

# Original Article: Effect of Dance on Holistic Development of Culturally Diverse Communities

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## ABSTRACT

Recent research highlights the importance of art in the educational process and its benefits in the holistic psycho-emotional development of the individual. Current literature focuses mainly on visual arts and music, while studies on dance and its contribution to mental health have increased only recently. The aim of the present study was to analyze recent literature that correlates the art of dance with mental resilience. In particular, the contribution of dance during school age was studied with particular emphasis on the mechanisms of development of mental resilience in students who are characterized by cultural diversity. This literature review was conducted in electronic databases, which was basically due to the restrictions imposed during the pandemic period. The duration of the study was 7 months, from November 2020 to May 2021. The results of the study showed that research activity on the effect of dance on mental resilience has not been adequately assessed. However, certain characteristics of mental resilience studied in relation to dance seem to contribute positively to the holistic psycho-emotional development of children by providing multiple benefits. It has been found that dance works beneficially and holistically across all ages, genders, socio-cultural, and socio-economic environments. It would be useful to plan more research to evaluate the effect of dance in greater depth and also in relation to more factors of psycho-emotional development.

## Introduction

Research over the years has shown that childhood and adolescence are characterized by psychosomatic changes associated with biological and environmental factors which are particularly critical in the adaptation and behavior of young people in the family, school, and social

environment (Matsumoto *et al.*, 2021; Salmela - Aro, 2021; Wright, 2021). Especially when it comes to vulnerable students who are characterized by diversity in relation to the wider social context, the factors that are likely to put students' mental health at risk increase (Deardorff *et al.*, 2021; El-Jor *et al.*, 2021; Woldehanna, 2021).

Modern research, taking into account the above-mentioned data, often focuses on the need to

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increase students' mental resilience, while at the same time it is also interested in developing intervention programs to strengthen it (Lee *et al.*, 2021; Gee, 2021; Reeve *et al.*, 2020). The contribution of art, and especially of dance, to the cultivation, development, and prevention of mental health issues seems to be important, and its healing power is now considered a given (Al-Rasheed, 2021; Amber Rhae Salo, 2019). Of the many art forms, however, the one that has been least studied in terms of its contribution to mental health is that of dance. Modern research shows that dance works beneficially in most psychological areas of human existence (Cherriere *et al.*, 2020; Gara & Wilsner, 2021; Payne & Costas, 2021). More specifically, the art of dance seems to have a positive effect on the development of students' emotional, social and intercultural skills, as it helps students to cultivate the ability to collaborate and accept diversity (Athanasekou & Argyriadis, 2016).

Several research studies focused on the dynamics of dance, which among other things, holds a vital place in education, as a teaching tool oriented to intercultural education and compatible with it. In addition, its teaching seems to be a common language of communication and is compatible with culturally acceptable ways of solving problems (Holiday *et al.*, 2021; Ou & Gu, 2021; Wulf 2015). To be effective, however, dance dynamics must go beyond sterile step-by-step learning and mere reference to historical and folklore elements; it must be transformed into a technique capable of making the student's inner landscape visible. Cultivating cultural competence creates a climate of freedom, acceptance, understanding of behavior, and the awareness that difference does not mean disability (Borowski, 2021)

Dance is a practice to form cultural identity of individuals (Dimopoulos *et al.*, 2016; Omanov, 2021) enabling them to self-identify on the one hand, and to redefine themselves on the other. In addition, the organized teaching of dance in a group of school students, where many cultures merge, is possibly an effective practice that integrates individuals into a social whole, but also determines the way "others" define them (Choi and Lee, 2021; Hussain & Jones, 2021; Schachner *et al.*, 2021)

The ostracisation of the "other", as a common phenomenon in today's multicultural school, is

eliminated through art, because art and intolerance-fanaticism are incompatible concepts (Argyriadis, 2016). At the same time, in this functional process, the subjects (students) who have the ability to express themselves through the use of rhythmic movements (dance) feel that they are expressing themselves, while at the same time they are being exposed to an evaluation as "an unconscious depiction of the ego in its relationship with others" (Borowski, 2021; Schachner *et al.*, 2021)

In fact, given that the principles of interculturalism are relevant to inclusive education, which addresses issues such as isolation, inequality, and marginalization, the art of dance as an educational tool for inclusive practice promotes the cooperation and active participation of all children, mitigates marginalization and makes the diversity and heterogeneity of children a source of learning and creation (Figlio *et al.*, 2021).

The present work focuses mainly on the population that comes from different socio-cultural environments, since it was found in the literature that there is a research gap and a lack of specialized reports for this group of students on the effects that dance can have on their mental resilience. More specifically, a research deficit was found in the effect that dance, in particular, can have on individual protective factors of high school students coming from different national and cultural backgrounds. Taking into account the above, it was deemed appropriate to study the issue in two thematic sections: a) an analysis of the factors affecting mental resilience and b) the effect of the art of dance on mental resilience and on the normal psycho-emotional development of the child and adolescent

### Factors Affecting Mental Resilience

The fostering of mental resilience in children and adolescents is directly related to protective factors, which bring positive results or reduce the negative ones (Rojas, 2015). Papakonstantinopoulou (2018) demonstrates that the fostering of resilience in the school environment is of particular importance and that self-efficacy and self-esteem are among the most important individual protective factors for its strengthening as they simultaneously affect the effort, perseverance, and endurance of students.

Specific characteristics and properties that a person has which facilitate the demonstration of mental resilience are defined as protective factors. The protective factor modifies the effects of risks or adversities positively, and becomes particularly useful and beneficial for the individual (Shaheen & Miles, 2017).

According to Lyman, & Crossman (2014), such qualities that individuals have and which help them become resilient can be either endogenous (personal), that is originating in the person, or exogenous (environmental), that is, coming from the person's environment; they are activated in difficult and stressful situations, positively affecting the individual's psychosocial adjustment (Shaheen & Miles, 2017; Sapienza & Mansen, 2020) according to Lyman, & Crossman (2014).

The ability of students to manage adverse conditions changes over time. Their developmental level and cognitive background play very significant role in the adequate and optimal utilization of these protective factors (Malti, 2021). It is worth noting that all these qualities and characteristics that need to be developed as protective factors, are not some extremely rare abilities, but are contained in the psychosomatic existence of a person as normal and cultivable resources and can be developed through the learning process (Schachner *et al.*, 2021; Rojas, 2015; Chatzichristou, 2015).

Initially, research on mental resilience focused on individual characteristics but, as time passed, it became apparent that the interaction of individuals with their environment has a large effect on the development of personal protective mechanisms (Papakonstantinou, 2018). It is considered appropriate that individuals should have developed life skills which will enable them to cope effectively with complex and demanding life issues; for functioning properly in their life and, consequently, for being psychologically adequate and attaining the much-coveted state of "well-being" (Heckman and Corbin, 2016). On the other hand, human beings also need personal, emotional, social, cognitive, and other skills in order to deal both with their daily basic functions and with the management of serious problems and emotional states. These skills, also known as 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills (Bucher, 2014), which are developed from early childhood, contribute to the formation of a psychologically

healthy lifestyle (Schachner *et al.*, 2021). Thus, an intensely active person, with responsibility, good communication, humor and empathy, is considered to have developed social skills (Maleki *et al.*, 2019).

Adolescents consider their relationships very important and supportive in negative situations and claim that they feel emotionally secure when these relationships are good, and this is a fact directly related to their mental resilience. Research in recent decades shows that children's relationships with significant "others" mobilize their mechanisms of self-protection and social adjustment and form the basis of mental resilience (Ludi *et al.*, 2021; Luthar, Lyman, & Crossman, 2014). The protective experiences that people have experienced during their childhood can function in a supportive way in their later life when they find themselves facing adverse situations (Prince - Embury and Saklofske, 2013).

Cognitive skills, such as when children and adolescents find solutions to problematic situations when they process information and use effective stress management tactics, are also individual protective factors, as they enable the individual to deal effectively with adverse and dangerous situations (Sapienza and Masten, 2011). Young people who grow up in adverse conditions and develop mental resilience are also distinguished for their self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-control, and perseverance (Papakonstantinou, 2018). Self-esteem is a developmental phenomenon and its positive development can be a strong protective factor. Low self-esteem can lead to anxiety, depression, and even delinquent behavior. On the contrary, high self-esteem protects young people, helps them to make a healthy adjustment when they experience stressful and difficult situations (Von Soest *et al.*, 2016) and enables them to enjoy their achievements resulting from their high energy, easy socialization, and strong self-confidence. Research shows that self-esteem is a strong individual characteristic that is directly related to mental health and should be considered as an important component of the mentally resilient person (Papakonstantinou, 2018). Harter (1993) even identified five types of competence that are critical to a child's level of self-esteem: school competence, athletic competence, social acceptance, behavior, and physical appearance. Another important mechanism for enhancing mental resilience is self-efficacy because it affects the individual's effort and

perseverance, and also the choice of activities. Students are characterized as effective not when they avoid difficulties, but on the contrary, when they face them with perseverance and optimism, working harder in order to overcome them while having positive expectations for the final outcome (Bandura, 2012; Colman, 2015). According to Prince- Embury and Saklofske, (2013), children who are effective problem solvers have curiosity, positive expectations for the outcome of events, dexterity, creative abilities, and are characterized by high self-efficacy.

According to research, the ability of children and adolescents to recognize and manage their emotions can be included in individual protective factors (Petrides & Mavroveli, 2018). Getting people to experience positive emotions has to do with trying to meet a need for a psychological dimension that will take them away from stress, tension and feelings of frustration (Joseph and Newman, 2010).

The ability of individuals to self-regulate emotion and control their impulses, as well as their ability to coordinate their emotions with their behavior, are elements of their psychological adequacy which helps them adapt to the environment, but also to face developmental challenges. (Russo, Trombini, Baldaro, Mavroveli and Petrides, 2012).

Finally, students' personality traits, such as creativity, dexterity, and autonomy, mitigate the negative effects of stressful experiences of daily life and at the same time increase the chances for positive psychosocial flexibility.

In addition to the individual characteristics of children and adolescents for a successful treatment of dangerous situations and healthy coexistence with new data, an equally important role is played by external protective factors, such as the family and school environment and the wider social context.

Overall, the mental resilience factors mentioned above can emanate from the institutional context in which a child develops with the family, school, and social context being the most important. Good family relationships and the positive atmosphere that emerges through a well-organized environment create positive conditions for mentally resilient children. The good socio-economic and educational

level of the family that is interested in the learning process of children and actively participates in it, are strong protective factors and promote mental resilience.

According to Everly, Smith, and Lobo (2013), optimism, determination, integrity, and open communication are essential characteristics for cultivating a culture of mental resilience. At the same time, according to Maghsoodi *et al.*, (2017), the school cultivates a climate of care and support in order to create conditions for the development of mental resilience; such conditions are prerequisites for the provision of equal opportunities which allow the active participation of all students and foster high expectations for their development. Finally, the development of an interpersonal system of relationships of the individual with others, helps to cultivate the skills and abilities of the individual, through interactions. Young people consider their relationships to be an important support in difficult situations (Prince - Embury and Saklofske 2013) and are the ones that will be their basis for mental resilience.

### **The influence of dance on resilience and smooth psycho-emotional development of the child and the adolescent**

We recognize that by connecting the art of dance with the aforementioned characteristics of mental resilience through the art of dance, self-awareness is improved and the possibility for self-expression is offered; and also this is accepted by the group, while at the same time it promotes the individual's recognizability by others (Marich & Howell, 2015). Dance, which includes movement, music, and song, leads to a smooth socialization, to cooperation, and competition with socially acceptable terms and methods, but at the same time to a tacit acceptance of socially acceptable "rules" (Kutsuba, 2014). The art of dance is formed in the context of a social group, such as the school for example, and is addressed to a specific audience in an interactive way (Marich and Howell, 2015), which has to do with students, teachers, and the wider social environment. This two-way communication is carried out in a truly honest and purely personal way; and, as a psycho-emotional communication tactic, it is beneficial, as all children and adolescents need to communicate, in any way. Through the art of dance, they are offered the opportunity for free



expression, as Freinet means it, that is, to be personal and not predetermined by the teacher or textbooks; the art of dance also encourages a critical look and frees the student for a self-exploratory and discovery journey.

According to school psychology, in order to achieve mental health, well-being, and prevention, it is not necessary to seek the absence of problems, but the development of social and emotional skills (Tolland & Carrigan, 2011). Dance, as mentioned above, fosters cognitive, social, emotional, and motor skills (Kuchumba, 2014). During this fostering all the systems of the human body are activated, such as the muscular, the nervous, the respiratory, the sensory system, and also the cognitive. Therefore, the human body seems to be preparing to try to overcome difficult situations and face obstacles with the help of these skills and abilities during the process of dancing (Logan, Barnett, Goodway & Stodden, 2017).

During research in which American psychologists offered help in dealing with the psychological problems of children who had been abused, it was found that the use of dance, songs, and stories relieved them as they found them more natural. Dancing seems to increase mental endurance and emotional self-expression. Also, young people who practice dancing can participate in new challenges and they can also set and achieve goals (AmberRhaeSalo 2019). Moreover, it should be noted that the participation of children and adolescents in a dance group cultivates the sense of "belonging", which acts as a protective factor for them and helps them to determine their identity (Dania *et al.*, 2017).

Research findings on traditional dance show that the majority of young people accept that dance helps in interpersonal relationships and in dealing with adversity and also that it is a means of preventing and maintaining their psychosomatic health. Research conducted on a sample of genetic material of dancers showed that serotonin and vasopressin, which are neurotransmitters, are positively associated with spirituality, social behavior, communication, and also with psychological mood and different levels of consciousness. In addition, tango has been shown to affect testosterone, cortisol, physical well-being, and emotional well-being, resulting in positive psychobiological changes and stress reduction for

dancers (Boujesi, 2015; Witkos, & Petrycka, 2021). It seems, then, that art in general and dance in particular, is an all-powerful tool which, if approached with a willingness to communicate and not to be taught, then it can function in many ways in the psyche of children; it can encourage, confirm, calm down and console (Athanasakou & Argyriadis, 2016).

Within the school environment, from the teachers' point of view, it is very important to recognize and accept the cultural differences and the psychosocial and emotional needs of the students in the classrooms. The use of the arts helps students express their emotions, concerns and internalized hidden experiences (positive and negative) more freely than any other lesson, enabling the teacher to understand their emotional state and then the daily life of his students (Athanasakou & Argyriadis, 2016). In addition, according to Kourkoutas *et al.*, (2019), in order for teachers to be able to prepare and be effective in meeting the needs of their students for mental resilience, they themselves must have self-confidence, be healthy, and they must also have developed their own mental resilience. It is also worth noting that through art stereotypical perceptions and views can be transformed because conditions are created for effective cooperation and activity.

With the Dionysian dances, depression crises are overcome, Aristotle tells us, since there is a cleansing from the unpleasant consequences. Participating in the dance creates an emotional reaction to ourselves making us feel good about ourselves, our behavior, and our achievements, because "movement and emotion are mutually-influenced and the dancer's movement affects the mood and the emotions".

The "intensity of emotions" which prevails during dancing is a factor of expression of real emotions. The dancer expresses specific emotions each time, depending on the music and the type of dance he is called to perform kinetically. Practicing for many years in this, he is unconsciously trained first in recognizing and then in expressing them through movement. In everyday life, this is very important because it allows the dancer to make the right emotional decision each time (Ribeiro & Fonseca, 2011). The ability of persons to recognize their emotions and at the same time to be able to use

their logic in order to control their depression, impulses, anxiety, and irritability, is related to their emotional intelligence.

Emotional skills can be taught in appropriate ways and their improvement is continuous and timeless (Poulou, 2013). Emotional instability is an important risk factor that can adversely affect the mental health of young people. Findings from the Boreetal (2018) study of pre-adolescent students showed that there is a positive correlation between the occurrence of feelings of anxiety, panic, sadness, and nervousness in emotionally unstable individuals. On the contrary, students with a high level of emotional intelligence show extroversion, positive social behavior, and leadership, characteristics of mental resilience.

The evolution of research and the recognition of the great importance of social skills in the life of the individual have led to social-emotional intelligence. The role of social-emotional intelligence is very important for the well-being and happiness of the individual and is studied as a combination of skills and personality traits especially for the developmental ages (Rustad, 2012; Ligoutsikou *et al.*, 2015; Lyraraki, 2015). Many studies report that it is related to emotional well-being, high social ability, empathy, management of negative emotions, and also to the control and reduction of violent behavior (Doctors, Venetsanou and Koutsouba, 2019). Social-emotional intelligence is, therefore, an important protective factor for the mental and emotional health of young people, because it functions as a means of preventing negative and dangerous situations, such as depression, isolation and emotional tension. Given that art, and consequently dance, functions holistically as a method of self-development and also as a positive factor of influence on the cognitive and psychosocial development of the child (Pietratoia, 2011), it also constitutes an integral part of social-emotional intelligence (Catterall, 2002; Smithrim & Upitis, 2005). In recent years, art, in any form, has become a psychotherapeutic practice. Art therapy, for example, is person-centered as persons are active participants in their therapy because they are involved in spontaneous creativity, and in the construction and projection of a part of their psyche (Yatziv & Regev, 2019).

Another typical example of the positive correlation of dance with mental endurance is the following. Children in mourning were offered a dance therapy (Philpott, 2013), the results of which showed that the young participants in this program had a clear sincerity and did not hesitate to take the risk of talking about their traumatic experience, nor to express the feelings of sadness, despair, pain, and anger they experienced. Also, through dance, the children were able to remember and honor their loved ones, to share the pride and love they felt for these people, but also the sadness that they could not say goodbye. They were given the opportunity through this dance therapy to tell their story through their body (Maleki *et al.*, 2019). Another dance therapy program implemented in a family that had suffered domestic violence demonstrated the active help that dance provided for physical and emotional recovery (Devareaux, 2008). Functional dances were used to develop self-awareness, emotional and mental health in mentally injured children and consequently mental resilience (Taylor, 2015). The literature claims that through functional dance children can freely and spontaneously express their feelings in a safe environment. In addition, it is pointed out that with movements, such as raising their hands in the air, children are given the opportunity to "leave" what bothers them in the sky, whereas with dance movements of the lower extremities they release despair, pain, and anger.

Yousef (2010) in her research on wound healing and enhancing post-war mental resilience in Palestinian society has found that the involvement of young people in art treatments such as treatments through theater, music, painting, dance, and poetry, helps them heal psychological trauma and offers them support and mental resilience. Expressive art is, according to the same research, an effective tool for protecting people who are vulnerable to mental trauma. In addition, it is stated that artistic expression through the arts helped young participants to express and share their political ideas and beliefs as well as their feelings.

## Conclusions

Through the present bibliographic study, it has been shown that dance works beneficially and holistically across all ages, genders, and socio-cultural, socio-economic environments. In particular, the systematic practice of dancing in

childhood and adolescence can bring about positive adaptations, multifaceted psychosomatic changes and dynamic transformational effects on both individual and environmental protective factors. At the same time, the art of dance can function "therapeutically" and supportively in the individual, to enable him to deal with and manage risk factors effectively. The data from this research review has also revealed that the effect of dance on mental health and mental resilience, in general, is evident in the majority of the student population. The influence of dance seems to extend to issues that touch on the basic principles of interculturalism. In particular, it is understood that there is a tendency for interpersonal contacts, communication, and interaction with different cultures. Acceptance of the diversity and cultural identity of the "other", empathy and respect, as intercultural values, seem to have been cultivated in the participants of our research. The largest body of research highlights the use of dance to solve problems, release negative and positive emotional tensions and highlight the inner self and its hidden potential. Issues of bullying, anxiety, and shame were dealt with effectively through dance, as this caused a change in the way things were viewed and interpreted. Self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-confidence seem to be stimulated in many of the participants, since they use dance as a way to demonstrate their skills, a fact that triggers self-improvement and cultivates their self-image and self-worth. Negative stereotypical perceptions, which students may hold about their classmates' situations and behaviours, often function negatively in looking at things, dealing with situations and finding solutions. Our research shows that dance is a powerful counterweight to the smoothing of contrasts that come from the adoption of prejudices and stereotypes. In addition, dance is viewed as a free world language for most participants, a language with a multicultural dimension which fosters interpersonal relationships, communication, unity, and peace.

It is worth mentioning that dance, as some people experienced and used it, contributed to the cultivation and development of self-regulation, self-determination, and to the recognition and management of emotions. The individual and environmental factors and areas that have been improved, as evidenced by the analysis of recent literature, are a sign and an indication of cultivation

and enhancement of the mental resilience in the majority of research participants.

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