

# Inspirational teachers: Their role in the development of excellence in professional dancers

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In the study of outstanding performers, research has established the important role of significant people at different stages of excellence development. Specifically, teachers and mentors seem to have a central role in this process, contributing to the investment and persistence of individuals in learning, developing, and mastering a given task, as to professional socialization and influence. In this study, types of support and influence of teachers and mentors at different stages of dancers' excellence pathways are identified and analyzed. Using a case study approach, four dancers nominated for revealing excellence in performance and being actively engaged in their field were interviewed. Results confirm past research on the influential role of teachers and mentors in talent and expertise development. Dancers identify significant teachers and choreographers in their careers, particularly their important support on skill acquisition and mastery. Also, their role on dancers' careers as "inspirational teachers/choreographers" was also referred to. Reflections on future research are discussed.

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Research on excellent performance has established the important role of significant people at different stages of excellence development that contribute to the investment and persistence of individuals in learning, developing, and mastering a given task, as to professional socialization and influence (Bloom 1985, Ericsson *et al.* 1993). Several studies on the role and influence of significant teachers in excellence development suggest their impact on the self-esteem and career choices of individuals (Bloom 1985, Gomez *et al.* 2001,

Morrow 1991, Schiff and Tatar 2003). In a previous study with gifted adults, Kaufmann and colleagues (1986) identified three main support functions of mentors and teachers: (1) role modeling, demonstrated by teachers considered exemplary, that stimulate students intellectually and transmit values and attitudes; (2) support and encouragement, expressed by teachers' concern for the interests and needs of students; and (3) professional socialization, promoting opportunities for social visibility and career information. Similarly, other authors (Morrow 1991, Schiff and Tatar 2003) highlight teachers' cognitive (facilitator of learning, challenging cognitive abilities, original and open to experience), confidence (respect and trust, scientific and pedagogical competence), and emotional (worry and concern, support and help) characteristics. Different kinds of teacher' support seems to be associated with different phases of learning and talent development (Bloom 1985, Durand-Bush and Salmela 2001). Research has pointed out that, at early stages of expertise acquisition, the motivational and affective support of teachers and mentors contributes to task involvement, curiosity, and pleasure for a given domain activity (Bloom 1985, Moore *et al.* 2003, Sosniak 1997, van Rossum 2001). As individuals get more involved in specialization and improvement in a particular field, rigorous and demanding teachers are more valued. In the latest years, individuals are highly committed to the talent field, to personal improvement, and specialization. Therefore, contact with competitive peers and masters seem to be essential for developing their "own trademark." In general, literature on excellence highlights the role of teachers and significant others in sustaining and regulating persistence, discipline, positive emotions, high expectations, and focus (Bloom 1985, Ericsson and Charness 1994, Durand-Bush and Salmela 2001, Subotnik *et al.* 2003). The aim of this study is to identify and analyze different types of support and influence of teachers and mentors identified by participants as significant, at different stages of dancers' excellence pathway. Particularly, the inspirational role of teachers is highlighted.

## METHOD

### Participants

Two female dancers and two male dancers were consensually identified by a panel of experts, for revealing excellence on performance and being actively engaged on their respective field. They work at contemporary dance companies, and they also have their own projects. The ages of participants range from 23 to 41 years old.

## Materials

Relevant literature and interviews guides successfully used in previous studies with exceptional individuals in different domains (see Araújo 2010) were reviewed, and an interview protocol was created to assess the multiple topics of excellence development paths. A semi-structured protocol covered the following main areas: (1) career path, (2) past achievements and actual performance, (3) expertise acquisition, (4) personal characteristics, (5) role models and significant others, and (6) relationships within each professional community. In the present study, the topic of role models and significant others is analyzed in more detail.

## Procedure

Participants were nominated according to the following criteria: awards, participation in international/European dance companies/projects, and professional certification. Identified participants were contacted and interviews were scheduled according to their time and location. Interviews were recorded integrally and transcribed verbatim, and then sent to participants for verification. The data analysis protocol was adapted from several proposals on qualitative analysis (see Araújo 2010) and assisted by Maxqda qualitative analysis software. Validity procedures included triangulation, member checking, and peer-debriefing (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007).

## RESULTS

Data analysis reveals the singularity of individual paths in dance, including dancers' different familiar backgrounds and, in some cases, unconventional educational paths. For example, one of the male dancers started to dance at the age of fifteen years old, without any previous contact with dance, and is currently one of the most prominent Portuguese dancers. One female dancer also demonstrated an unconventional academic path, stating:

They [the teachers] told me: "You can never be a dancer because you have twisted legs, and as a classical dancer you will not go far because you do not have the technique" (D1).

Nonetheless, all the participants identify teachers and mentors at different stages of their career development that played an important role. Based on Bloom's (1985) and Durand-Bush and Salmelas' (2001) phases of learning and talent development, we identified several kinds of teachers' support, in-

fluence, and inspirational role. In early stages, teachers were important sources of encouragement and motivation, stimulating participants' interest and pleasure in dance activities. But it is their particular role in recognizing participants' potential to excel, contributing to a developing sense of "specialness" and self-confidence that is highlighted. For example, dancer 2 identifies the important role of his dance teacher when he was 9 years old. She identified his potential talent, and his parents were recommended to enroll him in the dance conservatoire. Another dancer also states:

I was very lucky to have started with this young teacher...because she was very good as a children's teacher, which is something that is not very easy to find.... And she had that knowledge, she was really careful. I think that was really important, to start with her, and it was very important that she recommended me to the other teacher (D3).

When participants started specialization in dance, teachers' knowledge and expertise were crucial to develop expert dance knowledge. At this stage, participants also reveal the central role of some teachers who recognized their talent and originality and helped them to improve their skills. As an example, Dancer 4 identifies a teacher that:

...also saw my motivation and helped me a lot until the end of conservatoire. Indeed, from then on I began to evolve gradually, with hard work and effort, also with the help of colleagues, but essentially of this teacher (D4).

Also, Dancer 1 refers to the important role of some teachers who "understand that I could not have the technique but I had the will of being on stage," so they helped her to improve her skills and to apply her energy on stage.

After educational training, participants identified significant mentors and their role in professional socialization and career influence. Additionally, participants reported significant events where teachers' and mentors' action was influential to their individual careers. Dancer 3 identifies a choreographer she worked with that was influential to her work: "it opened doors to things I had never done or experienced or knew that existed." Also, dancer 4 reveals that when he started his professional career he had not yet developed the maturity and experience required to dance in a professional company. The company director was one of the significant people that had an influential role in his career and personal development: "It was with them I learned the most in that phase." Participants also stress the value of professional invita-

tions and contacts, in addition to professional advice from mentors for their careers development. Finally, participants highlight the rigor and expert knowledge of their teachers, their motivational competence, and the inspirational role of some choreographers as key characteristics of their mentors. Dancers also identify some choreographers they worked with as “divas,” having a strong effect in their personal “trademark” and their careers’ development.

## DISCUSSION

The present data confirm the literature review on the importance of teachers and choreographers as a facilitating factor of excellence development (Amabile 1983, Bloom 1985, Gagné 2004, Subotnik *et al.* 2003). Particularly, teachers’ rigor and technical demand in early stages of expertise acquisition, as well their ability to recognize participants’ potential talent and originality were emphasized. Dancers’ contact with some “inspirational” teachers/choreographers seem to be influential in developing a sense of “specialness,” self-confidence, motivation to persist and improve, and “inspiration” for tracing their own pathways. The influential role of significant others is especially discussed in excellence literature, but research on dance excellence is still developing. Additional data on the specific quality of support and characteristics of teachers and choreographers in different stages of the dance career is needed for more refined and comprehensive conceptualizations on excellence in dance.

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