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Dance as Therapy in Grenada: The Intersection of Gender, Education, and Crisis

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Abstract

This narrative qualitative study explores the effects of “Dance as Therapy” on the emotional well-being of young women in Grenada. More specifically this study will explore the role dance and mindfulness plays regarding participants' mood, social interactions, and goals/aspirations. This study was comprised of ten young women who are former students and/or teachers of Harmony Dance Academy (HDA); a mindful dance program on the island. Through semi-structured focus groups and one-on-one interviews, critical themes and findings emerged that helped to inform recommendations to the government of Grenada, dance educators, young Caribbean women, as well as for future research.

Aim

The purpose of this study is to first explore the challenges that young women in Grenada face, particularly through the intersectionality of gender, education, and crisis. It also looks at the role of “dance as therapy” in their lives, both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study intends to tell the stories and amplify the voices of those that often go unheard. Pietraroia (2011) calls for more studies to be done on the effects of dance and movement programs on children who are underserved resulting in sustainable programming (p. 48). This study is an answer to that call.

Problem

Whether they are faced with gender inequality, economic instability, natural disasters, or most recently, a global pandemic, young women in Grenada are no strangers to crises. Day after day, year after year, young women in Grenada are faced with prevailing patriarchal, social, and cultural norms, which define their gender roles and identities in society, starting at a very young age. Jocelyn Frye (2020), reminds us that “women of color often stand at the intersection of multiple barriers, experiencing combined effects of racial, gender, ethnic, and other forms of bias while navigating systems and institutional structures in which entrenched disparities remain the status quo” (p. 3). Grenadian women are no exception.

But what about those challenges that are less known, less spoken of? A recent report documented the hardships that young women in Grenada face that are often hidden from the general public (e.g., teenage pregnancy, single parenting, dependence on men for financial support and child maintenance, gender-based violence, transactional sex, etc.), (National Review Grenada, 2014, p. 15). Emotional challenges (e.g., depression and/or anxiety) also fall under this category, as it is often kept a secret - making it difficult to see, address, and/or seek help. While the benefits of “Dance as Therapy” have been heavily researched, the effects of such programming are undertheorized. The COVID-19 pandemic offers a unique opportunity to explore intersections between dance, education, emotional well-being, and crises through the experiences of young women. This study uses the case of dance in one country context, Grenada, to generate recommendations that will be of interest to dance therapists, educators, and policymakers more generally.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this qualitative narrative study:

- a. What challenges do young women in Grenada face, particularly in terms of social stigmas, gender inequality, and discrimination?
- b. What role(s) does dance play in the lives of young women in Grenada both in and out of school, particularly in terms of managing emotional wellness?
- c. How has COVID-19 impacted young women's relationship to dance? How has this impacted their sense of emotional wellness?

Findings

Several critical themes emerged during the data analysis process, each with a set of sub-themes; (1) Being Silenced, (2) Finding Voice: Before & Amidst a Global Pandemic, (3) The Impact of Mindful Dance Programming. The first theme presents what young women are coping with, particularly in terms of cultural stigmas, gender inequality, and discrimination, and how they have been silenced by it all. It also sheds light on various ways in which they cope, outside of dance. The second theme, Finding Voice: Before & Amidst a Global Pandemic, provides insight into what dance means for these young women and how their relationship with the art form has led to them finding their voice in the most unique ways. It also sheds light as to how the role of dance has changed in their lives since the onset of COVID-19. Theme 3, The Impact of Mindful Dance Programming highlights the benefits of programs like HDA, and the impact it has had on the participants and their students.

Discussion

The findings of this study were developed through the perspective of ten young Grenadian women who participated in a mindful dance program, either as a student and/or teacher. An analysis of qualitative data from a focus group and individual in-depth interviews revealed the following findings:

- (1) Participants have experienced and continue to experience gender inequality at home, within the school system, and in the workplace,
- (2) Participants have experienced and are experiencing emotional challenges (anxiety, depression, low self-esteem) as a result of discrimination, cultural stigmas, and lack of a trusted space in which to share and process their truth,
- (3) Participants' experiences reflect the positive impact dance and mindfulness had on their emotional and mental well-being.

This study provides a look at the lived experiences of young Grenadian women as they seek to find their place within a male-dominated society due to cultural stigmas, gender inequality, and discrimination. The participants explained that things are slowly getting better for young women on the island but that there is still a very long way to go before they are seen and treated as equals to their male counterparts. They also spoke on the immense impact dance has had on their lives, both pre- and post-pandemic.

Research Implications

This study explored the challenges young women in Grenada are facing and how they are using dance and mindfulness practices to impact their mood, social interactions, goals, and aspirations. Overall, the results and findings concluded that mindful dance programs are beneficial both personally and professionally. Additionally, participants shared

how the COVID-19 pandemic has had both a positive and negative impact on their dance practice. This, and future studies, can not only fill a void in the literature but can actually change the lives of the participants and those around them by coming together as black women and speaking truth to power.

References

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Author Biography

Vanessa Aird, EdD, has worked in the field of education for over 2 decades and spent her most recent years serving as Dean of Students within the independent school system. Beyond the school building, Vanessa is the founder and creative director of Harmony Dance Academy, a non-profit organization that provides mindful dance programming to underserved communities. She believes part of her life's work is to aid youth in reaching their full potential by first gaining a better understanding of self; all through the power of dance. As such, Vanessa's research focuses on the impact dance can have on the emotional well-being of young women in her homeland of Grenada; as well as the need to create a safe space for them to express themselves. Vanessa successfully defended her dissertation in December of 2022 and is looking forward to expanding her research throughout the Caribbean.