

A Mixed Methods Investigation of Dropout among Talented Young Dancers

Findings from the UK Centres for Advanced Training

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to understand reasons for dropout from a dance-talent program in the UK, using a mixed methods design. In-depth interviews were conducted with ten dropout students to explore the influencing factors in their decision to leave the program. In order to triangulate these findings, reasons for dropout were then examined from descriptive records of 147 young dancers who had withdrawn from the talent program over a four-year period. Overall, the most frequently cited reasons for dropping out were conflicting demands, change in aspirations, course content, difficulty making friends, and lost passion. Injury, financial factors, low perceived competence, and teacher behavior emerged as minor reasons. Intervention strategies that focus on changes in course content may be the easiest to implement and most effective means to enhance student retention.

Adherence and dropout research has been conducted in the sport sciences for several decades and has focused on individual, environmental, and developmental factors that influence participation decisions.¹ Such research is essential to promote talent development, to

ensure that training programs meet the needs of the individuals involved,² and to maximize the numerous physical and psychological benefits that can result from physical activity.^{3,4} Levels of physical activity in Western societies are reportedly in decline, with sport dropout rates of approximately 35% among young people in America as an example.⁵ Consequently, the study of dropout during adolescence appears particularly important, as it constitutes an age at which dropping out is especially prevalent.

Descriptive research has indicated that young people drop out from sport for a variety of individual and environmental reasons, such as training being too time-consuming; having other things to do; a lack of fun or enjoyment; low activity value; low perceived competence; low expectations of success; perceiving excessive pressure or controlling behavior from coaches; disliking the coach; and a lack of team atmosphere.^{2,6-13} Consistent results from descriptive studies indicate that time conflicts and having other interests are the most frequently cited reasons for sport dropout.¹⁴

Building on descriptive findings,

sport researchers have adopted numerous theoretical frameworks to help explain the motivational processes underlying adherence, commitment, and dropout. For example, using Self-Determination Theory,¹⁵ investigators have found that dropouts report less self-determined motivation and lower autonomy, competence, and relatedness than persisting athletes.^{10,16} Expectancy-Value Theory¹⁷ tenets have been employed to demonstrate the relationship between task value, perceived competence, and dropout.¹⁸ Investigators using the Sport Commitment Model¹⁹ have reported that greater attractive alternatives and perceived costs, in addition to lower enjoyment, involvement opportunities, perceived benefits, and social support, are associated with lower commitment.²⁰⁻²⁴ Finally, research based on the Developmental Model of Sport Participation^{25,26} suggests that early specialization in one sport is associated with dropout.²⁷ This finding may be particularly pertinent in relation to talent development programs, which often involve intense training in one activity from an early age. Taken as a whole, the study of dropout has been well addressed in sport, although some inconsistencies exist due to the varying foci of theoretical studies. Perceived competence plays a key role in Self-Determination and Expectancy-Value theories, for example, while research using the Sport Commitment Model has noted a lack

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of empirical support for the presence of perceived competence as a variable in the model.^{22,28}

Unfortunately, the large amount of adherence and dropout research conducted in sport has not been duplicated in the dance domain. Despite reports of physical activity decline in Western populations, the popularity of dance in the UK appears to be increasing.²⁹ With recent research indicating that dance participation can result in physical and psychological benefits among young people,³⁰⁻³² the UK government has promoted dance as a beneficial physical activity.³³ Therefore, research into dropout specific to dance is required to ensure that young people accrue maximal benefits from their participation. Moreover, investigations of youth enrolled in talent development programs could help educators to provide young dancers with the optimal opportunity to develop their talents.

While some researchers have explored dance participation motives, only two studies to date have investigated dropout.^{34,35} Although not a main aim of his study, Bakker compared the personalities of continuing and dropout student ballet dancers.³⁴ He found that dropouts reported higher sensation-seeking but lower impulsivity than persisting dancers. Additionally, dropouts scored significantly higher with regard to estimations of their own physical abilities. This appears to contrast with sport research that shows low perceived competence to be associated with dropout.^{7,9,13} It further suggests that the particular dance environment in Bakker's study may have lowered perceptions of ability over time among those who remained in training.

The second dance study followed 40 dancers enrolled in an elite ballet school, 55% of whom dropped out over four years.³⁵ Dropout students were more likely to exhibit anatomical limitations that inhibited dance technique, disordered eating characteristics, an earlier age of menarche, and a greater incidence of injury than persisting dancers. These results suggest that in ballet

only those who meet the stringent aesthetic and physical requirements remain in elite training. However, the requirements of ballet differ from those of contemporary techniques (which typically have less restrictive attitudes toward body shape), so that the results of the cited dance studies may not generalize to other dance genres. The sample sizes in both studies were small, further calling into question the generalizability of the findings. Consequently, there is a need for more research into dance dropout, especially from styles other than ballet. In order to address this gap in the literature, the current study aimed to investigate dropout from a dance talent program.

Methods

This study was part of a larger longitudinal investigation into the development of talented dance students. A mixed methods design was employed to better understand dropout among these students, as such designs are thought to offer the best opportunity to answer research questions by capturing a combination of depth and breadth.³⁶ This is particularly true in under-researched subject areas. Moreover, a purely descriptive approach was adopted to provide a broader view than would be gained by employing a pre-determined theoretical perspective. As qualitative research can be used to explore complex phenomena via rich description,³⁷ dropout students were interviewed in order to understand dropout reasons from the dancers' own words. Descriptive data on dropout reasons from a large sample of former dance students was then analyzed as a means of triangulating the qualitative findings.³⁸

Participants were from seven UK Centres for Advanced Training (CATs) in dance, nationwide programs that offer high quality part-time training to talented young dancers. Students typically attend two auditions to secure a place at one of the CATs; thus, the study participants have been selected from a larger group of young people because of the level of potential they already possess. Training takes

place on weekend days and weekday evenings (CAT students continue to attend mainstream schools during the week), with intensive courses running during school vacations. The CATs are government-funded and are able to offer financial assistance to those students who need it, following a means-testing process. The curriculum of five of the CATs is based in contemporary dance, with some classes offered in additional styles (e.g., ballet, creative dance). A sixth CAT focuses on ballet, while the seventh has both contemporary and urban dance (e.g., Hip-hop) strands.

Qualitative Methods

In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 students (8 females, 2 males) who had dropped out from 3 of the CATs, all of which focused on contemporary dance. Participants were recruited using information packets designed by the lead investigator and sent out by CAT administrators to students who had recently left the program. A small incentive was offered as a token of appreciation for taking part in the study (clothing, cinema, or music vouchers to the value of £10). Interested potential participants returned a signed consent form and were then contacted directly by the lead author. For those under the age of 16 years, parental consent was also obtained. Interviews were arranged at times and places convenient to the participants. Ultimately, those chosen for the study were aged between 12 and 18 years ($M = 15.40 \pm 2.17$), had been dancing for an average of 9.15 ± 3.83 years, and had been in attendance at one of the CATs for an average of 1.69 ± 0.79 years.

A semi-structured interview guide was created for the study, organized into four sections: introductory questions and training history; feelings about dance and main reasons for leaving training; changes over time in training, feelings about dance, other commitments and social relationships; and the role of significant others in withdrawal from the CATs. Interviews lasted between 17.32 and 45.06 minutes.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and uploaded into NVivo software (QSR, Melbourne, Australia) for inductive analysis. Transcripts were read thoroughly and all relevant segments of text were coded into meaning units, which were then placed into logical categories (themes). Lower-order themes were combined to form higher-order themes, and this hierarchy was constantly updated and refined as part of the analysis process.³⁹

Trustworthiness was established in several ways. The primary investigator assured participants of their anonymity and ability to speak freely during the interviews and explained her own dance background, indicating that she was able to empathize with their experience. During analysis, the second author independently coded 30% of the interview transcripts to ensure agreement on coding density and also independently created categories from the meaning units. The two versions of the analysis hierarchy were debated and ameliorated into a final version that was coherent in terms of perspectives from both the data and existing literature.³⁹ Finally, quotations from the interviews are included in the text presented here so that readers can create their own interpretations.⁴⁰ Quotations are coded according to the order in which the participants were interviewed (i.e., P1, P2, P3, etc.).

Quantitative Methods

The CATs keep records of graduate destinations (e.g., professional training or companies) and reasons for student withdrawal in order to inform the development of their programs. Records detailing information on graduate and dropout students, together with a range of demographic information from the years 2005 to 2009, were collected from seven of the CATs for the purposes of this study. During this time, 135 students graduated while 155 dropped out. The records contained data pertaining to the participants' age, gender, ethnicity, length of time in the program, grant status (level of financial assistance), and their main reason for leaving.

Overall, the demographic backgrounds of dropout students reflected those of the students who successfully graduated from the program. For example, 79.4% of graduates and 71.9% of dropouts were female; 47.4% of graduates and 44.8% of dropouts had received a full grant for their training. Hence, many of those data were relevant to this study only insofar as they indicated that no particular demographic "type" of student was more likely than any other to drop out.

The CAT students' dropout reasons were gathered during one-to-one, open-ended conversations between students and Centre administrators. Seven records were incomplete; thus, a total of 147 were used for analysis. Once student names had been deleted, frequencies, percentages, and means were calculated for all relevant variables. Withdrawal reasons were grouped into four general categories—Change in aspirations, Other commitments, CAT-related, and External reasons (see Table 1 in Results)—to be used for analysis in relation to age at dropout, number of years in a CAT, and gender. These categories were comprised of similar dropout reasons, so that, for example, "other performing arts" and "academic route" became part of the "Change in aspirations" category.

Qualitative Results

The 10 interviews revealed a wealth of information pertaining to the dropout experience, which was organized into 2 higher-order themes: "past and present," and "dropout."

Past and Present

The participants had mixed dance backgrounds, having begun training at varying ages. Interestingly, for four participants, CAT was the first intense training they had experienced. The volume of training was challenging for these participants: "In my school, I used to do one hour fifteen minutes and then CAT; I think it was about four hours of dance on Wednesday and Saturday, and that was a big step, and it was really hard" (P10). At some point in their dance history eight of

the participants had aspired to a future career in dance, while two had never held such ambitions. Despite having dropped out of a CAT, four participants continued to dance recreationally, while another four still envisioned a dance career and continued training elsewhere. Only two participants had completely withdrawn from dance activity.

Dropout

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that dropping out was a process that stemmed from various reasons that had repercussions following withdrawal. Hence, this section is divided into "reasons" and "process." While many positive experiences at CAT were cited (e.g., learning new skills, performing in various venues), these are not relevant to the current study.

Reasons

Below, the major dropout reasons and factors influencing dropout are presented. These included personal, CAT-related, and external reasons.

Personal. Personal reasons for dropout included conflicting demands, a change in aspirations, lost passion, and low perceived competence.

Conflicting demands. Due to the large amount of time CAT training involves, conflicting demands was an important factor in seven participants' decisions. As one explained: "I had to focus on all my college stuff, and then my [youth dance] company stuff, and then at that time I had a few kind of like family kind of issues.... It all just got a bit much!" (P4). There was a general perception that balancing commitments had become more difficult over time. Four interviewees noted that their schoolwork had been negatively affected as a result of their busy schedules.

CAT involvement also had an impact on the amount of time participants spent with their families. This affected their siblings, some of whom were unable to take part in extracurricular activities themselves due to the participants' time commitments to CAT. One participant with two young sisters explained: "It wasn't

fair on my sisters.... My sisters, like, have hobbies as well, and it was all based around me”(P5). Six participants found meeting up with friends difficult, which was felt keenly: “I kinda left CAT because on Saturdays and Sundays my friends were going cinema and doing stuff and I felt left out”(P10). This was also reflected in three participants’ comments that their friends had not understood their dance commitments. Incidents of friends becoming annoyed because the dancers were unable to spend time with them were reported, and one participant recalled: “I did, like, miss them, and in the end they stopped calling me”(P5). Finally, one participant had recently changed schools and was struggling to form meaningful peer relationships. She felt that she needed more free time in order to maintain friendships with peers from her previous school and consequently decided to leave her CAT.

Change in aspirations. Changes in aspirations, cited by four participants, related either to simply realizing that a dance career was no longer an ambition, or concerns over the difficulty of securing a job in the field and consequent lack of financial security: “Just the fact that it’s very competitive and the numbers of people auditioning for one job”(P1). Expectations of success played a role as participants considered other potential future paths; for example: “I needed to decide what I wanted to do, and whether I was going to be able to succeed”(P8). Such reservations had developed over time, with participants becoming more critical of their reasons for engaging in dance as they grew older and more independent. Alongside these considerations, four participants realized that they were not as serious about dance as their fellow trainees: “I saw all these people who were, like, really working to get somewhere, and it got to the point where over time...I was thinking ‘I don’t have what’s driving them’”(P2). Furthermore, changes in aspirations made training less important and relevant than it had

been previously. For example, one participant, having decided against pursuing a career in dance, began to consider the utility of continuing attendance at his CAT: “The question was, will it benefit me when I’m older?”(P10).

Lost passion. Three participants explained that, over time, they had lost their passion for dance, as the following quotation illustrates: “I think the main [reason] was my own personal kind of drive and ambition and passion for dance had just burned out. I think I’d been doing it since such a young age that I just totally lost the kind of drive”(P1). Perceived causes of this loss of passion were a lack of challenge during classes, a critical evaluation of dance engagement and for one participant, early intense involvement in dance.

Low perceived competence. Low perceived competence was a direct reason for dropping out for one participant, who had been the youngest and smallest in her CAT. She described feeling “quite untalented and getting just so tired and feeling quite weak”(P6). Although not cited directly as a reason for dropout, four additional participants described having low perceived competence, suggesting that this may have influenced their decision. One explained: “I was worried that I wasn’t doing it properly, or I wasn’t doing it as I was supposed to”(P9). Another had previously flunked out of vocational school, which had had repercussions on her perceived competence ever since. Such concerns were exacerbated by interpersonal comparisons with other dancers in the class: “When you see someone better than you then you start to put yourself down”(P5).

CAT-related. Three factors directly related to the program were cited as causes of dropout: course content, the social environment, and travel.

Content. Focus on the technical aspects of dance was described by two participants as making the program less enjoyable; for example: “It just kind of made it feel like a chore kind of. You had to do the technique and you had to get it right, but there was

never like a dance routine that you learned that was fun or made up your own little dances”(P9). Two participants reported that there was a lack of challenge in classes. This was related to four interviewees’ perceptions that there was too much repetition in the curriculum; for example: “When, like, the second year came up I felt like I went back to the beginning a bit and we kept doing, like, stuff from the beginning”(P5). On the other hand, three interviewees had found the training too intense and tiring. One participant explained that there were few performance opportunities to work toward.

Social environment. Three participants described the effects of low levels of individual feedback from teachers on their motivation and perceptions of competence; for example: “I felt like I wasn’t improving and that, that I was doing worse in class, which made me feel like an under-achiever”(P10). This was sometimes due to the employment of guest teachers and choreographers in the CATs, which, although providing a valuable artistic opportunity, entailed less individual feedback. One participant believed that CAT teachers were stricter than those at her other dance school and had favorites in the class.

With regard to peers in the program, half of the participants reported difficulty making friends. This was explained in terms of insufficient time to forge bonds, competition or rivalry with others, and unequal contributions during group work. As one participant noted: “It’s not the same sort of friendship when you’re in that sort of intense environment”(P2). Difficulties making friends were compounded by age: one participant had been the oldest at her CAT and felt out of place among the younger students; two others felt that being the youngest made friendships difficult and recalled “tagging along”(P6) with their older peers.

Travel. Travel to training was a minor contributing factor for four of the former students. Some participants had made three-hour round trips to attend training, which had not been

perceived as problematic initially; however: “When you don’t want to do it, it becomes more of an issue, so you’ve got to get up at 6 o’clock to get all the way up there to do something that you don’t actually want to do” (P2).

External reasons. Two external reasons were identified that directly influenced the participants’ decisions. First, half of the participants cited financial issues. While the CATs are means-tested to offer training to young people from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, the program is expensive, and some middle-class parents with several children may struggle to pay the fees. For example, one participant explained that once having decided against a career in dance the cost of attending training was difficult to justify: “I was thinking if I’m not going to take a career in it, then we’re paying the money out that we could be using for other stuff, to send my brother to football training, give my sisters to go and do whatever they wanted” (P8). The second external reason was injury, mentioned by three participants: “It wasn’t a big influence, but it was sort of ingrained in the back of my head,

the fact that I get injured really easily” (P2).

Process

Withdrawing from the training program required careful consideration as well as social support. Eight of the participants explained that their decision to leave their CAT was difficult and gradual rather than sudden, because they wanted to consider all possible options to ensure an informed choice. For example, descriptions of cost-benefit analyses and research into the prospects of achieving a successful dance career were in evidence. Most participants found their CAT peers and teachers helpful and supportive during this process, although two reported indifference or disappointment from some of the staff. All participants had described receiving support from their parents throughout their dance involvement, and this continued as they considered leaving the CATs. Eight of the former dancers found discussions with their parents to be helpful when making their decision, although there were two instances of parents expressing regret that their children were “wasting a good talent” (P8). Three participants said

that their non-dancing friends were supportive of, and even pleased by, their decision to withdraw. Other positive consequences of withdrawal included having more free time, cited by four participants, and feelings of happiness and freedom that were mentioned by three participants, with one claiming she had moved on from dance to “join the ‘real world.’” (P1). Further positive effects included the healing of recurrent injuries and an improvement in both friendships and schoolwork. However, eight of the participants were sad to leave the program and missed the friends, teachers, training, and opportunities they had experienced.

Quantitative Results

The most common category of reasons for dropping out of the CATs, according to our coding of the programs’ records, was External reasons (48, or 33%), closely followed by Change in aspirations (43, 29%), and then CAT-related (30, 21%) and Other commitments (26, 18%). As to the sub-categories of specific reasons for dropping out, those with the greatest number of responses were “pursuit of other dance pathways” (22), “training

Table 1 Categories of Reasons for Dropout Based on Descriptive Data (Frequencies are Shown in Parentheses)

Categories	Reasons
Change in aspirations (43)	Other dance pathway; e.g., recreational dance class, dance teacher training (22) Other performing arts route; e.g., musical theater, dramatic arts (6) Academic route; e.g., greater focus on school studies (5) Sport pathway; e.g., gymnastics, cheerleading (5) No longer viewed dance as a career; e.g., change of interest, unsure of future in dance (5)
Other commitments (26)	Academic pressure (12) Distraction from other commitments; e.g., hobbies, school work, part-time work (8) Lack of commitment; i.e., could not commit to the time requirements, but no specific reason given (6)
CAT-Related (30)	Training was not right for him/her (reasons not specified; 18) Not enjoying the course (4) Feeling out of depth (2) Could not cope with travel (6)
External reasons (48)	Assessed off course; e.g., insufficient progress, disruptive behaviour (17) Financial reasons; i.e., fees too high (9) Injury (8) Domestic problems (reasons not specified; 7) Illness (3) Lack of family support (2) Moved away (2)

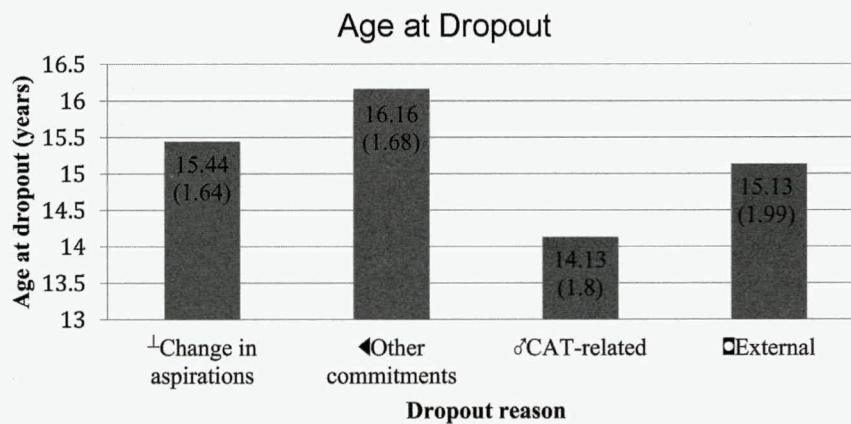


Figure 1 Comparison of reasons by age at dropout. Numbers show mean age with standard deviation in parentheses for each reason.

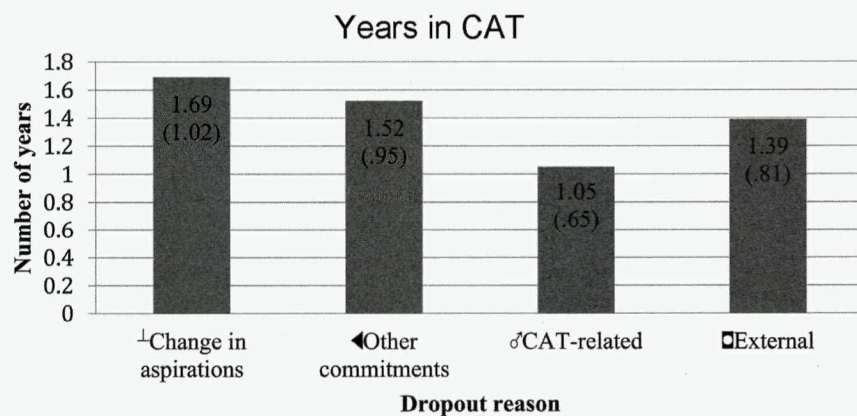


Figure 2 Comparison of reasons by number of years in CAT. Numbers show mean number of years with standard deviation in brackets for each reason.

was not right" (18), participant was "assessed as being off course" (17), and "academic pressure" (12), Table 1.

Two ANOVAs were conducted to assess potential differences in age at dropout and number of years at a CAT between participants whose recorded reasons for withdrawal placed them in different categories. There was a significant difference between categories for age at dropout, $F(3, 142) = 6.17$, $p < 0.01$, as illustrated in Figure 1. Post hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD test revealed that those who dropped out for CAT-related reasons were significantly younger than those who dropped out for any other reason (Change in aspirations, Other commitments, or External reasons). There was also a significant difference between the categories according to number of years in CAT, $F(3, 141) = 3.23$, $p < 0.05$ (Fig. 2). Post hoc tests revealed that those who dropped out

for CAT-related reasons had been attending the CAT for significantly less time than those who dropped out due to Change in aspirations. Chi-square tests for independence were conducted to assess differences between dropout reasons according to gender, but no significant result was found, $\chi^2(1, N = 147) = 1.20$, $p > 0.05$, $\phi = .09$.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to understand reasons for dropout from a dance-talent program. A mixed-methods approach was employed to gain a combination of depth and breadth.^{36,38} There was much consistency between the qualitative and quantitative results, with similar categories of dropout reasons found. For example, the importance of Other commitments or Conflicting demands and Change in aspirations emerged

in both types of data. However, the exploratory nature of qualitative research³⁷ naturally resulted in greater depth and detail around participants' experiences. Background and developmental findings will first be summarized before discussing dropout reasons and briefly outlining the dropout process.

On the whole, demographic and background factors, such as years in dance and grant status did not appear influential in terms of dropout. However, for four interviewees, CAT was the first intense training they had experienced. The sudden increase in training hours and technical demands compared to their previous dance involvement appeared difficult to manage. Similarly, one participant discussed how her passion for dance had "burned out" due to having trained intensively from a young age (before CAT). Sport research has also revealed an association between intense early involvement and dropout^{27,41}; thus, it appears that intense training should only be undertaken when a young person is physically, psychologically, and emotionally ready. Further research is required to establish what this means in practical terms for dance training.

Interestingly, most of the dropouts continued to dance at a different level after withdrawal, indicating that they had changed their participation to meet their current needs. This is similar to sport studies in which dropouts were still engaged in, or planned to re-enter, their sport at a different level.^{8,42} These findings emphasize that the term "dropout" should be specific to the study context (of interest in the current study was dropout from a specific training program, not from dance in general). Finally, although the focus of the current study was on dropout, it is important to note that several positive experiences during CAT were cited by the participants. Therefore, educators and researchers must bear in mind that while maximizing retention rates is important, enhancing the quality of the experience should be the goal, so that benefits are gained from training regardless of the eventual outcome.⁴³ Indeed, continuing intense

training may not be in some young people's best interest, and their leaving does not necessarily represent "failure" on behalf of either the individual or the training program.

In terms of major reasons for dropout, both personal and environmental (CAT-related) factors emerged. With regard to the former, conflicting demands was the most frequently cited personal reason according to the interviews, and Other commitments was an important category in the quantitative data. Participants reported that attending their CAT limited the amount of time they could spend with family and friends, on schoolwork, and on other activities. Missing out on time with friends appeared particularly pertinent, presumably due to the increased importance peer relationships assume during adolescence.⁴⁴ This supports previous findings regarding time conflicts in sport dropout research,^{2,8,9,13,45} particularly with regard to the role of peer relationships in withdrawal.^{42,45,46}

Change in aspirations was also an important dropout reason found in both types of data. This related to several factors, such as different interests and other potential career options. Additionally, expectations of success and the uncertainties of a dance career were reflected in the participants' awareness of the competition that exists in the professional dance world, alongside the insecurity of temporary work contracts and often poor remuneration. A study of urban youth similarly reported that the practical realities of a career in the arts served as a barrier to participation.⁴⁷

The finding that some participants had lost their passion for dance is unique to the current study. Recently, investigators have suggested that passion for an activity forms the motivation that underlies persistence^{48,49}; it could be that the absence of emotional attachment to an activity lessens commitment. A lack of challenge, critical evaluation of dance engagement, and early intense involvement appeared to cause a decline in passion for these participants, although more research is required to fully understand this

apparent trend.

Regarding CAT-related factors, program content emerged as a major dropout reason, with repetition in particular being cited. The emphasis on technical skill acquisition in high-level training naturally entails repetition and attention to correct technique; for some participants, this was de-motivating. A lack of challenge was also reported by some interviewees, while in contrast others found the training too intense and tiring. These differences in perception of content accentuate the importance of appropriate challenge on an individual level wherever possible. A study of talented persisting and dropout arts and athletics students demonstrated how activities that were too difficult were perceived as frustrating and lowered confidence, while those that were too easy were perceived as boring and de-motivating.⁵⁰ Balancing challenge and skill is also fundamental to the experience of "flow," which has itself been cited as a reason why people do what they do.⁵¹ Overall, it appears that, particularly in the context of talent development, repetition and challenge are crucial considerations with regard to student motivation and retention.

Given the importance of peer relationships during adolescence, it is perhaps not surprising that half of the participants reported difficulties making friends in the CAT programs as an influential factor, and indeed poor peer relationships have previously been associated with dropout in the arts and sport.^{11,21,46} For participants who had not forged strong relationships in the CAT, spending time with their non-dancing peers outside of school may have taken on even greater importance.

Minor dropout reasons included travel, injury, and financial factors. These were interpreted as minor because they typically only became an issue once commitment had begun to decrease. Despite the importance perceived competence has assumed in previous dropout studies and theories,^{7,52} it was only cited by one participant as a dropout reason in the current study. While other participants men-

tioned low perceived competence, this was not reported as a direct reason for dropout, suggesting that other factors had greater influence on participation decisions. Finally, some indications of teacher favoritism and a lack of individual feedback emerged. Such factors have been reported in sport dropout research,^{10,11,41} but do not appear to be particularly characteristic either of typical teacher behavior in the CATs or, like perceived competence, of dropout reasons in this cohort.⁵³

Some age-related differences emerged from both the qualitative and quantitative findings (Fig. 1). Change in aspirations and lost passion were characteristic only of older students (over 15 years). This may be because decisions regarding post-school options are of pivotal importance to this age group. A critical evaluation of dance, combined with changes in aspirations, could result in lost passion among the older students. For younger students (under 15 years), course content (specifically the focus on technique and repetition) appeared more influential. This supports research by Ryska and colleagues,¹² who reported that younger dropout gymnasts cited reasons related to the program structure more often than their older counterparts. Although more research is needed to better understand age-differentiated dropout reasons, such findings suggest that talented younger dancers may struggle to cope with the demands of high-level training, and that career-related concerns in older students should be discussed in an open manner.

Regarding social support and dropout, in accordance with previous research,⁵⁴ family support was important throughout the participants' dance involvement, including the process of dropout. Only two examples of negative statements from parents emerged in relation to wasted talent or investment. Similarly, non-dancing peers were generally supportive during the dropout process; some were even pleased when their friends dropped out, and an improvement in friendships resulted. Most participants experienced support from their CAT

teachers and peers, although some perceptions of teacher disappointment were apparent in the interviews. This suggests that young people need social support throughout their dance engagement and beyond in order to validate their choices. While the withdrawal process tended to be lengthy, and some participants felt sad to leave their CAT, many positive consequences of dropping out were reported. In particular, having more time to spend with friends and family was emphasized.

Some limitations to the current study must be acknowledged. Firstly, interviews with ten former students from a large network of Centres may not be representative of the entire CAT cohort. However, qualitative research does not necessarily aim to produce generalizable results but rather to explore individuals' perceptions. Secondly, reasons for dropout in the CATs' records were based on one-to-one conversations between students and administrators, and it is possible that the students were to some extent providing socially acceptable responses. The use of a mixed methods design helped to triangulate the data, partly safeguarding against such limitations.

Conclusion

In summary, it appears that conflicting demands, change in aspirations, course content, difficulties making friends, and lost passion are major reasons for dropout from a dance-talent program. Minor reasons include injury, travel, low perceived competence, and teacher behavior. Older participants tended to cite change in aspirations and lost passion more frequently than younger ones, while younger participants cited course-related reasons more often than their older counterparts. Intervention strategies that focus on changes in course content may be the easiest to implement and most effective means of reducing dropout. This might include more individualized instruction and active attempts at helping students to make friends. However, it is important to note that while the word "dropout"

tends to have negative connotations, it may simply be a normal part of adolescence, whereby young people seek activities that best suit their developing identities.⁷ Thus, the focus of teachers and administrators should be on the *quality* of the dance experience, not simply the outcome.⁴³

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