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Stepping into Salsa culture: an experiential account of engaging with a university non-credit dance programme

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ABSTRACT

Salsa is a popular form of partnered social dance with a distinct Latinx identity. In the qualitative literature, the experience of involvement in Salsa has been explored within a community-based setting in a cultural and health promotion context. How students experience engaging with Salsa, as a social dance when instruction is provided within a university environment and delivered as non-formal learning, remains less clear. This research sought to improve our understanding of how university students in the United Kingdom experience Salsa when offered as non-credit group-based dance classes. We collected data using face-to-face semi-structured individual interviews and took a reflexive approach with our thematic analysis. The three themes we developed were: Stress relief and escapism; Challenging at first but amazing after; and Switching partners to meet people. University campus-based partnered social dance provides opportunity to experience subjective well-being, skill acquisition, and social connectedness. We discuss some of the practical implications of supporting Salsa as a means of non-formal learning to enhance mental health through physical activity engagement within higher education.

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Big Q; Braun and Clarke; constructionist; Latin dancing; wellbeing

Introduction

Here, we use the World Health Organization (2018) description of physical activity as a broad term that refers to any movement of the body requiring energy expenditure above that at rest. Hence, dance and partnered dance are examples of physical activities taken part in by adults, regardless of whether engaged in for artistic or social purposes. In the United Kingdom, currently, one in three men and one in two women are not physically active enough for good health; moreover, one in six deaths is attributable to physical inactivity (Public Health England 2019). According to Public Health England (2019), an increase in physical activity in early adulthood can benefit not only physical health but mental health as well. This is an important issue as poor mental health is increasing in prevalence in young adults in the United Kingdom (Brown 2018). It was reported that experiencing poor mental health, especially in young adults in higher education (Granieri, Franzoi, and Chung 2021), can disrupt

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daily functioning and cause emotional distress, in turn manifesting in lowered mood and self-confidence alongside feelings of social isolation (Royal College of Psychiatrists 2011).

It would be prudent, therefore, to evaluate physical activities within the realm of arts and health research, such as dance, where provision has focussed on cultural, social, and emotional enhancement rather than physical benefits alone (Hanna 1995; Jain and Brown 2001; Ravelin, Kylmä, and Korhonen 2006). In a recent qualitative systematic review, Sheppard and Broughton (Sheppard and Broughton 2020, 2) contended that ‘a contemporary understanding of health and what it means to be healthy needs to incorporate more than medical or biological perspectives’. They further described the positive contributions of dance to health and well-being across different cultures and age groups. Dance provides a context for social and cultural participation and community building, allowing individuals to manage their cognitive function, stress reduction, self-perception, and physical and mental health (Hanna 1995; Jain and Brown 2001; Sheppard and Broughton 2020). Involving sight, sound, touch, and kinaesthesia, dance has been referred to by Hanna (1995) as purposeful, rhythmical, and culturally patterned sequences of body movement often synchronised to music. In Latinx culture, partnered dance has a long and rich history (McMains 2016; Renta 2004) and is participated in by all age groups. Its popularity is, in part, due to its accessibility as a social, rather than an artistic, dance. Nevertheless, we feel Hanna’s (1995) description of what dance is to be perfectly fitting here. Despite the experience of (primarily European/western; Jain and Brown 2001) dance having been explored in a health promotion context in the qualitative literature, surprisingly few authors (Iuliano et al. 2017) have asked the same research questions of partnered social dance with a Latinx identity (Bock and Borland 2011).

Two holistic aspects of health that have been evaluated qualitatively as outcomes of physical activity are subjective well-being and social connectedness. Although the former is a topic of much philosophical debate, here we consider subjective well-being to mean the emotional condition of being authentically happy (Haybron 2005). When one experiences subjective well-being, they are exhibiting ‘a sufficiently favorable balance of positive versus negative’ (Haybron 2005, 307) emotion. The concept of social connectedness we align with here is based on Baumeister and Leary’s (Baumeister and Leary 1995) understanding that all people are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a need to belong, that is, we have an awareness and wanting for enduring relationships in the social world. It is specifically these outcomes that were the focus of Wankel and Berger’s (Wankel and Berger 1990) theoretical presentation of the beneficial effects of engaging with physical activity. Physical activity yields enjoyment and growth on a personal level and integration and change on a social level (Wankel and Berger 1990). Programmes of physical activity, however, require appropriate frequency, intensity, time, type, and level of challenge considerations alongside appropriate environmental, organisational, and social contexts to be fruitful (Wankel and Berger 1990). More recent qualitative explorations of physical activity in adults with mental health needs have illuminated individuals’ positive experiences through social support, social interaction, gaining a sense of meaning, purpose, and achievement (Mason and Holt 2012), and deepening one’s understanding of the personal journey to health (Pickard, Rodriguez,

and Lewis 2017). Not dissimilarly, Crone, Smith, and Gough (2005) highlighted themes of self-acceptance and belonging in adults who had been referred to exercise schemes for (primarily physical) health reasons.

Much positivist research has given us an indication of why young adults in higher education take part in physical activity, yet qualitatively, there is less evidence to help us understand how it feels, what it means, and what its possible connections are with mental health in this specific population group. The transition to entering higher education is recognised as a critical time marked by declining physical activity levels with university students reporting a lack of time, mainly due to academic schedule, work commitments, and personal relationships, as the primary reason for being physically inactive (Deliens et al. 2015; Greaney et al. 2009; LaCaille et al. 2011). Factors facilitating physical activity include perceived enjoyment, personal motivation, social support, and availability of campus-based participation opportunities (Deliens et al. 2015; LaCaille et al. 2011). In terms of positive psychosocial health outcomes, university students reported improved mood, improved self-esteem, and feelings of relaxation following engagement with physical activity (LaCaille et al. 2011). It may, therefore, be prudent to facilitate physical activity participation in higher education settings by focussing on group-based intramural or extracurricular activities (Greaney et al. 2009) that are experienced as fun, social (Deliens et al. 2015), stress relieving, and with provision of opportunity to acquire new skills (Cronon, Biber, and Czech 2015).

Although there is sparse recent mental health-related qualitative research on dance in a non-clinical context, Ali, Cushey, and Siddiqui (2016) reported overwhelmingly positive experiences of women who engaged with world dance, including Latinx styles. Dance provided a rich experience of acceptance of self and others, social support, achievement, creativity, happiness, and relief from stress (Ali, Cushey, and Siddiqui 2016). Furthermore, the dancers felt their community provided them with a safe space for healing when experiencing loneliness, isolation, depression, and low self-esteem (Ali, Cushey, and Siddiqui 2016). In reference to partnered dance, some context has been provided in terms of experiential accounts of social participation (Cohen-Stratynner 2001; Monaghan 2001), although we found only minimal qualitative research (Iuliano et al. 2017) focussing specifically on explorations of health through engagement with partnered dance identified as Latinx (Bock and Borland 2011). Callahan (2005), however, described the experiences of dancers of West Coast Swing, a partnered social dance originating in the United States. We feel, in some respects, that West Coast Swing is somewhat similar to Latinx styles of partnered social dance, in particular Salsa. West Coast Swing commonly takes place in settings that offer a community of people in which to learn from and practise with (Callahan 2005). Much of the acquired skills of the dance are learnt non-formally, that is, within an appropriate organisational framework but remaining outside traditional education systems (Callahan 2005). It is likely exactly this non-formal learning experience that contributes to the fun, enjoyment, and psychosocial benefits of participation. Through engaging actively in a West Coast Swing community, the dancers reported experiencing improved self-confidence, self-awareness, and self-concept over time (Callahan 2005).

McMains (2016) described Salsa as ‘arguably the world’s most popular partnered social dance’. Salsa is participated in by people of many different cultures and communities, not only those that identify as Latinx. There are three studies we feel are worth

noting that involved the teaching of Salsa to students within higher education contexts (Flippin 2013; McMains 2016; Pedro, Stevens, and Scheu 2018). None of this research, however, explored dance from a health-oriented perspective. It was reported that Salsa was experienced as an immersion into authentic social and cultural learning spaces (Flippin 2013; McMains 2016; Pedro, Stevens, and Scheu 2018) with provision of opportunity for improvisation, creativity, and development of technical skill in dance (McMains 2016). Additionally, Flippin (2013) described numerous psychosocial benefits of participation with students feeling relaxed, connected to their peers, and having fun in a prosocial manner during the classes.

Within a dance pedagogy context, motor learning refers to the broad processes involved in learning and refining dance technique through practise and accounts for movement adaptation, decision-making, and skill acquisition (Enghauser 2003; Mainwaring and Krasnow 2010). The information processing theory of skill acquisition, although the dominant position of authors in the motor learning field, has been contrasted with a contemporary qualitative approach of how one acquires skills, specifically in environments such as dance (Bailey and Pickard 2010; Purser 2018). The view we align with here of what skill acquisition is and exactly how it occurs is the qualitative one. Dance is learnt 'within the context of development, in which skills are (literally) incorporated in learners' bodies through training and practice in dance environments' (Bailey and Pickard 2010, 379–380). Skill acquisition by dancers, hence, represents active engagement with problem-solving scenarios that involve culturally distinct movement patterns situated within defined dance contexts (Bailey and Pickard 2010). This position takes into account and applies the earlier philosophical work of Dreyfus (1965) who critiqued the rule-governed approach to information processing in human learning and expertise development.

Salsa requires very specific skills to be learnt in order to participate in the dance and is also likely well-being enhancing when engaged with in appropriate social contexts. From a qualitative perspective, Iuliano et al. (2017) explored the experience of involvement in Salsa in a cultural and health promotion context within a naturalistic community setting in the United States. The researchers sought to understand the relationship between different styles of Latinx partnered social dance, for example Salsa and *rueda de casino*, and health as described by the dancers themselves and to gain insight into implementing Latinx partnered social dance for all age groups within their community for the promotion of healthy lifestyles (Iuliano et al. 2017). Health-related themes that were generated through focus group discussions and interviewing included: dance supports health; dance fosters community; and dance promotes connectedness (Iuliano et al. 2017). It was reported that many dancers did not describe Salsa as being actual exercise per se but experienced engagement as a way to help reduce stress, build self-confidence, feel happy, and dissociate from feelings of sadness and pain (Iuliano et al. 2017).

It is our belief that qualitative methods of inquiry of dance indicate participation enriches lives physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially. What we feel is less clear, however, is specifically how university students experience engaging with Salsa, as a social dance, when delivery of instruction is kept strictly within a higher education community but offered as non-formal learning. In this research we sought to understand how students at a United Kingdom university experience classes of Salsa when provided as a non-credit dance programme. Of concern for higher education

counselling and health services is the fact that help-seeking from students is on the rise in the United Kingdom (Brown 2018). Therefore, investigating potentially health enhancing extracurricular activities for these students (Dickinson, Griffiths, and Bredice 2020; Laidlaw, McLellan, and Ozakinci 2016), such as partnered social dance, is both pertinent and timely. Moreover, we consider our research to be novel in its health-oriented approach to the study of this particular dance genre in the current context. As far as we are aware, in the qualitative literature, no other studies have evaluated Salsa as a learning opportunity in a university environment and focussed on mental health-related research outcomes.

Method

Study design and participants

We designed a face-to-face semi-structured individual interview study to speak to university students about their experiences of engaging with a semester-long non-credit Salsa dance programme offered as an extracurricular activity at a university in the West Midlands of England, United Kingdom. The research received ethical approval from the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences Ethics Committee at our university. The population from which we recruited our participants was conceptualised as any undergraduate or postgraduate student enrolled on a degree at the university where the dance programme was being offered and had completed at least one semester's worth of Salsa classes. We made no specific requirement for fluency in English as the university requires all students who are non-native English speakers to demonstrate proficiency in English prior to enrolling on their degree. The students who volunteered to participate in the study were recruited purposively (Suzuki et al. 2007) using an online social media post. No remuneration for taking part was advertised or offered.

We received expressions of interest about volunteering from nine students and all of them were invited to participate. Of these nine participants, seven were female and two were male. We did not attempt to recruit a sample that was balanced between genders as the first author's observations of the students over several semesters of the dance programme being run was that there tended to be a greater number of females taking part when compared to males. In terms of age, we were able to recruit participants across a reasonably wide range. The $M \pm SD$ of our sample was 23 ± 5 years. Eight of the participants were studying for a bachelor's degree, while one was studying for a doctoral degree. We asked the participants what nationality they identified as and we found the majority were Europeans: British = two; Bulgarian = two; Romanian = two; Lithuanian = one; Turkish = one; and Egyptian = one. Furthermore, we asked the participants to identify their ethnicity and the majority identified as white: English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British = two; Any other White background = five; and Any other ethnic group = two. Despite Salsa having a Latinx identity (Bock and Borland 2011) and originating from Latinx culture (McMains 2016; Renta 2004), none of the students who participated in this research were of Latinx heritage.

Procedure

The university offered a semester-long Salsa dance programme as a non-credit extra-curricular activity that was open to all students of the university. The dance programme took place twice per year and started shortly after the commencement of each autumn and spring semester. There was no cost for the students to attend. The dance programme was delivered at a level that was appropriate for novice through to intermediate learners with instruction given by two experienced Salsa teachers. One of the teachers was a Latino male and the other was a white European female. The classes were 1 hour 30 minutes long and were held once per week on a weekday evening. The teaching was done (almost) entirely in English. Some Spanish, however, was used where it was necessary, for example when giving the names of steps within their original context (McMains 2016; Renta 2004). The classes took place in a large room at the university that was suitable for group-based physical activity. The specific style of Salsa taught was Cuban (McMains 2016; Renta 2004), which is also known as *casino* or *rueda de casino* (Iuliano et al. 2017; McMains 2016). The dance programme commenced with the basic steps instructed in a non-partner fashion and progressed through to more complex steps, which included partner work and changing of partners in sequence as the classes continued over the semester.

Participants were interviewed by the first author, a Latino male, who introduced himself as a Salsa dancer of nine years who practised partnered social dance regularly and who too learnt Salsa initially as a student while attending a United Kingdom university. Suzuki et al. (2007) described the intricacies of participant rapport building from an insider-outsider perspective during interviewing for qualitative studies. We acknowledged and reflected on these complexities during the data collection process. The interviews took place in a small conference room and were completed between August and November 2019. Our interview questions were designed to foster a two-way dialogue between the researcher and interviewee that could be personalised for each participant in a natural and conversational manner (Braun and Clarke 2013). To gain a robust understanding of the experience of engaging with the dance programme, we explored six broad areas during these conversations. Moreover, we intentionally chose overlapping questions to allow for flexibility and reflexivity (Finlay 2002) when probing and responding to each participant's personal account (Braun and Clarke 2013). Our intention was to generate rich qualitative data through the interviewing process that followed a big Q interpretive science paradigm (O'Neill 2002). The questions covered: a personal description of the participant in their own words and why they wanted to take part in the study; first interests in Salsa; what learning Salsa as part of the university dance programme means; experiences of Salsa as the semester progressed over the weeks; any challenges faced; and fitting into Salsa culture. Participants were also given an opportunity to add any additional information they felt was personally important to them that had not been adequately covered during the interview (Braun and Clarke 2013). Following informed consent in writing, the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author in the manner described by Braun and Clarke (2006). To increase readability, minor hesitations in speech were omitted and any potentially identifying details were modified to ensure confidentiality. In total, the interview time for all participants was 5 hours 42 minutes.

Analysis

To analyse our data, a reflexive (Finlay 2002) approach to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was taken. As qualitative researchers, we acknowledge the role played by our interpretive framework during both the collection and analysis stages of data handling. Our personal experiences, subjective understandings, and theoretical alignment were involved in creation of the analytic account we present. We adopted Finlay's (2002) deliberate approach to qualitative research involving critical self-awareness during each reflexive stage of the research process. Themes were generated (Braun and Clarke 2019) in a deductive or theoretical (Braun and Clarke 2006) manner as our existing understanding of how people engage with Salsa in different contexts helped shape theme generation in this research. This was done using primarily latent coding (Braun and Clarke 2006) as we attempted to capture underlying meanings behind the data that we understood to be informing the semantic content. Our findings are presented using a constructionist orientation (Gergen 1985), where we acknowledge that interpretation and understanding of experience is co-created between researcher and research participant. Our reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019), therefore, is aligned with big Q interpretive science (O'Neill 2002).

The first author followed Braun and Clarke's (Braun and Clarke 2006) step-by-step phases for doing thematic analysis. Our transcripts were read several times to gain familiarisation with the content before noting initial codes. These initial codes were created recursively, then grouped to form candidate themes. We reviewed our analysis at this stage and checked our candidate themes against the initial coding and across the entire data set. We looked for good fit in patterns of shared meaning we had constructed and sought a clear central organising concept for each candidate theme. We continued this refining process until we generated our final themes and corresponding sub-themes. A thematic map is provided for representation (Figure 1). Although not every participant spoke in depth about each individual theme, we feel our themes indeed represent genuine experiences of the participants in the study. For preservation of anonymity, all names used in this research are pseudonyms.

Results

Students from a variety of cultural backgrounds, which reflects the diversity of our West Midlands of England, United Kingdom university, expressed an articulated and clearly patterned set of ideas about how they experience Salsa. Our analytic process was interpretive and underpinned by our understanding of the positive relationship between physical activity and mental health. With this in mind, we generated three particularly salient themes and named them in a fashion we feel captures this relationship well. The three themes we developed were: Stress relief and escapism; Challenging at first but amazing after; and Switching partners to meet people. These themes and their corresponding sub-themes are presented and discussed here.

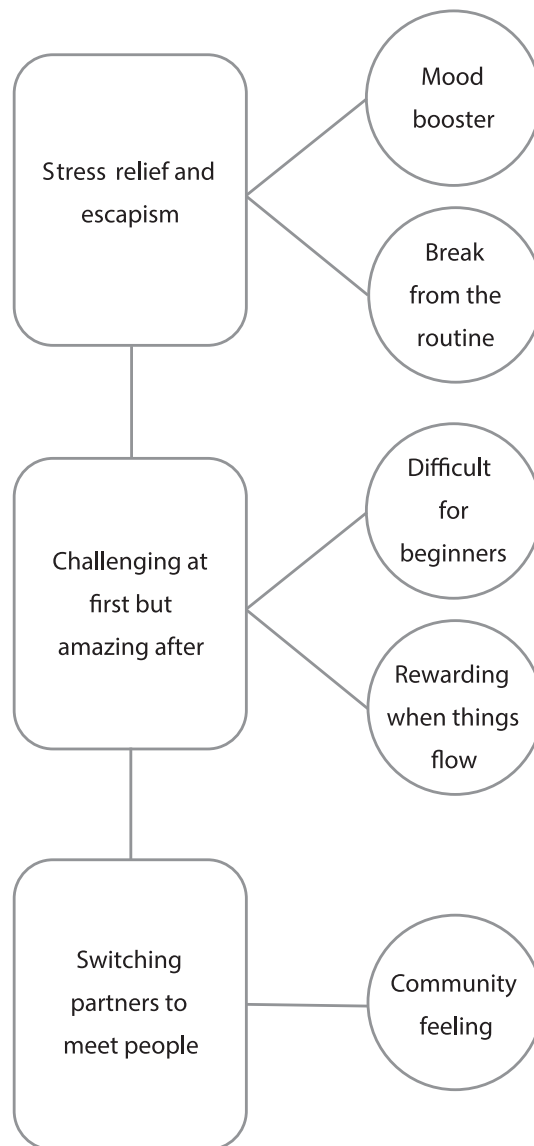


Figure 1. Thematic map generated during analysis of our interview data.

Stress relief and escapism

Mood was referred to frequently with Salsa overwhelmingly being described as a means of mood enhancement to complement the often ordinary, yet demanding, routine of student life. As Monika, quite straightforwardly, put it:

When you're dancing you don't think about all the problems that you have, so people in Salsa always tend to be in a good mood and it's a very positive atmosphere ... physical activity in general promotes well-being, so it's been a very positive experience ... and yeah just being around like-minded people has definitely made me feel a part of the university more.

Mood was also discussed as it relates to dance as a multisensory experience with participants commenting on pleasant feelings associated with particular songs played during the classes. For Melisa, the music was sometimes almost as important, if not more so, than the dance itself:

Every time that song would come up I'd feel really happy and then when I'd go home and listen to that song I'd still feel happy as well, so there was something about the music I really enjoyed . . . you forget about things that are happening outside . . . I think that whole environment is just somewhere that's a good place to be.

The participants often described feelings of joy and happiness through learning Salsa and expressed this as 'contributing immensely to your own self-confidence' (Ana). Ana continued 'I can really do this and yeah it brings you so much satisfaction'. Beatrice talked about the classes as 'a place where I can learn, relax, and enjoy at the same time. It almost feels like a small party for me'. Monika stated 'every time I come back from dancing Salsa I have a huge smile on my face. It positively contributes to my mental health as well'. Sandra described the classes as more of a holistic experience 'because Salsa, all in all, is like bringing people together, enjoying the dance, and just chatting and being happy'. This sentiment was shared by others too. Seth remarked 'when it comes to meeting people, when it comes to dancing, when it comes to support, I would say it's one of the best university experiences I've had'. Some participants were more implicit in terms of expressing how Salsa facilitated mood enhancement for them personally:

I definitely felt that, I don't want to be cliché, but it kind of awakened part of me that wanted to move, wanted to dance, wanted to express myself. It was such a great feeling. Salsa has brought a lot into my university life for sure. (Robyn)

Salsa was also discussed as being a needed break from the regular routine. 'It being right in the middle of the week and being completely different to what my degree is, it's sort of time to relax and think about something other than my studies' remarked Alex. Melisa described Salsa as 'something to do that's different and breaks up the week . . . it gets me out of the environment I'm usually in'. Sandra, in describing her usual university week, noted that Salsa is 'a very good distraction from my studies'. Ana spoke about Salsa as being 'a nice addition to everything that's happening to me . . . I'm always eager to go to the classes'. She explained that 'doing Salsa, especially during my university studies, is a good way of finding balance . . . it's something that brings balance and harmony to my everyday life'. The classes were also described in positive terms as a means of getting away from or beating boredom. Iuliana spoke of wanting 'to do something interesting, because as we all know, you don't have much to do and I wanted to be part of a society where I can be [physically] active'. In relation to dance, engaging with hobbies was talked about as a way to break up the day-to-day routine with the Salsa classes being seen as an appealing option because 'other memberships are expensive' (Iuliana). Sandra expanded:

The biggest part of it is social . . . so besides university and work I have a hobby, something to do, because . . . of course everyone needs something like a hobby. Somewhere they go and talk to people and just get out of the house.

Relating Salsa to her previous dance experience in non-Latinx styles when she was younger, Beatrice remarked 'it's the best part of the week. It's just having a break from my modules . . . it relates to what I did before university. It's the only thing in common

with my previous life'. On the whole, the participants spoke frequently about the dance programme being a positive experience for them. They shared personal accounts of feeling elated in mood after dance and often described Salsa as a complement to or distraction from their life as university students.

Challenging at first but amazing after

On the other hand, the participants recalled experiences during Salsa they felt were difficult for them in terms of learning the dance. 'Dancing is not something that comes naturally for me or that I'm very confident in doing. I'm very . . . self-conscious of how I think I look' explained Melisa. The participants commented on the basics of Salsa being harder to learn than what they had anticipated. For Iuliana, the difficulty was 'getting used to the steps and getting used to extracting the rhythm. It was challenging, but it was good'. For Seth, familiarisation with the songs was something additional that needed to be done alongside learning the physical aspects of the dance. He remarked 'the biggest challenge was actually getting my ears used to the music'. Alex described the 'pressure' he felt 'if you get it wrong', especially when learning *rueda de casino*. He also discussed knowing that as the dance programme was for novices, he was likely not the only person experiencing these difficulties. He remarked 'where one person struggles, everyone is sort of struggling'. The female participants expressed difficulty in adapting to the follower's role as they progressed to learning partner work. Additionally, they noted the dependency they felt on their partner's ability to dance when practising as a couple. Ana explained:

At first it was more like concentrating on learning the moves and the steps, then later learning how to dance *with* [emphasis added] a partner. Considering that there is someone else around you, you should bear in mind how they move and what you do . . . and especially from the female position you should allow your partner to lead you, which was very hard for me.

The difficulties of learning Salsa, conversely, were also phrased in positive terms. The participants expressed that situations experienced as challenging, especially when learning new skills, such as dance, are not necessarily negative experiences. As Robyn put it:

I definitely felt like I was the worst person there. This made me hungry for more. I could see I had such a way to improve and this made me happy and excited because I could see myself getting better . . . I don't want it to be too easy, otherwise I'd get bored. I want it to be a challenge.

The participants often referred to learning, feeling, and flowing in dance. Ana spoke of 'developing my own abilities and seeing how and if I can fit in with the feeling of this dance'. She noted 'it's great to see how people develop their feel and understanding about the dance and master control over their own bodies . . . this was my lasting experience'. Not dissimilarly, when discussing the skills learnt in the dance programme, Beatrice said 'I find it really relaxing. Even though I'm learning new things, I'm not stressing over it'. In describing her experience of flow in Salsa, Monika said 'it's almost a time to relax . . . I can just enjoy the music at that point'. Iuliana spoke about learning how to dance in terms of being 'adaptable to learn new skills, new sequences, and patterns that connect to each

other'. 'I think this relates to other subjects too' she stated. The participants overwhelmingly found it rewarding as they progressed each week during the dance programme. As Melisa explained:

I can forget about being so conscious sometimes and that's good . . . it's sort of feeling like yeah when things flow that's a really good feeling . . . I really look forward to that. Overall, that's what made it a really great experience for me.

Robyn stated 'I like group activities and I think everyone learning together and going "oh" at the end . . . you know it's been rewarding and you know it's been fun'. Alex described the experience of learning Salsa as one where 'you come away with an idea of how to be creative' in dance. He continued 'in terms of listening to the music and knowing when to step, if you still have to think about it then you're not dancing'. Collectively, the participants expressed feeling a strong sense of reward as they overcame the difficulties faced in learning the skills necessary to dance Salsa socially. Although a few of the participants had been involved in dance previously, all were novices at Salsa. Moreover, most were unfamiliar with Latinx music and any form of partnered social dance. Despite this, the participants shared many positive feelings of overcoming challenges they experienced during the dance programme.

Switching partners to meet people

Feeling part of a community through active engagement with Salsa was discussed frequently. The participants spoke of making new friends through the dance programme and talked about why the social aspect of taking part was so important. Many described their experiences of meeting students from degrees other than their own and how this contributed to a sense of community, something that was especially important within a university environment. Additionally, the participants spoke about socialising with students of the dance programme outside the Salsa classes and how having something in common that everyone was passionate about, for example learning to dance, made it easy to meet people and build new friendships. Beatrice explained 'it's easy to maintain a kind of friendship with them . . . for social networking, it's perfect'. Iuliana described the classes as 'a very good social environment . . . I made a lot of new friends . . . after the classes we went to the pub one time and we practised, so the social side was really good'. The participants also spoke about feeling connected not only to other students but with the university as a whole through taking part in the dance programme:

It's part of university life, it meant that to me . . . going there dancing Salsa feels like I'm engaging with the life of the university and with other students. It feels like everyone was having fun. We're mixing together, we're from different degrees, different faculties . . . it felt like it connected me more to the university . . . I went there as an individual, but I ended up with some kind of a family. (Seth)

Monika remarked that Salsa is a social activity that perfectly suits her personality. She explained 'I'm very introverted in life. I don't like talking to people, but dancing is a way to socialise with people without really talking, if that makes sense . . . I've met a lot of new friends here'. The participants, by and large, described feeling a strong sense of community

within the dance programme. Their personal experiences of Salsa illustrate that learning the dance within a higher education context is socially engaging and provides plenty of opportunity to meet other students and build meaningful relationships with them.

Discussion

There is indeed a positive relationship between physical activity engagement, specifically in Salsa dance, and aspects of mental health in university students. Our findings are very much in alignment with those of recent qualitative explorations of dance and health, most notably the community health promotion study of Latinx partnered social dance by Iuliano et al. (2017), the world dance as a therapeutic tool phenomenological study by Ali, Cushey, and Siddiqui (2016), and the systematic review of dance for health and well-being by Sheppard and Broughton (2020). Using Gergen's (1985) approach to analytic construction, we feel that the university environment for learning Salsa appears to be rich in opportunity to experience subjective well-being, skill acquisition, and social connectedness.

The participants spoke frequently about feelings of subjective well-being, or authentic happiness (Haybron 2005), when they described their experiences of taking part in Salsa. Dance provided an environment that enhanced mood and fostered psychosocial benefits with participants describing feelings of fun, enjoyment, and relaxation during the classes. The dance programme was delivered as a non-formal learning opportunity within the university with sufficient planning over the weeks to ensure the participants experienced authenticity and richness in their learning. Flippin (2013), in a similar fashion, described the experiences of university students who also engaged with Salsa as an extracurricular activity. Although the research was presented in the context of identity and cultural learning, the students talked about several important issues relating to experiences of subjective well-being. These centred mainly around reasons for wanting to take up and continue the learning of a partnered social dance. The participants in the study of Flippin (2013), as was the case with our own participants, spoke of wanting to be physically active, wanting to connect with others, wanting to learn how to dance, and wanting to be involved with something joyful, happy, and sociable within their university community. All of these experiences we consider to be positively enhancing of mental health and supportive of subjective well-being. Salsa has also been discussed in the qualitative literature in terms of its therapeutic benefits and ability to impart emotional enhancement for dancers. Pušnik and Sicherl (2010) described Salsa as a form of therapy for health and healing in their research on European Salsa dance communities. The participants in Pušnik and Sicherl's (Pušnik and Sicherl 2010) ethnography talked about engaging with Salsa to help with feelings of loneliness, depression, and self-doubt. As a social event, attending Salsa classes afforded the participants the opportunity to experience physical contact with others while in a safe space and with significant emotional reward. Salsa allowed individuals to seek solace in movement and music and to use the dance as a form of therapeutic recovery to overcome personal stresses and hardships. These descriptions of the mental health and subjective well-being benefits of dance are not dissimilar to those provided by Hanna (1995) and Jain and Brown (2001) who posited that social and cultural dance have the ability to facilitate health and healing in adults.

The teaching and learning of Salsa to university students as a multisensory experience was explored by both McMains (2016) and Pedro, Stevens, and Scheu (2018) with physical skill acquisition in dance being described thoroughly. These works, however, did not involve provision of non-formal learning opportunities for students as our own research did. A recent ethnographic work of Salsa dancers learning primarily in Europe described the process of dance skill acquisition through attendance in classes and specialist workshops of Salsa (Menet 2020). Although the participants were not higher education students, dance skill was acquired over time through practise in authentic learning environments, which involved not only physical learning but cultural learning as well. As was the case with our own research, the participants spoke of the joy and meaningfulness that practising, learning, and improving in Salsa brought to them. The experience of acquiring technical skill in dance, with the ability to use it socially in Salsa, was described overwhelmingly in positive terms (Menet 2020). Similarly, from a dance pedagogy perspective (Bailey and Pickard 2010), we feel our own participants were afforded an appropriate learning environment in which to develop distinct skills through practise and engagement with dance.

Individuals have a need for belonging and are motivated to establish social relationships with others (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Taking part in recreational activities, such as dance, is one way of satisfying this need (Wankel and Berger 1990) as active engagement with dance provides opportunity for personal and cultural growth alongside social and mental health enhancement. Callahan's (2005) phenomenological evaluation of partnered social dance, in a manner similar to our own research, found participants experienced numerous psychosocial benefits through engagement with dance. Both the music and physical movement involved were perceived to be fun, enjoyable, and fostered self-awareness and self-concept over time. Dance brought about feelings of closeness, belongingness, and social connectedness with others. These experiences are not dissimilar to what our own participants reported. Feeling connected to others through immersion in social dance practise was also described in the anthropological exploration of Salsa by Wieschiolek (2003). In this account, which took place in Europe, the dancers were observed as being noticeably heterogenous in heritage with only some members being Latinx. What underpinned the strong social connection between dancers, however, was an authentic enthusiasm for engagement with the community and its music and dance practices. Taking part in social dance influenced self-esteem, brought about feelings of vitality, and generated connections with people that would not otherwise have been established. The experience of social connectedness through Salsa was exemplified by participants expressing that their community 'develop[ed] into a home' (Wieschiolek 2003, 129) for them and provided an essential element of social support in their lives. This is not unlike some of the ways our own participants expressed themselves in terms of feeling social connection through dance.

Implications

Given the interpretive (O'Neill 2002) themes developed in this research around Salsa dance and mental health improvement in students, several implications for practise are apparent to us. As many universities in the United Kingdom, including our own, have engaged with the government's widening participation agenda in terms of increasing

higher education opportunities, we feel greater consideration ought to be given by these organisations to promote student non-formal learning activities that are mental health enhancing (Brown 2018; Royal College of Psychiatrists 2011). These extracurricular programmes (Dickinson, Griffiths, and Bredice 2020) should involve a component of social physical activity that takes into account appropriate frequency, intensity, time, and type principles (Wankel and Berger 1990) to sufficiently stimulate health benefits, both physical and mental (Public Health England 2019). The activities should be campus-based, available equally to all undergraduate and postgraduate students, offered at minimal or no charge, and be run in a manner that prioritises fun, enjoyment, and social support (Laidlaw, McLellan, and Ozakinci 2016). Furthermore, opportunities could be made to train or mentor new programme leaders, for example in the role of assistants in dance teaching, for students who are capable and enthusiastic enough to want to participate in such a manner. There could even be scope to link these opportunities to university work experience hours for students seeking to gain insight in working in the arts, health, or cultural sectors and for those wanting to develop employability-related transferrable or soft skills.

Limitations

Although our research is novel in its presentation of student experiences of engaging with a university non-credit Salsa dance programme, we feel there are some limitations of this work that must be noted. Our thematic analysis does not seek to provide generalisable findings. Rather, we have attempted to show a nuanced experiential account of engagement in dance that was focussed around promotion of mental health within a specific context and using a specific set of participants. Furthermore, the questions we used to guide our interview conversations did not ask about mental health history or status nor did we collect this information from the participants when they enrolled in the study. As such, it is unclear how this may have impacted the analytic account we co-created with our research participants and present here. Hence, in future studies, qualitative researchers may want to investigate the benefits of dance participation within higher education settings using non-formal learning in students who are specifically experiencing poor mental health. Recent literature (Brown 2018) indicates that help-seeking from these individuals continues to rise in the United Kingdom and remains a major concern for university counselling and health services.

Conclusion

Student mental health, from both a research and policy (Department for Education 2018) perspective, is increasingly becoming prioritised within higher education. The ideal long-term outcome would be to better identify trends in student mental health, appropriately evaluate initiatives and interventions in place that provide support, and share best practice between different institutions in the sector. Although students frequently face a number of challenges that make the university experience unique (Granieri, Franzoi, and Chung 2021), they also flourish when they gain independence, achieve personal growth, create an appropriate peer support network, and achieve academic success. All of these factors are likely to influence student mental health

and well-being (Laidlaw, McLellan, and Ozakinci 2016). As the number of mental health issues being reported to support services continues to grow (Dickinson, Griffiths, and Bredice 2020), it becomes increasingly warranted to investigate novel low-cost health-oriented activity programmes for students. Provision of non-formal learning opportunities within university, such as the extracurricular dance classes we explored in this research, can foster individual self-efficacy and self-awareness, develop vocational interests, and provide a springboard for emboldening students to discover personal motivations, interests, and skills that are of value during emerging adulthood (Dickinson, Griffiths, and Bredice 2020; Granieri, Franzoi, and Chung 2021). Our university non-credit dance programme is just one example of a mental health positive extracurricular initiative. We believe our interpretive reflexive thematic analysis of the experiences of taking part in a semester-long partnered social dance programme illustrates that students in a higher education setting can be actively involved in physical activity that is both supportive of mental health and enhancing of well-being. Our research is in alignment with contemporary thinking that universities today have a duty to provide a holistic educational experience for students where individuals' needs are met not only academically but as they relate to all aspects of student mental health as well.

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