

Relational identity: A case study of the Now and Next Dance Mentoring Project

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Abstract

Across many dance education contexts, students form relationships with one another and with their teachers that contribute significantly to their learning and development as artists and citizens. This research explores the nested mentoring model used within the Now and Next Dance Mentoring Project, which puts emphasis on these connections as core to both dance-making and personal development. This program encourages college women and adolescent girls to build powerful relationships as they explore the themes of action, connection, curiosity, challenge, and resilience while dancing together in week-long summer dance camps hosted in different American communities. The college students, preparing to navigate an increasingly challenging career field, are in turn mentored by the faculty in a supportive environment where these emerging professionals can develop their dance leadership skills.

This qualitative case study investigates the experiences of Now + Next participants to address the question: *How do middle school girls and college dancers experience and understand mentorship through their engagement in dance?* Within the relationships built through collaborative dance-making, discussion groups, and teaching and learning experiences, participants inhabit many identities: mentor, mentee, student, teacher, girl, woman, dance artist, and more. The dance experiences of physical engagement, shared movement, and creative problem solving go beyond traditional discussion-based mentorship activities to offer a powerful place where these relational identities can be explored and nurtured. Drawing on class observations, discussions, and interviews, this research situates dance education as a unique context whereby artistic and personal development are inextricably linked.

Keywords: mentoring, identity, dance education, middle school, college

Introduction

The Now and Next Dance Mentoring Project¹ involves a week-long summer program for college women and middle school girls led by a faculty of professional artists. College women take classes in somatics, technique, and repertory during the morning, then co-teach a dance lesson for the girls in the afternoon and meet with faculty for feedback and career guidance.

I was invited by the director, Dr. Ashley Thorndike-Youssef, to visit the program in Boone, North Carolina, as an outside qualitative researcher in 2014. I observed the lessons and feedback sessions, reviewed curriculum documents, and conducted interviews with students and faculty. As a qualitative study, the focus of this research is on understanding participants' experiences. The question driving this research is: *How do middle school girls and college dancers experience and understand mentorship through their engagement in dance?*

Relational identity

A key concept in exploring this question is *relational identity*. Writing in the field of business management, Sluss and Ashforth (2007, p. 11) define relational identity as “how role occupants enact their respective roles vis-a-vis each other. ... a role is fundamentally relational and is largely understood with reference to the network of interdependent roles.” They go on to explain, “relational identities knit the network of roles and role incumbents together into a social system.” In other words, I understand my own identity, in part, by my relationship to you, which is deemed important because of the roles we each occupy within this community.

This idea of relational identities being constructed within a larger social system is particularly important for a program like Now and Next, which is structured as a site for positive relational identities — specifically, mentors and mentees — to develop. First, the community structure for mentoring creates a supportive social system. To understand this, let's first think about mentoring in a traditional sense. When most of us hear “mentoring,” we think about one-on-one relationships; if these unfold in a group setting, they might be formed as a series of somewhat exclusive partnerships. This is the model I expected to see when I was invited to Now and Next, but what I found was significantly different.

Community mentoring

¹ For more information, see www.nownextdance.org

In the community mentoring model, each person, or group of people, contributes to the entire community. While individuals might pair off or form small groups for particular activities, they always return to the group as a whole. As a result, each individual becomes supported by the entire community, which is strengthened by the overlapping relationships. College mentor Amanda explained this approach:

I like that we can build a community between us and the middle school girls.

So that's what makes it really unique. Because ... mentorships are typically between one person and they become very personal and private, where this is a very unique experience where we're trying to build a community and trying to essentially make ... everyone feel welcome and feel accepted no matter what.

In addition, the tendency toward hierarchy is diminished, which helps many people feel more able to relate to others, as Kelly explained:

I like the way that it's a role where it doesn't put you way higher above the mentee ... we do teach them, but we also take class with them. So I think that opens it up to forming a relationship with the girls where they feel more comfortable around you because you're taking the class with them. You're doing the same things they're doing, you're having the same discussions they're having, and I really like that about it.

Collaborative teaching

In the afternoon sessions with the middle school girls, faculty first lead a welcome activity and introduce the theme; at the end, they facilitate group choreography and discussion activities related to personal development. In the middle, the college students teach a movement lesson following a general progression similar to a contemporary technique class. When the college students are not leading the lesson, they actively participate by modeling strategies for taking class and assisting students who need it. Middle school girl Laney explained how this was especially helpful:

If you don't know how to do something or you have a question, they will show you instead of saying “like well watch one more time.” They will walk the steps with you. I just think that if you're dancing and there's moves and you forgot, they're there, and you can look over and they're not going to be like “you're watching, you're being a copy cat!” you know? So they're friendly.

The college students are supported in teaching the movement class collaboratively, where each person is assigned one 10- to 12-minute section to teach. They have a written curriculum guide to refer to, but they are also encouraged to come up with their own ideas. This structure allows them to support one another in both the planning and the teaching of each lesson. College mentor Alex explained:

Sometimes in the dorms we would talk through our ideas which was helpful, and ask, “Oh how do you think I could change this to make this more interesting and they get it?” or “What could be layered on top? Do you think this idea is good?” And that was helpful having each other because we are all very different as teachers, as dancers, as movers, as people. So having those different personalities and perspectives was really nice.

Themes as core principles

Finally, Now and Next is based on core principles that are used to provide the thematic cohesion for each day's activities. Everyone references these principles, which provide additional support for the development of positive relational identities. The themes are *action*, *support*, *curiosity*, *challenge*, and *resilience*. College mentor Maryanne explained how she used the theme to help her plan her teaching section:

My process for coming up with today was thinking about the theme of the day ... and thinking about how support manifests itself in all aspects of dance. So supporting other people and your body supporting itself and your breath supporting itself.

Middle school girl Melissa explained how she saw the principle of *support* infuse the entire community:

Like clapping is something that many people do in a performance. When it is over, you clap for them. But me, I find clapping really important in supporting somebody, like after they have done something, if you clap, and go “Oh yeah, that was real good, I liked that.” And now I think it becomes sort of an automatic thing: someone does something, you clap for it, but here I think it means more.

College mentor Jada explained how the structure of the lesson provided a framework for her to use the themes:

I found myself really wanting to be able to push the girls and make them feel like they accomplished something. So strength and power comes at the end of the class ...

I noticed in my lesson and in other lessons it pulled from previous exercises from the class ... and you wanted to use large movement, full range movement to find strength and power ... The theme of the day was resilience. So I wanted to use lunges and under curves and grounded movement, and I included running because it makes me feel powerful.

Alex reflected on the thinking of many of the college mentors and faculty when she explained how the themes provided a mode of entry, through movement, into topics that are sometimes challenging to discuss:

I think a big part of the success of Now and Next is the approach of the five principles because those words help us to relate to the body. ... So starting with action I think gets everyone thinking, “Okay I can do this thing in my body or I can do it outside of the studio, but it's still happening in my body.” ... I think it makes it easier to approach these bigger issues if we start with the dance class because it's more familiar and oftentimes it's easier for us to dance around and then to put things into words.

Dance-specific mentoring

Now that we have discussed the structure and some of the defining features of Now and Next, let's consider more specifically the role of dance in processes of personal development and holistic well-being. The afternoon sessions at Now and Next included a movement class, led by the college students, and then a variety of mentorship activities facilitated by the faculty. These included activities such as the "body map," where participants traced their outline on large paper and included words and images that described them; a discussion of magazine advertisements and a critique of media images of girls and women; and a "sense walk" where participants guided a partner, who had her eyes closed, through the outdoor environment, encouraging both trust and new perspectives. These activities were somewhat typical of what one might find in other youth development settings.

However, it is important that these activities took place within a context focused on dance. As I observed and talked with participants, I became interested in the ways that dance itself became both a medium and a process for mentoring relationships, a context where artistic and personal development are inextricably linked. Whether moving together across the floor, solving a choreographic problem, or discussing the challenges of being a supportive friend, the experiences participants had at Now and Next built upon one another in a process I have come to think of as *dance-specific mentoring*.

Use of themes

As Alex described above, the themes of action, support, curiosity, challenge, and resilience provided the framework for both the physical and creative exploration in dance as well as discussion of personal challenges in life. The faculty and college mentors expertly wove these together throughout each day, using dance activities as a means to physically engage with each theme and discussion of the themes as a way to introduce or deepen their understanding of each movement idea.

Challenge, which was the theme on Thursday, was one the middle school girls described both in terms of dance as well as everyday life. The college mentors planned movement phrases that they knew would be difficult. For instance, Kelly taught a battement and chassé combination on one side, then asked the girls to figure it out on the opposite side. Jada taught a particularly challenging combination of precise arm gestures and steps in multiple directions. Many of the middle schoolers echoed Amy's sentiments about mastering the challenges:

We had to speed it up, and speed it up before I had even gotten it down, and I was like, “What? What are we doing?” ... But I also like the things that are challenging, like Jada’s thing. I was like “What?!” at the beginning, but toward the middle I was like, “This is actually pretty easy for me, now that I practiced.”

Several of the adolescents also described an interpersonal challenge of meeting and talking with new people. Sandy and Laura explained:

Talking in front of a large group of people. I really hate that.

I think the hardest thing, like Laney said, was making new friends. I am an only child and I really haven't been anywhere but home. And that was kind of difficult.

Many of the girls found that challenge of talking with new people was helped by the presence of the college mentors. Sandy explained that by dancing together, they found a common bond with the college students:

What I like about having the college students help us, it just seems like somebody who loves dance just as much as you do ... and they have the same intention as you, to learn more ... we're all in the same car together or something, we have to talk, we have to learn, we have to all be just moving forward together.

After dancing and talking one on one with the college mentors, the girls found them relatable. Kasey described how the interview activity on the first day paved the way for her to work with one of the mentors:

I was with Sarah for the interviews. I liked that, listening to her, like she wanted to be a dancer, and what her other hobbies were. And I liked that she listened to me, and that really stood out for me. She's really nice and I liked talking with her. Like I could trust her.

Many of the middle school girls seemed to greatly enjoy talking with each other but found that starting a conversation was difficult, or as Amy said, “Awk-WARD!” Once they had formed relationships with the college students through moving and talking, they relaxed around each other and began to open up more. Melissa explained that the college students were critical to the process of community building:

Well it is like if the college students weren't here, there wouldn't be a lot of bonding because a lot of us wouldn't talk to each other. We wouldn't know each other. And we're shy. And so having them there ... you get to meet all the other people.

Physicality and embodiment

While the middle school girls recognized the value of having college students dance with them as part of the mentorship process, many of the college women were interested in the role that physicality and embodiment played in helping them teach abstract concepts. Amanda shared one example:

Earlier today in our movement class when we were leaning against a partner and sharing weight, that is an example of a mentoring concept through movement. So, you know, one person isn't overcompensating. One person isn't held back. They are both sharing equal weight. So there's equality between the two people which I think is really important for a mentorship.

Kelly also found that the physical aspect of dance was important for connecting with the younger students, providing a site for problem solving and nonverbal communication.

You can really see them using creative thinking and problem solving without ever having to say a word. So for different choreographic problems or something like that, you would have a problem that you needed to solve, and sure some talking would go into that, but really that was something that we figured out with our bodies.

Comfort in one's own body is a challenge for many young women, and some dance movements can highlight that challenge. Many dance teachers have experienced students' reluctance when it comes to moving the pelvis; the struggle to teach adolescents to move with freedom in the lower body can be magnified when an entire roomful of girls is hesitant. At Now and Next, the presence of college women as confident and capable role models helped to tip the room toward a critical mass of people actually doing hip movements, creating a classroom culture where this was the norm. Sarah described how dance is thus an important part of mentoring:

They feel more confident and comfortable with their bodies. So it's kind of nice to teach them a combination — maybe it's swaying your hips and your shoulders — just feeling comfortable with your body. And seeing your teacher, an older individual you know, feel that in their bodies, as well, can be really helpful and [they] realize that as a middle school student, that's ok, like "I have this rhythm, I can move my body the way I want, I feel comfortable in my body."

Metacognition

Finally, in terms of both artistic and personal development, adolescence is a time of learning how to learn. Middle schooler Amy explained:

With a lot of people in our class, they don't get things pretty fast. Like me, I'm a pretty slow learner. And maybe we taught [the college students] to be patient.

Indeed, this metacognitive process does require patience for teachers to facilitate. The process of dance-specific mentoring, then, is also one in which the college students need to reflect upon what they are doing in order to break complex patterns and processes down. On Thursday, college mentors and middle school students broke into small groups to review the choreography for their showing. Here, dance-specific mentoring consisted of modeling the internal processes and questioning that experienced dancers rely on when executing complex choreography. Sarah later explained how she and Kasey worked through several canons and timing changes in the dance:

I'd be like "Well, what count of eight do we go on?" or "How do we know when we're going?" You know whether it's a count or "Well, this group goes before us and then we can go." So I was trying to ask her different things just so I wasn't giving her all the information. And it was helpful for me to ask her those things because I may have forgotten them myself.

Conclusion

The Now and Next Dance Mentoring Project was created to address the need for focused attention to personal development through dance experiences. Structured teaching and mentorship activities, facilitated by knowledgeable dance artists, provided a rich environment for relationships between middle school girls, college women, and professional faculty to develop. In exploring the research question, *How do middle school girls and college dancers experience and understand mentorship through their engagement in dance?* I found that mentorship is a layered and multifaceted phenomenon where relational identities — our understanding of ourselves based on the relationships we have with others in a community — can be supported and nurtured.

By focusing participants' activity in the art form of dance, the principles of action, support, curiosity, challenge, and resilience are addressed physically and emotionally, anchored by shared movement experiences that provide the basis for dance-specific mentoring. Movement is used as an entry point for discussion, while talking about real-life situations in turn provides access to movement concepts. Mentors help facilitate conversation, display comfort in body movement, and model the metacognitive processes underlying dance learning all within a supportive and engaging community, with awareness that their words and actions have tremendous effect on their young partners. Middle school girls appreciate the opportunity to work alongside and share ideas with the college women, gaining confidence and insight as they become part of an artistic community.

References

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