

Do Dance Teachers Have a Moral Obligation to Allow Students with Anorexia to Participate in Dance Classes?

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Introduction

Dance teachers are increasingly expected to be able to deal with a wide range of health, well-being and safety issues, in addition to everything that can be viewed as dance-specific. With these added responsibilities come a growing number of ethical dilemmas that need to be recognised, acknowledged, and debated. One such dilemma concerns the participation of students with anorexia in dance classes. A recently published paper (Giordano 2005) in the *Journal of Medical Ethics* addresses a similar yet fundamentally different dilemma: the ethics of teaching exercise to people with anorexia. Giordano highlights the lack of guidance in ethical codes or legislation. She shows us that there are strong ethical reasons to let anorexics participate in exercise classes. However, she also explains why, despite these apparently convincing reasons, there is no moral obligation for an instructor to allow a person with anorexia to participate in exercise classes. Using Giordano's paper for a comparison, this presentation demonstrates that despite it being possible to present convincing reasons why students with anorexia should be allowed to participate in dance classes, there is no moral obligation for a dance teacher to allow such participation.

Art or physical activity?

First of all, a key difference exists between the exercise to music (ETM) classes discussed by Giordano and dance classes. It is true that both types of classes involve participants being physically active, but a fundamental difference can be found in the character of the activity and the constraints it imposes. For example, dance classes focus on developing technical ability, choreography, or artistry rather than physical activity and fitness. This does not mean that physical fitness is not desirable for dancers; quite the opposite is true. But in order to improve physical fitness dancers often need to look outside of the dance arena. They may participate in aerobic classes (Glance, 2004) or other fitness-based activities, and for this reason view exercise and fitness as being something quite separate from dance. This is an accurate perception insofar as dance classes focus primarily on dance education, while ETM classes by way of comparison explicitly offer exercise-related health benefits such as improvements to cardiovascular fitness, flexibility, muscular strength and self-esteem. Reducing the risk of major diseases such as coronary heart disease, diabetes, and osteoporosis are also key selling points for this type of class (Giordano, 2005; Lawrence, 1999), as is weight reduction, and this is particularly appealing to people who have a desire to be thinner.

Eating disorders and dancers: policies and codes of ethics

There is a variety of information available to teachers and students about eating disorders and dancers. Much of it focuses on recognising and

managing the physical and psychological symptoms (Buckroyd, 2000; Dance UK, 2001; Glace, 2004; Robson, 2002; Robson, 2003). Advice is rightly aimed at the student as well as those involved with her dance education, well-being and care, and highlights the need for teachers to be able to make adaptations in class content to accommodate injury, disability, or other needs (Dance UK, 1998; Dance UK, 2001; IADMS Education Committee, 2000). Furthermore, *Your Body Your Risk* (Dance UK, 2001) reports that vocational dance schools and dance companies are increasingly likely to have a written policy regarding their attitude towards disordered eating. I am not aware, however, of a policy or code of ethics that deals specifically with the ethics of teaching dance to students with anorexia or other eating disorders. It is a similar situation for teachers of exercise and fitness (Giordano, 2005, Register of Exercise Professionals, 2004). Even if there were an ethical code dealing with this particular issue, it would not necessarily be successful in achieving the desired outcome.

McNamee (1995, p. 145) describes the “*Got yourself a problem? ...Get yourself a code*” attitude, as *‘the public relations solution to the ‘contemporary’ professional moral malaise.’* He points out that codes have limitations and should not be viewed as providing the ultimate answer to ethical issues. Codes are like other systems of rules in being unable in principle to cover all cases; difficult cases can simply opt out of following them. Furthermore, in order for codes to be effective they need to be understood by those they seek to control, and there needs to be commitment to them. This agrees with Stinson’s (2004) reasons for developing a program to teach ethical thinking to prospective dance educators. This has also been evident in my own work with dance teachers (Botham, 1997; Botham, 2004). That said, codes can provide a useful, general framework when considering issues of good practice (McNamee, 1995).

Paternalism and autonomy

In the case of the student with anorexia there is a possible conflict for the dance teacher between a desire to act paternalistically to protect the student and avoid harm on the one hand, and to respect the student’s autonomy on the other. However, as Giordano (2005) notes, it is possible to argue that the desire to exercise (or in this case, to dance) is a symptom of anorexia. As such, it cannot be autonomous; therefore, the ethical option for the teacher would seem to be to act paternalistically, in the best interest of the student, even though this may be against the student’s wishes. By acting in this way, however, the teacher is not allowing the student to take control, thereby increasing the sense of lack of control, which is a recognized trait of anorexia (Giordano, 2005). So this option is not attractive.

The dance teacher of a talented but anorexic ballet student might be motivated to ignore the issue altogether, arguing that if up to 25% of female ballet dancers are dancing with anorexia or bulimia as currently estimated (Glace, 2004), then it must be acceptable. Otherwise all of these dancers would not be attending class and performing. This might be reason enough for some dance teachers to be persuaded in favor of allowing students with anorexia to participate in dance classes.

Why dance teachers do not have a moral obligation to allow anorexic students to participate in dance classes

The existence of ethical reasons for allowing anorexic students to participate in dance does not mean that dance teachers are obliged to allow them into their classes. By allowing a student with anorexia into her class the teacher is agreeing to something other than the usual (formal or tacit) learning contract she has with her students. It changes her role from teacher to something else, requiring different knowledge, qualifications and competencies. For these reasons, just as in the case of the fitness trainer (Giordano, 2005) there is no moral obligation for a dance teacher to allow an anorexic student into her classes. This is not to say that dance teachers cannot have ethical reasons for agreeing to teach anorexic students.

It is acknowledged that this is only a very brief presentation of ethical considerations relating to this important issue, and that further debate is needed.

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