
Aspiring Ballerinas and Implications for Counselling Practice Ballerines en herbe et implications pour la pratique du counseling

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ABSTRACT

Preparing for a professional ballet career requires dedication, discipline, and single-minded focus. But as training becomes increasingly competitive, many dancers must give up their aspiration to become a professional. The aim of this study is to share the stories of elite female dancers who, despite years of intense training, were unable to achieve a professional dancing career. Five women volunteered to tell their stories by participating in multiple semistructured interviews, during which they also shared personal mementos such as dance photographs, pointe shoes, and dance competition medals. Their stories were analyzed thematically and represented with illustrative quotes. Findings suggested that giving up the dream to dance professionally after years of training resulted in many losses; most striking was the loss of identity. Implications for counsellors working with amateur female dancers who were unable to achieve a performing career are discussed.

RÉSUMÉ

Pour se préparer à une carrière dans le ballet professionnel, il faut du dévouement, de la discipline, et une détermination sans faille. Mais à mesure que la formation devient de plus en plus compétitive, bon nombre de danseurs et de danseuses renoncent à leurs aspirations professionnelles. La présente étude a pour objectif de partager les récits de danseuses d'élite qui, en dépit de nombreuses années de formation intensive, ont été incapables de réaliser une carrière en danse professionnelle. Cinq femmes ont accepté de raconter leur histoire en participant à de multiples entrevues semi-structurées, au cours desquelles elles ont aussi partagé des souvenirs personnels comme des photographies de danse, des chaussons de pointe, et des médailles de compétitions de danse. Leurs récits ont été analysés de façon thématique et illustrés au moyen de citations. Les résultats semblent indiquer que le fait de renoncer au rêve de danser de façon professionnelle après des années de formation se traduit par plusieurs pertes, dont la plus frappante est la perte d'identité. On discute des implications pour les conseillers qui travaillent auprès de danseuses amateurs qui n'ont pas réussi à faire carrière dans le domaine.

Many young girls dream of becoming professional ballerinas. They spend years training rigorously, only to realize their goal is unattainable. Although this is an experience shared by many aspiring ballerinas, it has received little attention. The aim of this study is to increase understanding and mobilize support for future

aspiring ballet dancers by shedding light on the experience of being unable to achieve the dream of dancing professionally. Implications for counselling practice are then addressed.

BALLET TRAINING

Ballet training is a challenging experience associated with potentially both negative and positive consequences. Ballet dancers start training for their career in early childhood, many as early as 5 or 6 years of age (Pickman, 1987; Pulinkala, 2011; Wainwright & Turner, 2004). Some dancers are enrolled in their first ballet class as a result of their parents noticing them dancing around the house (Wulff, 1998). Others are enrolled on their own account, usually after being exposed to a ballet performance as a young child and then asking to be enrolled in a dance class (Pickard & Bailey, 2009; Wulff, 1998). As identified in Stinson, Blumenfield-Jones, and van Dyke's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological study of adolescent student dancers with backgrounds in jazz, tap, ballet, and modern, mothers are a common driving force behind young girls' discovery of dance. While many of the adolescents disliked dancing at first, they all reported that dance became an important part of their lives. Importantly, whatever the reason for developing an interest in ballet, the process of acculturation to the world of ballet begins at an early age, strengthening students' commitment to the art of dancing (Lee, 1988), and beginning their vocational training (Wulff, 1998).

Training is foremost difficult—characterized by pressure, self-discipline, dedication, and perfectionism. Pressure has been identified as a key aspect of training, both pressure to meet dance standards in order to continue training (MacFarlane, 1994) and pressure to complete homework, meet new people, eat properly, manage finances, and live up to teachers' expectations (Cardinal, 2009). In order to manage the pressure and demands of training, ballet students need high levels of self-discipline (Hamilton, 1998).

The intensiveness of ballet training (Pulinkala, 2011; Wainwright & Turner, 2004) also calls for high levels of concentration and dedication (Pickard & Bailey, 2009; Pickman, 1987). Hamilton, Solomon, and Solomon (2006) argued that dancers are especially known for dedication to their art. Dedication requires singularity of focus, and serious ballet students devote much of their youth to dancing. Much non-school time, strength, and energy are spent preparing for a ballet career (Alter, 1997; Pickman, 1987; Wainwright & Turner, 2004). Hopeful dancers attend daily ballet classes, which are highly competitive, as well as rehearsals and performances (Pulinkala, 2011; Wainwright & Turner, 2004). In addition to meeting the physical demands, ballet dancers must have a passion for dancing (Wainwright & Turner, 2004). To reach the level of a professional ballet dancer requires talent, hard work, and the drive to dance (Wainwright & Turner, 2004).

Unsurprisingly, many dancers are described as perfectionists (Ackard, Henderson, & Wonderlich, 2004; Anshel, 2004; Schluger, 2010). Several negative consequences have been associated with perfectionism. For example, perfection-

ism can (a) contribute to burnout (Hernandez, 2012); (b) lead to injury, health issues, and poorer quality of performance (Cardinal, 2009); (c) create feelings of inadequacy (Myburgh, Poggenpoel, & van Staden, 2009); and (d) contribute to negative body image (Myburgh et al., 2009; Robson, 2001).

Conversely, perfectionism has also been identified as a positive quality for dancers. Cumming and Duda (2012) found that dancers who have high personal standards but who are not overly concerned with making mistakes and doubting themselves had fewer concerns about their body. They also experienced greater overall health and experienced positive affect. There is evidence to suggest that particular personality types are attracted to ballet culture (e.g., introverted, emotional, achievement-motivated, fewer positive self-attitudes), rather than these characteristics being acquired as a result of training (Bakker, 1988, 1991).

Dancers' busy schedules leave little time for socializing outside the dance studio; thus, developing non-dance-related friendships is difficult (Buckroyd, 2001; Hamilton, 1998). What little time they do have to spend with non-dancing friends decreases as they advance in their training (Buckroyd, 2001; Hamilton, 1998). More hours allocated to dance classes mean less time available for socializing (Buckroyd, 2001; Hamilton, 1998). Dancers' social networks mainly consist of other dancers (Greben, 1999; Hamilton, 1998). Dancers may also have trouble making non-dance friends because they may seem unlike "other kids" (Buckroyd, 2001; Hamilton, 1998). Adolescence is a particularly hard time for developing friendships, but it is that much harder when one is seen as different (Hamilton, 1998). Stinson et al. (1990) noted that student dancers found it difficult to both be a dancer and have a "normal" life; they felt that many non-dancers did not understand them. Similarly, Hamilton (1998) reported that ballet dancers may be teased about their turn out (turning of the hips and legs out from the hip joints), about wearing their hair in a bun, and even about their busy dance schedule. Furthermore, Bakker's (1988, 1991) suggestion that dancers have a distinct personality profile supports the idea that dancers are different than non-dancers, another reason for why many dancers' friends consist of other dancers (Hamilton, 1998).

Dancers have much in common with each other, including the drive to be the best (Hamilton, 1998; Stinson et al., 1990). Although this commonality can generate competition between friends and may place strain on their relationships (Buckroyd, 2001; Hamilton, 1998), dancers have also described a bond that develops from commonalities and leads to deep friendships (Stinson et al., 1990). Interestingly, Stinson et al. (1990) found that despite the negative connotations of feeling different, dancers felt that the differences made them special, as they had discipline and knowledge not acquired by non-dancers.

The time constraints imposed by dancing leave little time to explore other possible occupations (Pickman, 1987). Some individuals go as far as to reject any alternative to performance (Stinson et al., 1990). Most serious ballet students cannot imagine not dancing, and therefore the short career length and negative impacts on lifestyle go unconsidered (Lee, 1988). These girls are goal-directed

from a very young age with regards to having a performing career, so much so that they have tunnel vision, and almost everything that is not dance-related falls by the wayside (Geben, 2002). For example, career-oriented dancers tend to pursue few high school extracurricular activities (Kiefer, 1996).

Because of their intense involvement with dance, young dancers' identities tend to form solely around dance (Pickman, 1987). As time passes, serious dance students can become exceedingly invested in the dancer identity (Hamilton, 1998). By the time the dancers reach adolescence, they have begun to form an occupational identity that merges both self-identity and occupational identity as one (Lee, 1988; Pickard & Bailey, 2009). Excerpts from interviews with the young women reported by Stinson et al. (1990) clearly illustrated this concept: "It is who I am.... If I couldn't dance I think I would feel like there was a part of me that was just totally dead" (p. 16), "I just can't imagine my life without it" (p. 16), and "I can't imagine not doing it. If something would happen and I couldn't do it, I'd be a very bitter person probably" (p. 16).

Injuries go hand in hand with training (Cardinal, 2009; Gamboa, Roberts, Maring, & Fergus, 2008; Steinberg et al., 2011). Gamboa et al. (2008) found that the most common injuries experienced by elite ballet students are to the foot and ankle. The second most common injuries are to the hip, followed by knee and back. Steinberg et al. (2011) analyzed types of injuries and dancers' ages. For example, dancers aged 8 to 9 years typically experience injuries to their ligaments and tendons, while adolescent dancers experience knee injuries. Furthermore, once dancers experience an injury, they are at greater risk for reinjury (Steinberg et al., 2011).

UNREALIZED PERFORMANCE CAREERS

Time, effort, training, self-discipline, and sacrifice are not enough to ensure success in the dance world (Hanna, 1988). Consequently, many aspiring young ballerinas have to accept the reality that they will not become professional ballerinas. As reported by Stinson et al. (1990), a sample of adolescent dancers aged 16–18 who were not in professional dance programs all wanted to dance professionally at one time, and most expressed a deep sadness at having to give up this dream.

Unrealized performance careers involve similar types of loss as experienced by retiring professional dancers: for example, loss of daily routine and structure, loss of dance friends, and loss of purpose. According to the literature, when professional dancers retire and leave their dance company, they lose a social network and source of security (Gordon, 1983; Geben, 1999; Pickman, 1987). Similarly, because ballet dancers typically have classes and rehearsals 6 days a week, retiring from dance dramatically changes their daily schedules (Wainwright & Turner, 2004). Many ballet dancers find it hard to give up dancing daily due to the compulsion to dance as well as the decrease in physical activity (Wainwright & Turner, 2004). The latter can have negative effects on the ballet dancer's body image (Pickman, 1987; Wainwright & Turner, 2004).

Another loss experienced by these dancers is the loss of identity. Professional ballet dancers, with their intense and lifelong relationship with the art, define themselves almost solely through dance; therefore, retiring from a performing career means giving up who they are, that is, their identity (Pickman, 1987; Wainwright & Turner, 2004). This loss of identity can be devastating for the dancer (Greben, 1992). The more energy that the dancer invested in the dancer identity, the more severe the identity issues will be (Schnitt, 1990). Buckroyd (2000), who has counselled many student dancers, found that dance students' identities are consumed by their desire to be a dancer. Consequently, leaving dance involves an accompanying loss of identity.

This transition is exacerbated when dancers have only this one interest. As mentioned, from an early age ballet dancers focus solely on dancing; therefore, they do not explore other possible occupations (Pickman, 1987). As a result, when it comes time for them to stop dancing professionally or to exit before achieving a professional dance career, they have little knowledge or training for other careers, and have little experience in the exploration of other career options (Pickman, 1987).

The combination of these losses may lead to feelings of anger, frustration, and depression (Pickman, 1987). It is not uncommon for dancers, upon retiring, to self-medicate, use drugs and alcohol, or develop eating disorders (Pickman, 1987). The ability to effectively adjust to the losses associated with retirement is a factor in the readiness of a dancer to stop performing, and Pickman (1987) recommended that dancers find ways to cope with the losses that accompany leaving a performing career. As noted by Jeffri and Throsby (2006), "The end of a career in dance is 'one of life's little deaths,' with dancers having to mourn their loss before embarking on a new career" (p. 57). The end of a dream to have a career in dance is a similar but unrecognized phenomenon in the literature to date.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The literature exploring the career transition into life after dance predominantly focuses on those dancers who are retiring from a professional performing career. The primary interest has been in how to aid this transition. There is very little research examining the post-dance lives of amateur dancers, despite there being many more elite amateur dancers unable to make it to the professional ranks than professional dancers. It is not known what happens to these amateur dancers once they leave dance training (Schnitt, 1990), and more research needs to be done with this population (Alter, 1997). Focusing on ballet training and its challenges for ballet dancers who are not successful in attaining a professional dance career is valuable for counsellors developing interventions for this population of young women. The present research focused on the narratives of women who dreamed of becoming a ballerina, were unable to, and had to transition to a life after dance. The central question explored was as follows: *What is it like to be an elite female dancer who is unable to achieve a professional dancing career and must make another kind of life for herself?*

METHOD

Five women—identified by the pseudonyms of Ella, Sam, Piper, Lily, and Megan—volunteered to participate in a retrospective qualitative study (Merriam, 2002), informed by narrative inquiry, about their experience of having been former elite ballet dancers who trained with the dream of achieving professional careers but were unsuccessful. The women were recruited using purposeful sampling based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) female, (b) 18 years of age or older, (c) a former ballet dancer, (d) auditioned at least once for a professional ballet school, (e) wanted to dance professionally but was unable to realize this dream, (f) struggled to navigate the transition to life after dance, (g) feels she is currently living a meaningful and satisfying life, and (h) is currently motivated to reflect upon this experience. Ethics approval was received from the affiliated university's behavioural research ethics board, and the study was carried out in a mid-size city on the Canadian prairies.

Each participant completed three in-depth semistructured interviews. The first interviews focused on the women telling their story, and the second and third interviews focused more on analytical discussion as well as clarifying content and meaning. The women also brought in and shared personal mementos such as competition photos, ballet slippers, pointe shoes, and medals. All interviews were audio-recorded, fully transcribed, and made available to the women for review. Thematic analysis was undertaken and is presented in an abridged form in this article. The full study is available at http://hdl.handle.net/10388/ETD-soas_02-348

FINDINGS

The Women

Ella. In her late 20s, Ella was a grad student trying to complete her thesis and working full-time in the field of her studies at the time of the interviews. She began dancing at an early age and in her teens attended a professional ballet school, but had to leave due to injuries, which ultimately ended her amateur ballet career. This experience led her to walk away from ballet, but she has since found a way to let dance back in her life.

Lily. Lily was older than the rest of the women, and at the time of the interviews she was working full-time at a ballet school in an administrative position and teaching ballet. Lily starting dancing at a young age and spent almost her entire school-aged years attending a professional ballet school, but when it came time to move to the upper-level school, she was not invited. She left the world of ballet and built a different life for herself, expressing, "I became a completely different person and the ballet world just didn't exist for me anymore." However, years later she eventually found herself back in the dance studio wondering, "How could I have left this for so long?"

Megan. At the time of the first interview Megan, who was in her early 20s, had just finished her first year of university and was working a summer job. By

the time we met for the third interview Megan had obtained a full-time job and decided not to attend school the following fall as a result of home-life issues. Megan started dancing at a young age and auditioned for a professional ballet school twice; the first time she was accepted but did not attend for financial reasons, and the second time she was not accepted. Although she continued to dance, she eventually quit. At the time of the interviews she was not dancing, but missed it greatly.

Piper. In her mid 20s at the time of the interviews, Piper was a grad student and ballet teacher. She started dancing at a young age and auditioned for a professional ballet school twice, but was not accepted either time. Although sad, Piper did not let this experience discourage her. Unlike the three previous women, she never stopped dancing. At the time of the interview she was still taking one class and stated, "I said from the time I was about 12 [that] I am going to dance until someone tells me to stop."

Sam. Sam, who was in her early 20s at the time of the interviews, had just finished her first year of university and was in the process of changing programs. In addition to being a full-time student she was a dance teacher and danced in a local dance company. Unlike the other women, Sam started dancing later in childhood. She auditioned twice for a professional ballet school but was not accepted either time. She, too, did not let this experience discourage her, and she never stopped dancing. In fact, she appeared to have an outlook about her experience that one would expect to see from a woman much older, as she stated:

I'm very set on the fact that you've got to be thankful for what you have. Sure, take your time getting over what you don't have. But, until you've gotten over the fact that you're missing this or you're not talented enough in this, you won't be able to look for what you are good at.

A Shared Story

A common three-part structure characterized the women's stories: (a) discovering the dream, (b) living the dream, and (c) losing the dream. Discovering the dream referred to how the women came to be involved in dancing. Living the dream characterized the women at a time in their lives when they still believed that they would be professional ballerinas. The last component of the framework, losing the dream, symbolized the time when the women realized that their dream of becoming a professional ballerina would not be attained.

Discovering the Dream

Each woman told a story about how their dream began. Some were externally motivated, whereas others described being internally motivated to begin formal dance lessons. Ella, Lily, and Sam found dance because of someone else. For example, Ella's mom was the main force behind her starting ballet:

I was 3 years old when I started. I really liked it; sometimes I am not sure whether I loved it; part of the reason why I was a dancer is because my mom

wanted to be a dancer, right, so she put me in ballet. And then I happened to be quite good at it, and it was just a given that I was going to become a pro, because I could have become a professional, you know.

Lily described being brought to dancing because her school teacher noticed that Lily had talent in the area of dance:

For me it wasn't something that as a child I begged my mother to put me in dance classes.... The way it happened was actually I was at school, just regular school, this would be about a 5- or 6-year-old child. We had a class called rhythm and movement, which I absolutely loved. The teacher would put on music and we would just dance, acting out sort of whatever we felt. I would lose myself in the music; I would just absolutely love it. That teacher, I think, spoke to my mother and said, "Your daughter really has got a talent for this sort of thing." My mother, I think, probably would have liked to have danced if she could have, but she never had the opportunity as a child. So I think in a way it was sort of through her.

Sam found dance because her best friend at school took ballet and Sam wanted to be just like her:

I would have been, I think, in Grade 2, and my best friend at the time was taking ballet classes and I just wanted to take ballet classes so badly. I kept asking and I kept asking and I kept asking, and finally my mom said, "Well no, not ballet, that is too hard core. You stand there and you do it," so she had put me in dance. I started with a studio that was a modern-based, intro-to-dance, free-movement kind of studio. So that is where I started when I was 6. It took me a year to convince her that I wanted to take ballet, that's what I wanted. So when I was 7 I got to move over to the main studio in my home city and from there I started with ballet.

In comparison, Megan and Piper described being internally motivated to dance. Megan, for example, started lessons because of the way she danced around the house as a young child:

My parents put me in when I was, I think, 3 years old. We have old home videos of even before I was 3 where I was dancing around in the kitchen, so they were like this is something we should try. It's just one of those things I don't remember not doing. It is the one thing I wanted to be doing. My parents said that I was 3 years old and I would wake up and be dressed on Saturday ready to go to dancing because I wanted to do it so bad.

Like Megan, Piper was also placed into dancing because of tendencies demonstrated at a young age:

For as long as I can remember all I wanted to do was dance. I remember my mom telling me that I didn't walk on flat feet when I learned to walk, I walked on my toes, it was natural. And because I wanted to dance at such an early age

that is all I did and I never wanted anything else. I started taking ballet lessons when I was 4 years old.

Each of the participants had their own story about discovering a love of ballet. But these stories shared a common discovery of an absorbing passion at a young age, which set them on a path of intense training that they hoped would result in a professional ballet career.

Living the Dream

A vivid picture emerged of what training was like for these participants who aspired to professional ballet careers. Training, sustained by the symbols of a ballerina's rites of passage, was the key activity of living the dream. Much that they described echoed the current research literature on professional and amateur dancers, suggesting that little difference exists between the training experiences of those who go on to become professional ballerinas and those who do not. Training for a career as a professional ballerina was a focused pursuit marked by a high level of pressure, self-discipline, dedication, and perfectionism. These dancers also dealt with injuries, competition, limited social networks, and feelings of being different than other girls. They were sustained and motivated to work to attain ballet's symbolic rites of passage. Despite the difficulties of training, these women invested everything in pursuing their desire to become professional ballerinas, which foreshadowed how devastating it was to accept defeat and give up the dream.

Pressure, self-discipline, dedication and perfectionism. Ella talked about the pressure she felt while pursuing her dream to be a professional ballerina. "Having to live up to the expectations of your dance teachers and parents and classmates, that is a lot to be dealing with ... there was a lot of pressure." Ella also believed that compared to most people she had a high level of self-discipline because of the demanding physical and psychological nature of ballet training.

Ballet is the least natural thing you can do with your body, people aren't meant to have 180-degree turn out, they're really not meant to be as flexible or wrap their foot around their ear. It's pretty unnatural and it's pretty painful and pointe, it's just all about forcing yourself to persevere through pain.

Lily talked of how incredibly dedicated ballet dancers have to be:

They (ballet dancers) are dedicated to the point of ridiculous. Unless you're a dancer you don't really know what the life is like, how dedicated you have to be, how hard you have to work, and how much you have to push yourself to obtain what you want.

Many of the women self-identified as perfectionists, which was accepted as an inherent aspect of training.

I think that ballet is [a life] of hyper perfectionism. I am a perfectionist because you have to be. (Ella)

[Y]ou expect yourself to be able to do something right away, you have to always step back and try it again and again. It gets frustrating sometimes when you have a bad day and falling off a pirouette every time. (Piper)

When you're in ballet class training to be a dancer, it's always edged with that I'll never be perfect. You always want to be better than you are and you never feel that you can achieve perfection no matter how hard you try. It almost gives you a defeated feeling as well. So they're always striving for perfection that they never achieve, so it's almost an obsessive compulsive personality, I think. (Lily)

Interests, social network, competition, and being different. The demanding nature of ballet meant that participating in other activities was not common. Ella talked about having solely one interest: ballet. "I had no outside interests. I spent my entire childhood being obsessed over one thing. I never had any other extracurricular activities at all." Like Ella, Sam did not have any other activities in her life growing up that were not dance-related:

By the time I was in grade 6 or 7, I was at the studio for two or three hours per night of the week, it was definitely my life. Everybody else played volleyball or did basketball, I didn't have time.

Megan's parents tried to put her into other activities. Although baseball and volleyball were short-lived, she did enjoy gymnastics until Grade 5.

I remember stopping gymnastics in Grade 5 because I was dancing too much and the classes would be on the same days, so I had to start picking. When I got older it was just one of those last little extra things that I didn't have time for. Dancing became way more important.

The demanding nature of training was also found to have an impact on the women's social relationships. Megan found that she just did not have time for friends, either dance or non-dance:

In elementary school I'd go to school, after school I'd come home and eat, I'd go to dance for two or three hours and then go to bed. That was over and over four or five times a week. So I didn't really have much time for friends.

In contrast, Ella revealed that all of her friends growing up were dancers:

All of my friends were dancers because I went to a high school where there was a dance program. I had no social life; I only hung out with dancers. Dancers at the professional ballet school or in my dance program at home, we're all in the same boat, it's [ballet is] all you have ever known ... They [fellow dancers] have been dancing since they were 3 as well, and that is the thing that holds you together.

Sam went further and described why dancers are attracted to other dancers: "It's a bond, it really is, you're so attached through dance. Dancers just bond

together, you have similar interests, you go through the same things, everything is relatable with them.”

Despite the camaraderie among dancers, there is also a high level of competition and unkindness in the ballet world that appeared in some of the women’s stories. Ella thought the competitiveness led to “cattiness” and undermined the possibility of having dance friends:

There are certain people in a class who are always going to be more able to get closer to perfection than others, so there’s always that *uber* [i.e., extreme] competitiveness between classmates. It’s so hard to truly get away from that competitiveness, especially if you are in a professional program.

As she grew up, Megan was always the best dancer in her age group, so she was placed in classes with girls who were two to three years older than her. This caused a lot of jealousy among her classmates:

[T]hey used to always think I was showing off because I could do certain things that they couldn’t do. They used to be actually kind of mean to me, saying well you are just trying to show off, making it so I didn’t fit in.

In addition, ballet training led to some of the women seeing themselves as different from non-dancers. Piper talked about how her dance life and normal life were different: “Things as a dancer you want in a normal life would be my wedding day, buying a house, and having my first baby. That will be the things that are my normal life, the non-dance life.” Similarly, Lily said:

I hated this ballerina kind of feeling that people put on me. I remember walking in to college and feeling really really nervous because I wasn’t a normal person, I was a ballerina. I had been in this isolated world where everybody was a dancer and it’s such a small world and it’s so tight. It was almost like a nunnery where I went to school, although I did go home every day because I lived so close. But I really felt different from normal people. Whenever I met uncles or cousins or anything it was always “Oh, you’re the little ballerina,” and I hated that so much. I was dying to be a normal person and it was actually quite a relief in a way to leave that ballet world. So I just remembered thinking “I hope people can’t tell that I am a dancer.” I walked in that room and I just thought “these are normal people.” It was just such an odd feeling [to feel different].

Sam expressed the viewpoint that dancers have a specific personality profile (Bakker, 1988, 1991). “I’m such a perfectionist when it comes to little things and I’m sure I borderline obsessive compulsive disorder or something. I don’t think it’s because of dance, but I think that dance really emphasized it.”

Injuries. Injury among ballet dancers was another aspect of ballet training discussed by some of the women. Ella had tendinitis in her hips and knees and said, “My ankles were both really bad.” Megan spoke of constantly battling sprained ankles. “I’ve sprained my ankles, both of them, way way too many times than

someone should. It has stretched the ligaments on either side, so my ankles move in really weird ways.” Sam talked about her knees and hips:

My knees suck, absolutely suck, and I don't know if it's from trying to force the turnout after being told so many times, and even my hips. I also have a sciatic nerve issue that I can't lay flat on the ground.

Dancer identity. All of the women described what being a dancer meant to them, which revealed how devastating it was to lose their dream to dance professionally. “Ballet meant everything to me at the time, absolutely everything. Ya, it was definitely my life” (Sam). “Actually ballet is one of those things that was kind of just my life, like I look back and I don't remember not dancing” (Megan). “It was incredible; I totally came into this world of ballet and absolutely fell in love with it” (Lily). “And because I wanted to dance at such an early age, that is all I did and I never wanted anything else” (Piper). “Ballet was so part of my identity” (Ella).

Rites of passage. Objects identified with ballet helped sustain the participants' continued pursuit of a professional career. Pointe shoes, tutus, and performing a *pas de deux* (i.e., a partner dance for two) were the particular symbols mentioned by the participants, which parallels the powerful imagery of Carter's (2000) description of the iconic ballerina as having pointe shoes, pink tights, a tutu, stage make-up, and hair pulled back in a bun.

Pointe shoes were the most treasured and meaningful. All five women spoke about their pointe shoes, and four brought a pair to share with the interviewer while the other participant volunteered that her pointe shoes were packed away at her parents' home. The photos included here evoke the specialness of these shoes, which in the literature have been described as both magical (Carter, 2000; Raimi, 2012) and the focal point of the “fantasy career” of young girls (Carter, 2000, p. 89). “Pointe shoes are a rite of passage” (Ella). “To me it (pointe shoes) epitomized what being a ballerina was all about” (Lily). “That's what every 2- or 3-year-old little girl wants, they want pointe shoes. Then you work so hard to get those pointe shoes and when you finally get them you hate them because they hurt” (Piper). “It's [pointe shoes] a reminder of something you can, for every pair you go through it's kind of like that was how much dancing and I think they're just really beautiful” (Megan). “They are definitely something that has been kind of an accomplishment in the ballet world seeing that not everybody gets the chance” (Sam).

Losing the Dream

As mentioned, years spent training do not guarantee success in the ballet world (Hanna, 1988). Thus there are many young girls like Piper, Lily, Sam, Ella, and Megan who work toward attaining a ballet career but are unsuccessful and have to move on in a different direction. The women's narratives revealed that giving up their dream to dance professionally proved difficult in the areas of identity, peer support, outside interests, and injuries.

Loss of identity. Ella identified solely as a ballerina, so when her dream of dancing professionally was not attained she had a very difficult time:



Figure 1. Participants' pointe shoes: essential rite of passage for ballet dancers.

I think it really was about identity. I was like, you took out ballet, like scooped it out of me, threw it in the garbage and I had nothing left. It was so part of my identity that it was not even that I had an identity as a dancer, I just did it. I was 3 years old when I started, so it was something that I just always had done, and I could not even conceive of myself as being something other than a dancer.

Lack of outside interests. Ella spoke of being at a loss because she had no other interests. “I didn’t know what life could possibly even be because I never had any other extracurricular activities, I had no outside interests.” Sam also faced difficulties because she did not have other interests in her life, as did Lily who described feeling “empty.”

It was definitely my life. Everybody else played volleyball or basketball and I didn’t have time because I was at the studio from four o’clock and you’re there till eight or nine depending on how old you were. I was lost after high school. (Sam)

I danced every day of my life until I was 16, I started around [age] 6, so every day of my life I’m dancing and then this realization that it’s over and I haven’t got a clue in the world what I want to do. It was empty and frightening. I had no clue what to do with my life, absolutely no idea. (Lily)

Loss of peer support. When Ella stopped dancing her whole peer support system crumbled:

You have an entire group of friends who are dancers and nothing outside of that. So when I went to university, I was not dancing anymore, and my social network fell apart because I did not have any of these people in my life anymore because I was not dancing, and the only thing that really held me to those people was dancing. So that was part of my struggle.

Injuries. Ella’s emotional intensity echoes Kiefer (1996), who wrote about giving up her dream of dancing professionally because of injuries: “Bitterness, resentment, and pain are the only words I can use to describe my mental state when I first realized that I could no longer pursue my dream of becoming a ballet dancer” (Kiefer, 1996, p. 59). After taking time off for rehabilitation, Ella returned to classes at her home studio, but that summer her dance teacher cut her from a dance number:

I remember thinking how much do you hate me, like you hate me so much and why would you do this. She cut me because she knew I was going to wreck myself but at the time I was fighting and just so angry. I think that was just the turning point, thinking like, I think I can do it but I am useless, like I can’t do anything, what am I doing? I quit, that summer school was the last thing that I did. I quit because of injuries, I was forced to quit.

DISCUSSION

Each woman in this study discovered ballet at an early age and spent formative childhood years training to fulfill their dream of dancing professionally. Training was difficult and entailed a high degree of pressure, self-discipline, dedication, competition, perfectionism, and feelings of being different. The women spoke of having limited interests and friends outside of the ballet world. Despite the difficulties, these women strove to attain their dreams—dreams that were symbolized and now recalled in image of pointe shoes. Despite the years of hard work and desire, none of the women attained a professional ballet career and each experienced a life-changing and challenging breach of self-identity.

The women described many of the same challenges faced by professional ballet dancers during their career transitions, which demonstrates that this is a difficult time in the dancers' lives. Such challenges included lack of exploring other possible occupations (Buckroyd, 2000; Pickman, 1987); loss of identity (Pickman, 1987; Wainwright & Turner, 2004); loss of peer support (Gordon, 1983; Greben, 1999; Pickman, 1987); and dealing with feelings of anger, frustration, and depression (Pickman, 1987).

Buckroyd (2000) found further issues that are faced solely by amateur dancers who do not go on to achieve a performing career. Unlike professional dancers who have lived their dream, these other dancers must give up their dream of becoming a professional dancer and come to realize that their dream is unattainable. This can make the transition from an amateur performing career more difficult, perhaps prompting feelings of foolishness and failure leading to depression and decreased self-esteem. Because amateur dancers do not attain professional careers, they may find it more difficult to look back and value what they did accomplish as a way of helping them through the transition.

Implications for Counsellors

The women's stories provide valuable information for those involved in supporting aspiring ballet dancers. There are many young ballet dancers, like the 5 women interviewed, who spend years training to attain a professional career (BenZion, 2012). However, the reality is that very few will go on to dance at that level (BenZion, 2012), which leaves a large number of girls needing to grieve while also transitioning onto an alternate path.

None of the women saw a helping professional to assist them through their transition; rather, Lily spoke of the opposite: "So it's all turned out amazingly well, but not thanks to anybody really, fate got me to where I am, I think. I think back, would I have turned to anyone for help? I probably wouldn't." However, helping professionals can also play an important role in these young dancers' lives as they deal with not attaining a professional ballet career.

One can look to the literature on amateur and professional dancers' transitions and the findings from the present study for developing supports for amateur ballet dancers. Amateur dancers experience a number of losses when they leave the

dance world, including their dream, identity, and peer support (Buckroyd, 2000). These are all areas that helping professionals can explore when working with this population. The amateur dancers need to be given the opportunity to mourn these losses (Buckroyd, 2000). In addition, counsellors can help these young dancers re-establish their sense of identity (Buckroyd, 2000). This does not mean denying their identity as dancers; they will always be dancers, even though they will not dance professionally. Rather, they must come to realize that dancing is not solely who they are; it is only one part of their identity.

Another area that may need to be addressed is the exploration of interests outside of dance, which can aid in the development of possible alternative career options (Pickman, 1987). This can be accomplished by investigating all the dancer's interests outside of the dance world, even if the interests do not seem like viable career options (Pickman, 1987). This can be a difficult stage for dancers because, from an early age, they have been focused solely on their dance career, leaving other interests and aspects of their lives underdeveloped (Greiben, 1999). Therefore, it might be helpful to have dancers explore interests by exposing themselves to various work settings through part-time work, volunteer work, or educational placements (Pickman, 1987). It can also be helpful for the dancers to deconstruct what led them to pursue a career in dance in order to uncover hidden interests, think of other areas besides dance that might have interested them, and investigate activities they missed out on as a result of the intense training they underwent (Buckroyd, 2000).

Finally, it is important for counsellors to help these dancers identify skills they have learned, while training to become professional ballerinas, that can be transferred to their new life (Pickman, 1987). Both anecdotal evidence and research findings have revealed that dancers learn many skills that can generalize to other careers (Baumol, Jeffri, & Throsby, 2004; Jeffri, 2005; Jeffri & Throsby, 2006; Pickman, 1987; Roncaglia, 2006). These skills include attention to detail, perseverance, intense concentration and determination, ability to evaluate themselves and make improvements, ability to take directions, ability to seek assistance from others when necessary (Pickman, 1987), team work, stamina, commitment, loyalty (Baumol et al., 2004; Jeffri, 2005; Jeffri & Throsby, 2006), and self-discipline (Baumol et al., 2004; Jeffri, 2005; Jeffri & Throsby, 2006; Roncaglia, 2006). They are also hardworking and accustomed to highly competitive situations (Roncaglia, 2006). With the help of the counsellor, the dancer can recognize these skills and determine how they can be used in alternative careers (Pickman, 1987).

Although there are supports in place to help professional dancers negotiate post-career transitions, such as dance transition resource centres located in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. In Canada, the Dancer Transition Resource Centre (DTRC; 2008) is an organization that solely focuses on the transition of Canadian professional dancers to post-dance careers. The DTRC was founded in 1985 and is the only organization in Canada that focuses on transitions to a performing career, within a performing career, or from a performing career. However, there are no such organizations for amateur ballet

dancers making an earlier exit from the dance world. In addition, the women in the study saw themselves as being unlike their non-dancing peers, which may suggest that adolescent dancers have different counselling needs than adolescent non-dancers.

CONCLUSION

The sheer number of young girls who train for a career in ballet and are unsuccessful far outweighs the number who do make it, which justifies a deeper look at specific supports for this population. Helping professionals can aid this population in the mourning process of the losses these dancers endure, re-establishment of these dancers' identities, exploring other interests, and exploring the skills learned while training for their ballet career that can be generalized to their new lives. Taken together, not attaining a professional ballet career and having to make another kind of life for oneself is a difficult situation for young dancers, and more research is needed with this population in order to increase awareness and effectively develop supports that are specific to their situation and needs. Therefore, future practice should focus on the development of counselling programs that are specifically suited for amateur dancers.

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