

ADPA6000
Maisie Jacka
2211331

Reflective Essay

Introduction:

"Why do students commit suicide?" This important and highly relevant question became the starting point for my research, leading me towards my main objective: exploring effective strategies to prevent suicide among students." A 2022 survey by Student Minds showed that 57% of students said they struggled with their mental health and 27% had been diagnosed with a mental health condition (Student Minds, 2022). Looking at the research and reflecting on my own experiences, it led me to think about my second question: **'Does dance improve or harm mental health?'**. I was drawn to this research topic because it is complex and has two different sides to it. On the one hand, dance is seen as a form of self-expression but the pressures and expectations within the industry could negatively impact mental health. This topic holds a lot of personal significance for me. A relative of mine struggled with their mental health and tragically passed away due to suicide. This experience deeply impacted me but also inspires me to want to understand how complex mental health is and the factors that can lead to suicide. From my personal experiences, I feel very strongly about finding strategies and solutions.

My research journal contains information gathered from multiple sources to ensure that I could fully develop my topic and have a strong argument. One of the most effective methods I used was through a Google Forms Survey. I shared the survey on social media so that I could reach a wider audience of dancers. One of the questions asked was **'How can we prevent suicide in dancers?'**. One of the respondents answered 'Make speaking about mental health normal in dance. Show dancers you are allowed to be vulnerable and that doesn't make you any less strong or any less of a dancer'. This is an example of why I found this method really impactful, because it was based on real experiences shared by individuals within the dance community. I ensured complete confidentiality to protect the identities of those who participated which meant people could speak freely without judgement.

I found that the responses allowed me to have a full understanding of the mental health challenges that dancers face – as mentioned in the previous quote, it sometimes isn't spoken about enough. It was really eye-opening to discover how many people, some of them my peers, had experienced comparing themselves to others, struggling with pressure and anxiety. However, the most common theme was self-comparison. Whether this was in terms of physical appearance, skill level or career progression. There was a

study that was published in *Frontiers in Psychology* that said one in five professional dancers reported significant symptoms of anxiety, depression or eating disorders, self-comparison being one of the biggest factors (*Frontiers Psychology*, 2025).

Research:

The main aim of this project was to contribute to a broader conversation of how we can support dancers mentally and emotionally. I have developed a strong understanding of the importance of breaking the stigma of mental health in the dance community. As mentioned, my main research method was through Google Forms so that I could fully understand the challenges and factors that may lead to dancers struggling with their mental health. Through this project, I have explored how dance can be used as an outlet for expression, healing and a way to process and communicate difficult experiences. There is a lot of research that supports this, for example, one study found that dance helped with mental health benefits with individuals already struggling with depression and anxiety (Perkes, 2021). However, as my research was focused on competitive and professional dancers or students who are training, it doesn't consider the negative effects that dance can have in a high-pressure environment.

A lot of the research I found initially didn't focus on dancers in particular, but just the benefits it can have as a form of exercise and the mental health benefits. This didn't align with what my own independent research had found. To make sure that I had a strong argument, I then focused on research that was specific to dancers and broke down the results found in my own research to more manageable parts. This meant I was able to stay organised and ensure that my research was specific and I was able to find accurate and detailed information that supported the aims of the project.

From this, I looked at more research that focused on the mental health challenges that dancers faced and found that there was a wide variety of causes. For example, one study found that physical strain and injury in professional dancers not only affects performance but can also have psychological effects such as depression and anxiety (Junge & Hauschild, 2023). However, this still wasn't specific enough to my individual study, as my aim was to focus on young people & students so that it could be related to the participants who were answering the Google Forms. After this, I found a study that looked at dance students and it stated that there was a big prevalence of mental health challenges with their participants with symptoms of depression, anxiety and eating disorders. The study also pointed out how there was a low level of 'mental health literacy' with dance students which suggested that there needed to be better support systems in dance training programs (Chin et al, 2024).

Once I had looked at different research specific to the challenges faced by dancers, I was then able to form a list of questions that I was going to ask in the Google Form. I had to make sure that my questions were not insensitive and would not be triggering to

someone who could potentially be struggling. This process made me feel vulnerable as it was a subject that I have personal experience with, inside and outside of the dance world. Once I had received the responses from the Google Forms, I felt connected with my peers and the other participants who had taken the time to answer. I could relate to some of the answers, but on the other hand, I felt emotional learning about the causes and felt more inspired to want to find ways to prevent/support others that are struggling with any difficulties – whether that was linked with dance or not. It became very clear that many people are suffering without saying anything and a lot of the time, you would never know these individuals are struggling. From the initial research and the results from the Google Forms, I felt strongly about creating a piece that addressed the topic of mental health challenges among dancers but in a meaningful and impactful way.

Research to Performance:

Once I had solidified the aims of my project, I began thinking of ways I could successfully portray this within a piece of choreography. I found that keeping a research journal was incredibly valuable in deepening my understanding of the topic. I used the journal to stay organised, document key ideas and reflect on the information I had gathered. This allowed me to revisit ideas throughout the creative process and shaped the direction of my practical piece by helping me refine my ideas. Alongside this, I created a mood board filled with visual images that represented the emotions, theses and mental health challenges I wanted to portray within the choreography. By putting everything down on paper in the form of notes or images, I was able to keep a clear vision on the final piece and what I wanted the message to be.

While researching and adding to my research journal and mood board, I came across several powerful quotes and statistics that helped me to understand the topic. One study stated that 'Body Image is an issue that affects dancers, often leading to eating disorders (Junge and Hauschild, 2023). This article provided a lot of information that also included details about comparisons between male and female dancers, which added dimension to my understanding. It also highlighted that the topic was a lot more complex than I had first thought. This article along with the other research found followed me into the studio. It informed the way I thought about the movement, emotional expression and the themes I needed to include within the piece.

However, this brought on further challenges such as feeling mentally blocked or unsure how to communicate the message. It was important that these sensitive issues were addressed in the right way but also in a way that the audience would understand. The research, journal and mood board kept me reminded of the purpose of what I was creating and gave me specific angles to explore – such as body image, emotional burnout,

anxiety and depression. I found it really beneficial to have all this research as it gave me real-world context and experiences to make sure the piece had realism.

Although these tools were beneficial, I was initially overwhelmed with creative ideas as the topic is very complex and has a lot of angles that could be explored. I was hesitant to pursue them fully as I struggled with self-doubt and questioned whether my concepts were strong enough to support a very important topic. Through previous performances within my three years of training, I had some inspiration from a previous project. I realised that it would be useful to utilise the mirrors as a 'mood board' directly in the piece itself. This meant that to accompany the dancers, there was information, statistics and motivation quotes which added a new layer of depth to the performance.

The goal for my piece was to produce something that people would emotionally connect with and to encourage them to think about mental health struggles. I wanted to ensure that the importance, reality and relevance of suicide was shown throughout. As I developed my concept further through my own research method, the project became even more personal as I decided to look at the issue through the perspective of dancers. It was important to me that the piece focused on how dance can be both an expression and a response to mental health challenges.

I felt that it was important to ensure that one main message came through with my performance - 'you are not alone'. From my research, it became clear to me that it is likely that there is always someone nearby, in the same room or in your life, that will understand what it means to struggle with mental health issues. To bring this message to life within the choreography, one dancer took the role of 'mental health'. The other dancers are drawn to each other, like magnets. I wanted this to symbolise the deep and sometimes unseen connections between people who are silently battling with similar emotions and experiences. There were eight dancers who participated in my piece, including: myself, Phoebe, Finlay, Armelle, Evangelia, Katie, Lydia, and Cas. I felt that each of these dancers brought their own unique energy and perspective to the piece. This was important to me as the piece explored a sensitive and complex topic. Due to this, I had to ensure that the dancers involved in the piece were emotionally comfortable and safe not only performing in a piece so delicate but were happy to share their personal experiences. Asking them to open-up about how dance affects their mental health was difficult but essential to the authenticity of my project. On reflection, I think this led to the cast feeling more connected to each other and the project. It was powerful to hear genuine experiences rather than only focusing on my own story and perspective.

To accompany the performance, I created a mood board filled with visual references to align with the emotions, theses and mental health disorders portrayed within the choreography. This visual component not only helped to focus the true aim of the project but added useful information for the audience to further show the importance of the

topic I wanted to showcase. Throughout the process of creating and rehearsing the piece, I faced a couple of challenges and minor setbacks. For example, there was a last-minute change to the cast as some dancers dropped due to injuries or scheduling issues. This was a big hurdle for me, as I had to quickly find replacements to fill the roles and learn the choreography in a limited time frame. In this situation, I needed to be flexible, use quick decision making and strong communication to ensure that the piece still held its emotion and storytelling. Despite the setbacks, I was fortunate to find individuals who were dedicated and committed to the piece.

Throughout the rehearsal process, I worked closely with the dancers, focusing on the development of solo and duet elements. I ensured to encourage them to move beyond technique and focus more on the emotion within the piece. I set multiple exercises throughout the process to allow the dancers to feel the music and connect with it in a way that was genuine and raw. The duet with Armelle and Phoebe was an important section of the piece, as it involved improvisation to keep the realism and authenticity. This was an intentional creative choice as the piece revolved around human connection and emotional awareness – so by giving the dancers space to respond to one another naturally (through improvisation) meant that the piece kept the realism, empathy and support of shared experiences.

As the day of the performance arrived, I felt ready and prepared. I was excited to share my work with the audience, regardless of how nervous I felt when the audience began to take their seats. The reality of presenting something so personal that I had created myself felt very real and I did feel a little vulnerable. However, these feelings reminded me of why this project is so important – to support individuals within the dance community with any feelings of anxiety and self-comparison.

After the show, I received positive feedback from my peers, mentors and audience members. Their thoughtful comments and emotional response gave me reassurance that my piece had delivered the message I had hoped. Reflecting on the experience, I feel proud of not only how the performance turned out, but the steps I took to ensure that it was a success. For me personally, I feel it was a milestone in my creative growth and that I can push through feelings of self-doubt. It felt like a full-circle moment that I had researched and put so much effort into understanding the struggles dancers face, while also over-coming them myself for this project.

While creating and rehearsing this piece, I feel I have gained a stronger sense of myself as a choreographer and leader. This project was something out of my comfort zone, but it has given me confidence in my creative abilities. I found challenges in time management throughout, but I learnt to use rehearsal time effectively to be able to work quickly but ensure that the message stayed within the piece without being rushed. I feel that I

developed my skills in choreographing with the dancers' abilities in mind but making sure that the movement reflected the themes and emotion I wanted to portray.

My thoughts and feelings have developed constantly throughout the process of creating this project. I have gained a better understanding of mental health and the specific challenges that dancers face. In my research, I was able to gain personal accounts from dancers who have/had struggled with anxiety, body-image issues and burnout. I think that these personal experiences made me feel more connected to my work as it gave me a purpose and showed me how important it was. I adapted my leadership skills and trusting my own judgement while still making sure that the dancers felt they could communicate openly and could collaborate with me. As I mentioned, this project also allowed me to over-come my own struggles as a dancer and reflect on my personal experiences with pressure, stress and performance anxiety. I felt that the challenges I was facing related to the project deeply, but this only inspired me to power through as I had gained an understanding of how many dancers suffer with similar issues every day. Whether that is anxiety and feelings of self-doubt, or body-image and stress.

At the start of the project, my expectations were different to how it turned out. Originally, I had planned to conduct a sit-down interview with my sister where we would have an open discussion about our shared experience in losing our elder sister to suicide. However, as I began conducting my research and imagining the creative process – I wanted to broaden the topic to the shared experiences of individuals within the same community. The shift in direction allowed me to focus on a specific research question: **How does dance impact mental health, and what role can it play in addressing and possibly reducing suicidal thoughts within the dance community?**

I feel that through my research and performance piece, the previous question has been answered. I have used personal experiences from dancers to find out how dance has positively/negatively impacted their mental health. However, I do feel as mental health is such a complex issue, I found it difficult to focus on one issue that dancers may face. However, I do feel that the process of this project has expanded my understanding of mental health challenges within dance and changed how I will continue to approach my creative practise. The project has challenges me to see choreography as more than just movement, but a space to make dancers feel safe, supported and seen. I feel more aware and conscious of the mental and physical demands that come with performing and to take this with me in the next steps of my career. Going forward, I will continue to create work that challenges and inspires me, even if the themes are difficult. This experience has shown me that meaningful dance can be powerful and healing and that's the kind of work I want to continue to create.

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