentrate on the strength in the legs to do these jumps. And they've got to look strong on top, not effeminate. So although they do arm positions called *port de bras*, it has a different feel and slightly different endings to exercises. So that's, they wouldn't do so many waltzy things.

Within this quote, Melanie equates not being strong with being effeminate, and implies that boys must not look effeminate. Equating dance, especially ballet, with femininity is a popular preconception and can lead to males who dance being bullied for not conforming to rigid concepts of masculinity that are held within the culture (Risner, 2002, 2009). To counter such narratives, some within the ballet world have developed what Fisher (2007) calls the 'make it macho' strategy that associates dance with athleticism, strength and heterosexual conquests. Melanie's attempts to strengthen the boys' physiques may in part be an attempt at such a strategy. However, the physical demands of dance mean that all dancers, regardless of gender, require considerable strength and stamina whilst dancing with grace and elegance (Pickard, 2012). Many of the participants recognised this, but there were opposing views as

to whether both boys and girls should practice the full range of moves to develop these diverse skills. Claire (62 years) described a reluctance to get the boys to engage in the girls' moves in case this challenged the parents' conceptions of their sons' masculinity:

And when you come to syllabus work in a ballet class, if you're looking for an exam, that was a tricky point, because there would be boys' steps and then you're left with that decision. Do you make all the girls do the boys' steps? Yes if you've got time, it strengthens them. Do you make the boys do all the girls' steps? Not necessary, if it's got too many funny floaty arms, that's not going to help them, particularly with the parent around the corner seeing their boys flapping about like little sex... something that's not perhaps that appropriate.

The gendered nature of the ballet syllabus reinforces concepts of gendered movement material that idealises strong males and delicate females (Alterowitz, 2014) and the ballet syllabus was often cited by participants as appearing to justify the need to dichotomise strength development across boys and girls, and to keep physical performance distinct between the two genders. Interestingly, Lehtikoinen (2006) identifies the dance studio as providing freedom for male dancers to explore their masculinity and femininity and thus develop multiple gender identities. However, in traditional dance classes where the teacher focuses on a gendered syllabus that dictates the movements in class, coupled with a concern regarding feminising boys and masculinising girls, such opportunities for the development of varied gendered expression may be severely limited. Alternatively, the embodiment of the specified physiques expected of male and female dancers can be argued to provide the individual with a strong dancer/ ballet embodied identity (Pickard, 2012). Risner (2009) identifies that boys do engage in the 'making it macho' strategy and yet feel frustrated by attempts to limit their experiences of dance to such narrow conceptualisations of masculinity. Avril (27 years), with her awareness of the versatility required of dance-performers today, regardless of gender, sought to empower the boys in her all-boys'

class by allowing them to choose which dance from the syllabus to perform in their exam:

...something that I've understood is that a lot of people assume, even within dance, that boys and girls are going to take very different paths. And that girls are all going to dance in a very delicate, feminine, lyrical way and that boys are all going to dance in a very strong masculine way. And that the kind of roles that they are going to get are going to be very different. That's not the case in dance any more. You have to be versatile [...] And when I've given the boys the options and I show them the videos, that's what I do. So I show them the video of the dances and I say: which do you prefer? So far they've always chosen the one that's for boys and girls, which is the more lyrical and you know, with a flute and the, you know, more emotive dance. Which is very interesting. And I, even when I started I had boys asking if they could do pointe work. So there are still assumptions regarding gender in dance.

Thus, the boys' choice of dance challenges stereotypical ideas around appropriate expressions of masculinity and enables them to embody more expressive performance opportunities. Requests for boys to engage in pointe work can also be construed as a strong challenge to masculine expressions of dance in ballet. Pointe work is usually considered the exclusive realm of female dancers although explanations for why this is the case are rarely offered (Lehikoinen, 2006). Lehikoinen (2006) argues that the feminising of pointe work is a product of the gendered division of roles in ballet, with little rationale for why men cannot perform such skills that require control, strength and stamina; key qualities for performing traditional masculinity. In fact, where Anne (29 years) works, the male ballet teacher actively encourages boys to dance en pointe. Whilst Anne spoke positively about this opportunity for boys, she also highlighted how boys struggled more with point due to anatomical differences:

...however they do struggle. They really do struggle. They are just anna... what's the word I'm thinking

of, anatomically built differently and it does create difficulties when going en pointe. They can do it, but they find it more tricky. Boys tend to be heavier and you need to be very light and dainty on your feet. Also boys' legs are thicker and they tend to be stronger than girls' legs. So girls have got sort of more sinewy, slim legs, which helps for getting up and over. So when you think that you're putting all your weight on the ends of your toes, it does help if you're lighter. [Laughs a lot]

Anne goes on to say that boys' feet are too wide and flat to do pointe well. Anne develops a narrative that positions boys' bodies as 'wrong' for going en pointe as compared to girls' bodies that are 'right' for pointe work. This argument is situated in biology and so is essentialist and fixed. The very attributes that position boys as masculine within dance are those that define the boys as 'wrong' should they engage in pointe work. Such a narrative further dichotomises the gender 'appropriate' physicality and movement performance for boys and girls in dance.

### ***Boy's Challenges to Traditional Dance Pedagogy***

Many dance genres, and especially ballet, are taught in a traditional manner that values authoritarianism and 'patriarchal' teaching methods; students are required to be docile, obedient and unquestioning (Alterowitz, 2014; Whiteside and Kelly, 2016). Emphasis, in the traditional model, is placed on technique, rather than creativity, and in their pursuit of perfection, students are supposed to embrace such expectations of behaviour in the dance studio (Barr and Oliver, 2016). Such a teaching style often produces binary positions of 'right' and 'wrong' (Barr, 2013), however, and places barriers to experiencing creativity through improvisation and developing a sense of agency. Interestingly though, students often feel reassured by an autocratic teaching style since this fits in with conventional expectations of a ballet class and so such authoritarian approaches are rarely challenged within the dance studio (Whiteside and Kelly, 2016). Girls often start dancing at an early age and so are socialized and institutionalised into the etiquette of the dance class much earlier than are boys. Boys often come

later to dance, thus having had a chance to develop their identities and their 'voice' outside of the dance class (Stinson, 2005). It can be argued, therefore, that boys are less likely to conform to behavioural expectations of dance teachers, as emerged from participants' narratives in the current study. For some participants, this led to positioning boys as more 'challenging' than the girls. Caitlin (24 years), for example, finds that overall the boys are 'naughtier' and less focused than the girls, and this causes tension within mixed sex classes:

Erm, I think the boys tend to be a bit naughtier in a sense. They find it more difficult to be focused on a task for like... maybe ten minutes, I'll have a task four, or five minutes. They tend to kind of be disinterested and then come back and their focus isn't continuous. So I think sometimes the girls can get frustrated...

The boys' perceived lack of concentration is constructed as 'naughty' behaviour. Such a negative interpretation can be explained by boys not conforming to the traditional expectations of behaviour in the dance studio where children are expected to be silent and focused at all times (Alterowitz, 2014; Stinson, 2005). It also positions the boys as 'bad' in relation to the 'good' girls, thus identifying the boys as 'other' and 'deviant' within the dance studio.

This 'othering' of boys was further emphasised by discourses centering on the physical and cognitive abilities of boys when compared to girls. For instance, Laura (39 years) considers boys less able than girls due her perceptions that their relative physical ineptitude is associated with boys being cognitively slower than girls:

...as my son's kind of grown up with dance I've been really observant, you know about how, how I teach him and how it differs from teaching the girls. And at first I put it down to the fact that he was left-handed. Erm, and that he's slightly less... uncoordinated than the girls... and I think that just kind of links

into with what I was saying where it just takes them [boys] a little bit longer to master the skill and absorb all the detail. So yeah, I put it down to him being left-handed, but I think as it's drawn over time that it's just a boy thing. They do just take longer. I've noticed the same thing with the college students as well. Who, you know, they range from sort of sixteen upwards. Erm, and the same kind of thing where I can teach a step or a sequence and the girls have, have got it almost straight away. But the boys tend to be, they tend to look a little bit more clumsy whilst they're picking up the skill. And it takes them a few more attempts to, to master it. I don't know. I don't think, maybe their brains process as much information as girls...

This belief that boys are psychologically slower to learn than are girls was also taken up by Freya and Claire. Both positioned this in a biologically-based narrative, with Claire (62 years) stating that for technique and co-ordination exercises, boys '... would need longer time to, in order to get their limbs to respond, to make their brains focus'. Such discourses suggest a biologically-deterministic view of boys' abilities, and position boys who dance as 'other' in relation to girls who dance. It further suggests that boys will 'fail' when taught within a traditional dance pedagogy due to the emphasis on good technique. However, a number of the participants noted that boys came to dance, and especially to ballet, later than girls, with girls often starting ballet at around 3 to 4 years old and boys starting in later childhood to early teens. As Avril (27 years) notes, '[...] the majority [of boys] come [to dance] at sort of eleven to fifteen. So they, they've missed that foundation. And that foundation is very important'. This challenges the biologically-deterministic explanation of perceived psychological and physical differences, and in contrast, suggests that these differences between boys and girls can be products of their socialisation into dance at different ages. Nevertheless, older boys entering the dance studio, especially in mixed sex classes, appear to challenge traditional forms of pedagogy due to their relative slowness to embody techniques when compared to the girls, who have been immersed within the dance tradition for a much longer time frame.

Despite considering the boys as cognitively slower, many of the dance teachers viewed boys as having a different type of energy to the girls, and being more competitive. Heidi (31 years) highlights that boys find a traditional ballet class challenging due to their need to be active, and hence require a different form of pedagogy and activities:

Erm, I generally find that they [boys] need very specific challenges, rules and guidelines, much more so than girls. Girls are quite happy to just wait or stop still and have a moment to think or wait while a teacher is preparing. Boys respond to those moments of pause by finding something else to do. They need to be active. They need to find something to do. The word[s] 'sit still' or 'stand still' don't generally work within their, within their vocabulary. [...] Because particularly with ballet, the traditional model of barre work then port de bras, then centre practice, that natural build, which is so very sensible to us and that girls generally are quite happy to go along with, the younger boys cannot. There's too much calm and still for them throughout, for them to be executing and concentrating on the steps to the level we'd expect at the same time as the concentration. They just, they can't do all of those things at once for a sustained period. They need different activities, challenges and the competitive element often really helps them. Whereas girls aren't, self-esteem wise they don't respond to competitive elements of challenge in class as well as the boys do.

When Heidi talks about the traditional model of teaching technique, she appears to valorise this approach over that of a less traditional approach, which she believes boys require. Esme also appears to consider that boys require a change in the traditional pedagogy due to their 'masculine' energy impacting on their ability to take on the finer elements of the technique:

... but the boys are much, er, I was going to say energetic, but I don't mean energetic. I think the energy's different. They're much erm, more powerful in the way that they move, I think and faster. Especially with the Key Stage 3 boys. They just come in the studio and they just run and jump and pick each other up.

Erm and getting them to look at the detail of gestures and body shapes is sometimes quite difficult. They, I think they seem to look at it and see like [pause] the big picture, like the whole body. Whereas girls I think will spend a little bit more time on [...] the finer details of, of a movement. (Esme, 29 years)

The energy exuded by boys was viewed positively by Eva (25 years) due to her perception that it impacted on creativity.

I mean from a female point of view, I absolutely loved dancing alongside boys. I feel like it gives a different energy to, to the group. I feel like it provides a lot more opportunities within the choreographic process, because I think that they offer on the whole, different ideas, especially younger boys. When we're doing stuff at primary school they're a lot more boisterous and a lot more daring. So I think a lot of the, a lot of the choreography is reflected on that. And it, I feel like they kind of pull the girls out of that really girly girly way of dancing and presenting stuff

Both Esme's and Eva's description of the boys' energy suggests that it has a 'boisterous', 'powerful', 'daring' and, thus arguably, masculine quality to it, that reduces the femininity of the dance performance. Such constructions of boys as boisterous and energetic feeds into the stereotypical constructions of what 'normal' boys are like (Gard, 2001) and allows them to engage in a traditional masculine presentation of self, even within the feminised environment of the dance studio. It also provides a masculine perspective that impacts on the creativity of the choreographic process and which participants report as being more highly valorised than 'girly girly' ways of dancing. The presence of boys in the dance studio is suggested to enable the girls to perform what have traditionally been considered masculine expressions of dance, at least to some degree, thus reducing an 'extreme' version of femininity within the creative choreographic process. Such binary notions of gendered creativity may in part arise due to society's valorising of masculine over feminine characteristics (Risner, 2014).



Interestingly, some dance educators have called for mixed, rather than single sex, dance classes as the perceived energy of the boys enables girls to engage fully with their creative ability (Lehikoinen, 2006). The notion of boys engaging in greater risk-taking and hence being more creative came across in the data, although this did not always impact on the girls' creativity. Caitlin (24 years), for example, compares the creativity of boys and girls in an open-ended dance task:

Erm, I actually find that boys come up with things that are more creative than the girls. They don't tend to stick to what's safe. So if you give them quite an open-ended erm, kind of creative task, whatever, because boys tend to group together, although I try and mix them in. They tend to want to group together. And they always seem to come up with something that is very different and that I don't expect, which is always nice. [...] I do sometimes think that the girls I've taught before, they almost need encouragement to push boundaries. Whereas the boys don't need encouragement. [Laughs]

The situation is, however, more complex, as later in the interview, Caitlin identifies that as the children she teaches get to about the age of 12 years, they become more self-conscious, which inhibits their creativity. This concurs with research that has found that high self-confidence is one of a number of attributes that engenders increased creativity in dancers (Watson, Nordin-Bates and Chappell, 2012).

The participants' narratives constructing boys as being more creative than girls may in part have developed due to them altering their traditional, authoritarian teaching methods for boys, primarily as a response to their perceptions of boys being more disruptive, less able to concentrate, more easily bored and requiring more physical stimulation in the dance class. Thus, the perceived attitudes and behaviour of boys in the dance studio challenges the traditional model of dance teaching and can generate a change in dance pedagogy that moves towards a more empowering and creative environment.

Interestingly, however, such an approach appeared to be applied only if boys were present, as Esme explains:

For, for the boys, as well, it can sometimes be maybe a bit more of a collaborative approach [when choreographing], because I think they, I think they are more interested and engaged if they feel that they have contributed to the movement material as well. So it, I think, whereas when I'm maybe teaching girls I will go in with an idea of this is what I want. But when I'm with the boys it would sort of develop and happen maybe a bit more organically in the studio. Because I'm responding to what they want and they're trying to copy from me and it kind of yeah, is probably more of a collaboration because of that. Yes, I think they [the girls] would [like to collaborate]. ... I think it's because I have, or I might think that I have less movement material that the boys would enjoy doing. And so I kind of maybe open it out to them a little bit more. Whereas with the girls I feel that I have loads of movement material that I can sort of teach them and that will be fine. So I feel it might be a bit more didactic in that way. I'm telling them more what to do, because maybe because I have a bit more confidence in what I am telling them to do. And I think maybe from a boy's point of view as well, erm, they [pause] I think they need to feel a little bit more ownership over the dance and the material than maybe the girls do. (Esme, 29 years)

Esme appears to valorise the traditional model of dance teaching where the students are passive and the teacher holds the power and knowledge as this is what enables her to feel confident. However, due to a lack of confidence in her knowledge of the movement material for boys she creates an atmosphere of empowerment and allows the boys to express their creativity. Hence, with boys she engages in a teaching technique far more in line with a feminist pedagogy that treats students as individuals, values their opinions and provides them with a sense of agency (Alterowitz, 2014). Although for Esme this derives from her lack of confidence, for many dance teachers, allowing students to be truly creative in the dance studio is seen as challenging due to their being socialised and even institutionalised into the authoritarian model of dance pedagogy (Watson et al, 2012).

Whilst the dance teachers in this study were all clearly capable of engaging in a more feminist pedagogy and were highly skilled, reflective practitioners (Author 2, Author 1, Author 3, 2016), it was

not until the boys disrupted the *status quo* with their more 'challenging' behaviour that the teachers moved towards a less traditional notion of dance teaching. Lehtikoinen (2006) warns against such gendered teaching, suggesting that this prioritises the needs of males above females, thus adopting a discourse of masculinism. Given the perceived (and actual) privileging of males over females in the dance world (Author 1, Author 2, Author 3, 2016; Meglin and Brooks, 2012; Stinson, 2005), the division of pedagogic approaches along gendered lines, which may result in males being enabled further to increase their creativity, could further privilege males. They may consequently gain higher positions, such as choreographers, in the dance world, and leave females deskilled in a profession where they already struggle to achieve higher status jobs that require high levels of creativity (Meglin and Brooks, 2012).

## **Conclusion**

The participants in this study appeared to be shaped and guided by the traditional discourses of dance, and especially ballet, which conceptualise dance as being understood along binary gendered lines with a clear delineation of what constituted femininity and masculinity. Within the first theme, 'Performing Masculinity' participants did reflect on the limitations of such an approach and acknowledged that dance-performers require elements of both the masculine and feminine within their technique and artistry. For some participants there was a desire to challenge such a dichotomized approach. However, challenging the traditional discourse was found to be difficult particularly when working with a gendered syllabus and needing to conform to parental and societal expectations. Nevertheless, within the second theme, 'Boys' challenges to traditional dance pedagogy', the positioning of boys as 'other' within the dance studio, due to perceived physical and behavioural differences vis-à-vis girls, stimulated a change in pedagogy that empowered the students and engendered creativity within the dance studio.

This research has implications for those within the dance world, especially dance educators. A

continued and fundamental reflection on dance-teaching practice is required in relation to gender. Dance teachers' perceptions of boys and girls may appear different due to the differing socialisation practices that occur within the dance studio. Girls may appear more compliant and to have a less powerful energy because they have been institutionalised at an early age into the traditions and expectations of the dance studio etiquette, whereas boys, generally coming later to dance, may resist such norms and hence be able to retain their energy and develop their physicality and creativity. Furthermore, the syllabus, along with practices that promote heteronormative, masculinised ideals for boys in dance, may restrict both boys and girls in their expressions of multiple and more nuanced gender identities. Therefore a move towards a pedagogy that is gender free and empowering for all genders is required. To achieve this changes need to be focused at the teacher training level to further encourage dance educators to be empowered and reflective practitioners who challenge restricted notions of masculinity and femininity. Student teachers should also be provided with the opportunity to teach both boys and girls within their training and to be skilled in a full range of dance movement regardless of the perceived gendering of such movement. Once within the dance studio, dance educators can then challenge binary concepts of gender through allowing the children to embody all possibilities of movement, by using more gender neutral language, and by providing imagery and choreography that allows for children to explore the full range of gendered expression. Corresponding changes could impact on the children's own perceptions of gendered norms in dance, thus ultimately filtering into wider societal conceptualisation of the nexus of dance and gender. Moreover, it could enable both boys and girls to become more versatile and skilled dance-artists, which could enhance their employability in a dance-world that is increasingly demanding a wider repertoire of expertise.

Whilst this study was designed to investigate the perceptions of female dance teachers, to address specifically a gap in the literature, the lived experiences of the boys and girls in the dance studio remain to be explored, together with the impact, if any, such perceptions may have on them. Research on the students in the dance studio along with research on male dance teachers' perceptions of the boys and

girls they teach would add further original research in this area of study.

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