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Why Dance Teachers Need to be Educated Humans, not just Experienced Dancers

Sometimes, dance teachers are in a dancer's life as much as their parents. Shouldn't they know about childhood and youth development for a healthy student-teacher dynamic?

By Moorea Pike

I was ten years old when I had my first anxiety attack. I was wearing a white tutu embellished with crystals and a tiara on my head. I couldn't focus on my solo and even was forgetting parts of it. "What's wrong with you? Why aren't you dancing the way you've been practicing in rehearsals?" my ballet teacher said. It was the day before I performed in my first YAGP, a ballet competition I had been preparing for, for over a year. You would think a dancer so young would be excited to perform her "Crystal Fountain Fairy" solo from *Sleeping Beauty*, yet I had nothing but fear and anxiety in me.

It is typical to be nervous or have stage fright when performing a solo and being critiqued by a panel of judges, but for me, it was much more than that. I felt the physical effects in my stomach. I felt dizzy and nauseous, I couldn't concentrate, and I was making mistakes I had never made in the past—all I wanted to do was go home. I was so nervous I did not want to perform the next day. It was not only the idea of performing and messing up that gave me anxiety, but it was the idea of not pleasing my first teacher.

I remember before I went on stage the next day, she told me something like, "You're representing me on that stage, if you do not dance well, you will make me look bad." With the pressure she unintentionally implanted in my head, she might have meant to inspire me to dance better, but for a ten-year-old, it had the opposite effect. Her harsh way of trying to motivate me ultimately made me feel more stressed, creating an overall negative performance experience. For the next three years of my training with this teacher, there was never a time before I went on stage that I didn't feel these intense feelings of anxiety. I wanted validation from her, so I had to keep doing something that made me anxious and caused me to doubt my abilities.

Although my technique was improving through her teaching, this teacher could be very harsh to me in private lessons and classes. She would often get angry with me and my classmates if she thought we didn't do our best during these private lessons. I remember a time where she told my classmate, "If you look in the mirror one more time during your solo, I won't be your teacher anymore." I remember my friend crying, not because of the comment but because of the threat that she wouldn't have her as her teacher anymore. If we did dance to her liking, we would get an ultimate amount of praise and love. There were times when she would show extreme favor to me as a dancer, even calling me her favorite. These incentives put a lot of pressure on me at a very young age. That toxic student-teacher dynamic was all I knew, so I thought all good ballet teachers had this sort of relationship with their students. These are all concepts I had to unlearn in my later years, when I found out about a healthier teacher-student relationship, where a teacher can encourage and build up a student with positive reinforcement.

Back then, my teacher was young, and we were her first students. The knowledge she had was from strict traditional Vaganova methods, and I assume she did not know that she was creating a toxic teacher-student dynamic for me. I was also an anxious child. I don't recount these events of my dance background to blame anyone but to shine light on dance teachers who may have extensive professional background and elite training, but may not have basic child development or psychology education, or awareness. Without that, certain teacher-student relationships can wound a child's emotional health and build trauma.

Parents often put their young children in dance classes to encourage mind-body awareness, socialize them with other kids, or even because they begged to wear a tutu. If the child sticks with the art, more serious dance training can begin from ages 9-12, with more classes, private training, rehearsals, competitions, or training at a professional-level dance school. It is then presumed the child will spend a large amount of time with a few dance teachers, and usually train heavily with one of them. Often, academies will hire teachers who are great dancers, maybe from big-name companies, but, despite having an excellent knowledge of the craft, many of these dance teachers have never taken an anatomy, psychology, or an education class, requirements that are vital for any teacher in most fields. They may come from a dance background where their teacher practiced strict discipline on them, as well as physical or emotional abuse. These teachers might even assume that because of their success from harsh training, they must continue this pattern to help guide the most gifted student.

Dance teachers without education training may lack empathy or disregard a child's physical body limitations, often stretching them beyond their capabilities in class and not truly understanding anatomy. Psychologically, they may lack the understanding that the relationship they share with the child can influence the child's social and relational development. In other words, they may justify their "tough love" as long as it means the student will become a great dancer. Yet building up a child's self-esteem through positive reinforcement is important for adolescent behavioral growth. In the dance classroom there is an expectation to remain quiet, poised, and highly focused, following traditional dance etiquette and respect for teachers that may prevent honest communication. Because of this environment, the dance teacher may be unaware of their student's emotions, and whether or not their relationship with the student is causing any distress. In my own experience, I would save the tears for the car ride home, because we were taught that there should be no crying in ballet class. It was instilled in us at a young age that if you were a strong dancer, you should be able to handle strong criticism to get better.

Whether a young dancer wants to become professional, or takes dance for exercise or fun, the quality of a teacher can emotionally and physically affect them. Children are very vulnerable, and relationships with teachers can alter the way they approach situations in the future. This is why parents should evaluate the dance teacher before letting their child be mentored by them, and also communicate with their child after dance classes about how the teacher is treating them. Dance teachers who have had professional careers could be susceptible to having narcissistic personalities and inflated egos, having been the dancers who went to the top of their academies, won the most awards, or had great connections.

Clearly, an extensive dance background doesn't always equal a good teacher. Without adequate training in anatomy, for example, many dance teachers might shame their students for the way their bodies are made and change as they grow. Having an education background could not only be important for injury prevention but could also be helpful in teaching students how a muscle should be used correctly for proper alignment. A teacher with some nutrition knowledge could also create space for dancers to learn about a positive body image in the studio. Watching oneself in the mirror every day can lower self-confidence and create an unhealthy relationship with perceived images, especially during the awkward years of puberty. I remember a ballet teacher laughed at us at barre saying, "Girls don't hunch to hide your chests during a step, I know they are growing but don't be shy, open your chests." We were all embarrassed, because being in a skin-tight leotard wasn't the ideal training bra that girls our age were wearing. If a teacher wants to address puberty, which could be helpful for young dancers, there are better ways to approach it. It would have been helpful if this teacher explained what body changing means for a young dancer, such as weight gain, growing pains, and hormone changes. This could also be translated into an open conversation about body positivity in the studio and encouragement to create a self-love narrative. I am sure that most of us in the room would have felt a little more comfortable with this way of approaching us rather than blatantly calling out our growing breasts during class.

In 2021, Maja S. Vukadinović conducted an assessment to explore the dark personality traits of dancers. They were tested on the Dark Triad, which includes machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism. The volunteers who did all dance styles, were asked to answer a series of questions regarding the meaning of dance for the individual. The results were that dance professionals, dance teachers, and dance performers had a higher rate of narcissistic tendencies than people who danced as a recreation. To me, it made sense. Dancers are often seeking "the top," and they find success and meaning in other peoples' admiration, such as a dance teacher, director, or the audience. In an article on the dangers of narcissistic pedagogy by Carol Lakey Hess, she states, "in extreme situations, the relationship between the teacher and the students can become almost cultic, a leader-devotee dynamic. In such cases, narcissistically vulnerable students idealize the teacher as powerful, brilliant, and historically important." This statement is true for me when it came to the first professional dance teacher I had I idolized. I thought that because she came from a very high caliber of professional dance, that solidified her opinion of what a "good dancer" was. I wanted to please her because her validation meant that I knew I did a good job, rather than believing in myself that I was a great dancer. After all, I put in the work and improved. Knowing how important it would have been for me to realize this when I was younger, it seems doubly important for parents to choose a teacher who can create a healthy teaching dynamic with the young dancer.

Some of the most positive dance teachers, who have made the biggest impact on my love for dance, have been at my university, University of California, Irvine. These teachers not only helped foster us as dancers but they helped foster us beyond the studios, as people. I don't know if there was any time before coming to college when I truly valued who I was as an artist. Back then, there were few times I really felt like I could communicate well with my main teachers—I almost felt that communicating with my dance teacher as a human was not allowed, that they could only see me as their dance student robot, rather than a child that had emotions and thoughts. I wonder what my dance background would have looked like if these teachers created a more open, safe space for me to learn in, how I could have prospered and avoided so much anxiety in my early years.

Creating a comfortable environment for a child to learn in is a prominent aspect of most child education courses. I believe my dance teachers of the past would have benefitted from these. In college I have found that most or all of my teacher-student dynamics have been positive. I am able to advocate for myself, ask questions about the intentions behind specific steps, and work to better myself as a dancer. These teachers encourage questions and remind us that class is there for us to try new things and make mistakes in order to learn, not solely for us to seek out their validation or attention to prove we are good dancers. At UCI, I have been taught that it is up to us to be present and work for yourself rather than for a teacher. I have been able to get on stage and not have feelings of intense anxiety or pressure to please my teachers but rather to dance freely and express myself as a human. I learned to be curious and let myself grow. Most importantly, I made the ten-year-old me that was filled with crippling performance anxiety proud.

The last four years of my dance education have not only shaped me into wanting a longer dancing career but have also fostered a passion for dance wellness, emotional support, and dance fitness. As Albert Einstein once said, “It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.”



Moorea Pike graduated as a dance major in June 2024. During an injury that altered her initial plans, she found a passion for Pilates through Diane Diefendorfer. With her love for health and fitness she plans on continuing teaching Pilates post grad and also hopes to resume pursuing a ballet career after recovery.

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