

A Question of Fun: Adolescent Engagement in Dance Education

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Article:

Ever since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), educational literature and the popular press have been filled with concern over low achievement levels among students in this country. One of the more recent responses has been the development of rigorous national standards, including standards in all the arts (*National Standards for Arts Education*, 1994). At the same time, there is recognition that far too many students are not motivated to meet even existing standards. The September 1995 issue of *Educational Leadership*, a publication whose themes reflect issues of current significance to public school administrators, was devoted to strengthening student engagement. Editor Ron Brandt opened the issue with a description that is familiar to almost anyone who walks into a typical high school class in any community:

Some [students] see no connection whatever between their priorities and what teachers expect of them, so they refuse lessons and even refuse to try. Others realize they must play the game, but go through the motions with minimal attachment to what they are supposedly learning. Teachers, thwarted by resistance or passivity, complain that students are unmotivated, and either search valiantly for novel approaches or resign themselves to routines they no longer expect to be productive. (1995, 7)

Certainly this dismal picture does not apply to young children, who arrive so eager to learn in kindergarten. It is reasonable to ask what happens to children, especially as they move through adolescence, to leave so many so unmotivated and disengaged.

Howard Gardner's response to educational reform in the 1980s speaks to the importance of engagement:

Almost everybody realizes that the American schools have been disappointing in recent years. But I think most of the reactions to this concern will not be very productive in the long term. Getting higher scores on standardized tests is not the real need....What we need in America is for students to get more deeply interested in things, more involved in them, more engaged in wanting to know; to have projects they can get excited about and work on over longer periods of time; to be stimulated; to find things out on their own. (In Brandt 1987/88, 33)

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Gardner further suggests that "the arts are a good testing ground for such activities because many members of the educational establishment don't care about them so much, so teachers can afford to take chances" (in Brandt 1987/88, 33).

This study examines engagement in one particular art form, dance. The study looks at middle school students, in those critical years between the time when most are eager-to-learn elementary students and the time when many become passive or resistant high school students. It seeks to understand what, from the perspective of the students themselves, draws them into dance, i.e., why some students are so engaged, and others not.

Procedures and Methodology

I began this study with some of the classic questions for interpretive researchers:

What's going on here?

What does the experience of the participants mean to them?

What do their meanings mean to me as researcher?

Procedures

I selected three middle schools as the site for the study, all on the outskirts of a medium-sized southeastern city. I knew all three teachers well prior to the study. All three were Euro-American, and their ages ranged from mid-twenties to near 40. Following procedures used in my earlier study of meaning in dance among high school dance students (Stinson 1993), I functioned as a participant observer in one class each week throughout the term. (Classes were held four to five days per week.) I participated in all class activities on the days I was present; while I was clearly not a peer age-wise, I worked both individually and in small groups along with the rest of the students. At the end of the term, I interviewed all students who were willing and who were able to obtain a parental signature and return the form. The participant observation time was not only to allow me to observe interaction in the class, but to gain sufficient trust from the students so they would be more likely to talk with me in the interviews. I interviewed fifty-two students in forty-eight individual interviews and one group interview. At the beginning of each interview, I guaranteed student anonymity and asked each to select a name by which I could refer to them in the research; all names used in this paper are pseudonyms. The data consist of extensive field notes, documents such as examinations and class handouts, and transcripts of the interviews. Primary analysis for this paper has focused on the interview data.

In spring 1993 I began my study in one private school and one public school. The public school, which I shall call Johnston, served sixth- to eighth-grade students, with a socioeconomic range from middle class to welfare. I worked with one relatively large and crowded sixth-grade class (eight-week course) and one small eighth-grade class (full semester course). The private school, Greenway, served preschool through grade twelve. It was known as an alternative school within the community, partly because of its informality, thematic courses, and opportunities for student choices and decision making. The clientele was largely white, and most students were from professional families. The middle school at Greenway incorporated fifth to eighth grades. The first course in which I participated included all these grades, while the second course included only fifth- and sixth-grade students; each lasted eight weeks.

Student engagement (or lack of it) did not catch my attention as I observed during this semester. At Johnston, almost all students participated fully. At Greenway, all students participated fully in every class; this was an expectation if they were to be allowed to take the course.

The following year, I participated in one seventh- and one eighth-grade class (each a full semester) at a third school, which I shall call Lewisburg. Both of these classes, approximately seventeen to eighteen students each, filled their space in a portable building to capacity. The school drew from a more rural and somewhat less affluent population than Johnston, and had a higher proportion of minority students. In the classes at Lewisburg, a large number of students were to be found sitting out during all or part of each class, and there were many instances of students appearing to go through the motions (or some of the motions) without much investment. This seemed the case not just in dance, but in other classes as well. It was at this point that I began to focus on the issue of student engagement. In the interviews with these students, I added queries about what, in the students' views, affected their participation and that of their peers.

At all three schools, dance was officially an elective course, although at the public schools a number of the students (especially males) were placed in the class because their other choices were full. The public school teachers followed a relatively standard program specified by the state. The majority of classes revealed a typical format with a warmup, then an introduction to one or more conceptual elements of dance, followed by some guided and open exploration, and group composition projects. During the semesters I observed, there were also units ranging from dance history to African dance. Students did some note taking, took some written tests, and watched some videos.

At Greenway, the first course involved developing a lecture-demonstration performance for younger students at the school, while the second was the introductory dance course for middle school students. The first course was open to all who had had the introductory course a previous year. The introductory course included more work on basic movement skills (developmentally appropriate technique) than at the other schools; it also focused more on the process of dance making than on specific elements of movement, although basic elements were infused into the assignments given. Students spent extended time creating "air mail dances" and "radio dances" in the fashion of choreographer Remy Charlip; they interpreted Charlip's symbols to create their own dances and created their own symbols to be interpreted by others.

Methodology

One might hypothesize that the differences in engagement that I observed were related to different demographics at the schools or within the classes I observed, or to the different styles of the teachers, or to different lesson content. One might attempt an experimental study in order to prove what causes different levels of student engagement in dance. Such a study might generate information that would facilitate prediction or control of student outcomes, allowing teachers to, for example, select strategies and activities that would have the best chance of promoting student engagement among the demographic population they were teaching. However, there are many complex factors involved in the teaching/learning process. In such a dynamic situation as a real dance classroom, it is not possible to accurately identify all the variables affecting student engagement and then control all but one or two, even for the sake of an empirical study. Further, standardizing class instruction to the degree necessary for control of a single variable would not allow for the responsiveness to students and the environment that is an essential aspect of good teaching.

Certainly I, as an educator of dance teachers, often engage in attempts to predict or control student outcomes. In this study, however, I was more interested in how diverse students describe their dance experiences, and what that might tell me as an educator about student engagement in dance. Such responses are best facilitated by an interpretive methodology. Interpretive research is concerned with questions of meaning rather than truth, with developing a language rather than proving or disproving a hypothesis (Donmoyer 1985). I was interested in understanding and finding a way to talk about student engagement, grounded in the perceptions of the students themselves, rather than what I already knew and told student teachers about how to get students engaged.

For those readers more familiar with traditional scientific research, questions about objectivity, reliability, validity, and generalization may arise. The interpretive researcher recognizes that the presence of a researcher does change the research setting, despite attempts to be as unobtrusive as possible. However, the interpretive researcher has a responsibility to reflect upon how his/her own perspective might be affecting what is sought and what is found. Throughout the stages of observation, interview, and analysis, I have intentionally questioned my own assumptions and looked for discrepant cases that would counter my initial interpretations.

However, subjectivity is not regarded as just an unfortunate necessity in interpretive research. There is also appreciation for the perspective that each participant brings to the research process. Thus I did not attempt to standardize the interviews for the sake of objectivity by asking the exact same questions the exact same way in each interview, but tried to be an actively engaged listener (Oakley 1983), allowing each student to place her/his own frame around the experience. (Sample questions are in Appendix I.)

In interpretive research, it is recognized that meaning is not a fixed entity which is only waiting to be uncovered by the diligent researcher; rather, it is constantly in the process of being created. Since it is never complete, one

can never have it all, regardless of how many classes one observes or how many interviews one conducts with how many individuals. While I tried to interview as many different kinds of students as possible, there are students whose voices I did not hear. For example, in the sixth-grade class at Johnston, none of the African American students wanted to be interviewed, despite my greater interaction with them during the class. In contrast, African American students were overrepresented, compared to the class make up, in the seventh-grade interviews at Lewisburg. (Demographic composition of those interviewed at each school may be found in Appendix II.) Further, the students I did interview might well have had very different stories to tell if I had spoken with them a day, a week, or a month later. My understanding of the "whole picture" of student engagement in dance is only partial, and could never be otherwise. It is only one possible interpretation, based on not only what I observed and heard but also what I as researcher brought to the research. It is my hope that the reader will find my interpretation to be a reasonable one, supported by the statements of participants, and that it will be useful, i.e., generate thoughtful questioning and reflection on the part of the reader.

Despite the fairly large number of students I interviewed, I have not attempted to quantify any of the data. While I have indicated at times that "many" or "several" students had a particular response, I was as interested in a comment made by only one student as I was in a view shared by many. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi noted in his study of adolescents,

If one boy out of a hundred finds a way to get along splendidly with his parents, this is something that hardly warrants mention in a statistical description of what teenagers are like. But this one-in-one-hundred finding can be the most important fact if we wish to understand what adolescence *could* [my emphasis] be like. So...we are not only concerned with proportions and averages; perhaps the most telling insight on this age of transition comes from persons and events that show how, despite widespread confusion or boredom, it is possible to create enjoyment and meaning. (1984, xv)

In the next section of this paper I shall discuss the primary themes I identified related to the issue of student engagement. In support of each, I will present a few quotes from the students. In most cases, I had a very large number from which to choose—so many, in fact, that I was at times tempted to look more quantitatively at the interviews, and record how many students spoke about the topic. However, in keeping with my methodological orientation and ultimate purpose, I selected those statements from students that I found the "juiciest," i.e., those most colorful, complex, and well stated.

Analysis of Findings

It is noteworthy that the word most often used by the students to describe their dance classes as well as particular experiences within them was *fun*. While I did not specifically ask them if dance was fun or even if they liked dance, I followed up when they mentioned fun, trying to understand what it meant to them. It became clear that the word is used in many different ways. Some could not say what it meant: "It's just real fun to do stuff like that and I'm not real sure how to explain it" (Nike); "It's hard to put it in words" (Charlotte). But others gave me a clearer sense of what fun means to them when they told me why dance was (or was not) fun.

The Meaning of Fun

A few students spoke of fun in the way I think most adults think about the word, using it to describe activities that do not really matter, that are "just for fun." I heard only a few comments from students that reinforced this view of fun. Rebecca, for example, told me that her parents wanted her to take dance so she "could like just have fun and...not do a whole lot of work but just dance and everything." Nicole described herself as "a wild kid...I like to have fun a lot." Shelby, who did not appear wild in class, said dance is "fun, sometimes boring, I mean you can act crazy."

Other students had a more serious notion about what happens and should happen in dance. Bobby noted that dance is "funner but it's not that you go in there and just play around." Bill concurred, stating that "some people just want to play in dance, but for me and the rest of them that want to participate we really get into the movements." Lovena expressed the more common adult values when she noted her lack of respect for her peers

who "joke around too much...and sometimes they just want to have fun, fun, fun and never want to be serious about anything. Sometimes you have to grow up...all that fooling around is not going to get you anywhere." Fun in general, however, was not a negative descriptor to most middle school students with whom I spoke, and they were able to tell me a variety of reasons that dance was fun. The order in which I report these reasons does not reflect any priorities or the frequency with which they were mentioned, and the categories in which I have placed their comments are my creation.

Fun as Social Interaction

To some students, activities are fun when they get to interact with their friends; these responses were especially prevalent among the seventh and eighth graders. Sweet R, who said she did not find dance fun, told me, "Fun is like when you happy that you're doing something, like when you happy to be around that person." Rene said that dance is "just funner than my other classes 'cause I get to socialize with my friends." Lana explained that if her peers "get to work with at least one of their friends I think they'll have fun or something." Alyssa told me that she and her good friends in the class get together and "try to remember the dances together and we'll look over our notes and stuff together—it's fun. We talk about how fun it is and how fun it is to be with your friends." Cody, a sixth-grade boy, went a bit deeper: "You can really get more friends and you can also strengthen your friendship with people, because in dance...you have to have a lot of trust sometimes."

Not all students, however, found the social aspect of dance class to be a positive factor. Desiree related that "sometimes I have problems working with people, certain people that I don't get along with and you know I think I don't do my best when I'm with these people, makes me feel like I don't really want to be over here so I'm not going to do anything." Bill told me that his misbehavior in class the previous year came from wanting to impress his peers. He said that students did not participate fully "'cause their friends laugh at them...'cause they might look funny, just because they're focused in on it and they're not, and they might be jealous of them is why they're laughing." In addition, some students pointed out that working in groups is sometimes problematic. Nike, from a class with many nonparticipants, noted that "when not everybody puts forth effort it's just real hard...and a lot of people don't care, they just sit there." Lovena, from the same school, explained that groups work only when "there's one person that doesn't fool around and everything so she like brings everybody together.... So if you have like one strong person you can make like anything happen."

Still, for many students, working with peers was an important part of fun in dance. Getting in groups, working together "to make up things," was mentioned as fun by a number of my respondents. As Rebecca noted, "I really like doing that—when you get in your groups and you just make up different things and go along with it and it's real fun." Joseph replied that what made dance fun was "getting to work with other people and...making up your own dances." "It's just fun working together trying to figure it out," said Jennifer. Lovena said she would tell other students that "they should take dance because it's fun and you get to know a lot of people there and you can make up your own thing and you work with a lot of people there."

The Fun of "Making Up Stuff"

For a great many students, "Getting to make up stuff for yourself instead of what the teacher says to do" (Lana) is what makes something fun. Crystal added, "You just have to do what you want to do and have fun with the dances and I think the best part is getting to create your own dances." Tim concurred: "just being able to practice and make up your own movements— that's a lot of fun." Jessica said her favorite experience was "making up the dances 'cause...I got to make up these moves and it was really fun....because we could experiment with different ways of doing things and [the teacher] wasn't telling us exactly what we should do."

The Fun of Moving Around

In addition to the social and creative experiences, getting to "move around" also made dance fun for most students. Rebecca's statement about what makes dance fun combines these themes: "when you get to move around a lot and you don't have to sit there and you get to make up things and...you get to like be with other people and like have fun and make up things together and that's fun." Crystal said that dance is "more fun than anything else because you have to get in groups and work on things and you don't always have to sit in your

seat and work on paperwork and stuff." Similarly, to Kim what makes something fun is "a lot of movement, not sitting around writing all the time." Agatha echoed that dance is "a fun class, 'cause you don't have to sit in desks and stuff, you just move around."

The importance of moving around was particularly mentioned by a number of boys in the study. Rayon expected dance to be fun "'Cause you get to move around in there instead of just sitting down and doing work all the time." Bobby spoke of dance as "just funner... 'cause I like doing stuff, moving around." Similarly, Joseph said, "It's been a lot of fun and you could do a lot of things...I like to get up and do something once in a while." Sam added, "It's a really good break from sitting...you're just sitting in a desk all day, you want to get out and move around."

The movement in dance can also create a sense of aliveness that draws students out of the lethargy some described experiencing in school. Jennifer said dance is "just lots of movement and it gets you hyper and it's fun," and Nike replied, "It gets me worked up for the day and I just think it's fun." Lance described getting "pumped up" when really dancing, while Cody spoke of "getting out energy." Dare elaborated, "I'll be so hyper leaving, I'm just so jumpy, it's really wild, it's fun." Shelby noted that, in her other classes, "you get so tired sitting there, and once you go to dance, you're happy, hyper, stand up, do what you want."

Only Mike indicated that he preferred classes in which he got to sit and not move around. Even so, a number of students, mostly at one school, made the choice to "sit out" on a regular basis. I wondered why, if students like to move around, some preferred to just sit there. "Not feeling good" or being sick or tired were sometimes mentioned. After one teacher remarked that a number of her students did not get enough sleep, I asked Mike how late he usually stayed up. He admitted to staying up until "about 11:30 or something" and getting up "about 5:30 or 6." If his situation is as common as his teacher indicated, perhaps lethargy in class is no surprise.

In summary thus far, fun to most of these students meant to move around and do new things, to make up stuff and work with other people, even though there were some limitations to these factors. It does not seem remarkable that many students might like school better, i.e., find it more fun, if they could do these things in all classes. Certainly these aspects of dance education are the most obvious, and no surprise. Further factors, however, added complexity to my quest to understand student engagement in dance.

The Dance Teacher in Relation to Fun

Most of the students liked their dance teachers, and several said that the teacher "makes it fun" or "really wants us to have fun." My file on comments about the teachers was thick with statements about how their dance teachers were nicer than other teachers. There were, however, a few students who claimed that dance would have been fun if they had had a different teacher. With one exception, the few students who claimed to not like the teacher were all found in one class at the school where there was a good deal of nonparticipation.

Learning as Fun

A number of students mentioned fun in relationship to learning. Alyssa "thought it'd be pretty fun to learn how [to dance]." Bobby, while he had expected to "learn different dances so...if I went to a dance I could use it," thought there was status value in what he learned: "It's fun...you learn all this stuff...you can brag and say 'look what I learned' and your friends get all jealous and they want to take it too." Yelnik took responsibility for his learning:

In dance I usually come to get out and learn a lot, but sometimes I just seem to get in one of those giggly moods, and that's harder to concentrate...but I don't learn as much from dance...it's not quite as much fun when I come out of dance class and I say, "Gee, I didn't learn too much today."

Agatha, a very committed and engaged eighth grader, gave a long list of what she had learned in dance that was fun, making clear that students sometimes mislearn as well:

Right now we're doing dance history and so far we've done Isadora Duncan, and we're doing her dances right now, we're doing oh gosh, what was that person's name....and we're just learning about how dance history really got started, how, you know, Agatha Christie came over to America, you know, to show them what she'd thought of—all the stuff she'd done. All the people thought that she was weird, and that they didn't like her or anything, you know they didn't understand her, but she was the real reason why modern dance got started in America.

This student was so attached to her misunderstanding that she chose the name Agatha as her pseudonym.

Not Fun

It became clear to me that learning is fun to students only when they consider that learning to be relevant. Some students, again all from the school where there were many nonparticipants, revealed that they did not value what the teacher was teaching. Rene was disappointed in her dance class because she had expected it would include "dance contests and stuff." Kadijah complained that "you do stupid exercises and stupid movements that don't make much sense." Kadijah indicated that, in all her classes, she valued learning "stuff that you use in life." She also noted that in her dance class, "we learn stuff about choreographing, but since I'm not a real choreographer or dancer that doesn't really help me in any way." Kadijah and several of her peers claimed that they did like to dance—the social dances or "street dancing" that they did at parties with their African American friends. Audrey explained that "street dancing is when you get wild and dancing [in class] is not the same.... not like the same dances that we do."

To these students, the class was often "boring." Kadijah said she did not like dance because "we do stuff that doesn't interest me." Audrey noted that "Some days it be boring, some days it be fun...stuff the teachers do, some people don't want to do it...if it's boring, we don't do nothing." The music choices contributed to this; to this group of disaffected students, "It would be okay if she put on music that people like," "the music that we [emphasis added] listen to all the time." Sweet R said, "some of her music is good, some of it is not, some of it is like old. I don't listen to that kind of music and listen to rap, R and B and stuff like that."

I found it relevant that almost all of the students who complained about not liking the class activities and the music were African American. During the semester I was present at the school with the disaffected students, the curriculum included a unit on African dance and a week's residency with an African American guest artist accompanied by African drummers, and the teacher made a conscious attempt to use jazz and music by African American artists. This situation made clear the complexity of multicultural issues faced even by well-meaning teachers.

It is interesting to look at the other reasons students gave for lack of participation (other than not feeling well, not liking the teacher, and not liking the music and/or the activities). Again, I brought up this topic explicitly only at Lewisburg, where there were many students sitting out. One student spent most of her interview time telling me about a fight with her best friend, which so upset her that she could not even consider participating at that point. As she went into a lengthy and emotional description of the incident, I was reminded that anything at school may seem irrelevant in comparison to personal crises in adolescence. Rayon said sometimes he was mad about events totally unrelated to class, and he used the time to sit and think about it. He described one time that the guest artist had come over and talked to him: "She...said I should get up and dance and said maybe it'll take my anger out by dancing." While he found that this approach was successful, he did not indicate that he tried it again.

One of the most prevalent views about why students did not participate placed responsibility on the students themselves. One category of students consisted of those who just were not interested in dance. Alyssa said class is "really fun if you like to dance." Mike thought his sister had liked her dance class and he and his brother did not like it because "She like to dance and we don't." Charlotte noted that, "If it's fun for me, it doesn't mean it's fun for you." Dance was an elective course at all three schools, which seemed to imply that only some students were expected to find it worth liking, worth choosing.

Another perspective on this issue came from those who placed blame on students for not participating. Nike said about such students,

I don't think they care. I mean, some people just don't even like doing stuff...that makes them work...they'd rather sit around all day...I don't think it's fair towards [the teacher] or any of the other people that try to work.... I just don't think that they want to...put out all that energy ...and would just rather sit there and talk, socialize with each other. People that do care I think they are working for something and they do want something out of life and the other ones just really don't care.

Nike noted that the teacher "doesn't give up.... she still makes them get up and do it, and even if they don't she still goes on...she just keeps working harder and harder."

Rayon, like most students at Lewisburg, said that he had no classes where everyone was involved: "Not even gym. They'll sit around and talk all day." When I asked if he thought teachers should do anything about it, he replied, "Let that be the choice of the students if they want to fail...they should just do what they want to do. They don't want to come to school to learn, just sit around all day." Interestingly, Rayon was one of the students who mostly sat around in dance.

Janelle thought students who do not participate are "just lazy," although she included herself in this category: "I don't like really do it...I do it and then I'll get lazy and I'll sit on the floor and start talking." I was surprised with her description of the kind of school she would like to go to: "The kids that goof off and got low, low grades, I'd put them on one side of the school and other kids that work and get high grades on another side of school." She said failure to learn is the fault of the students, "because their teachers try to teach...if they [the students] pay attention they'll know [what they should learn]." Similarly, Audrey said that people don't participate because "They lazy or they just don't want to do it," either because "they don't want to learn or they just want to be in the same grade again."

Nicole was another student who said about herself, "I don't like to participate that much. Sometimes I'm just shy...sometimes I just don't feel like it...Sometimes you have troubles at home and then you just want to forget about it so you just don't participate. But then some days...you go to bed so late and you just feel so tired and weak." Of the days when she does really participate, she said, "It's really fun when you really really dancing. It's amazing." However, she acknowledged that such feelings do not motivate her to participate fully more often. Tykia offered another reason for sitting out: "Some people they think they just too much to participate...afraid they going to mess up their hair or sweat too hard." She claimed that she was "more of an off and on, sometimes I have my bad days and I don't want to do nothing, some days I just be ready to get into something."

In summary then, students who do not participate fully may sometimes blame the teacher, or the choice of activity or music, but often the reason comes from within themselves: either they are tired or not feeling well, or just "don't feel like it," a comment that frustrates most adults who work with adolescents. From the perspective of these students, it would appear that their engagement has little relation to those factors which teachers can readily change. This does not imply that a different teaching strategy or some other environmental change might not stimulate students to feel more like participating, but that the students themselves do not appear to recognize what it might be.

Fun and More

Although there were non-engaged students in this study, I also met many highly motivated ones at each of the schools. It is helpful to look at those students as well, ones who found dance not only fun but useful and/or meaningful, in order to have a fuller understanding of why students are and are not engaged.

Stress Release

A number of students found dance helpful because "it gets your stress out." Agatha remarked that "Dance is like being at home, listening to the stereo," while Kim added, "It sort of like calms you down from being so grumpy

about doing a lot of...written work." Winona cautioned, "It's sort of a nice let go feeling of aaahh, but you still have to pay attention and stuff."

Certainly the stress-releasing effect of exercise is no secret. However, some students noted that dance gave them a temporary vacation from their troubles. Katie stated, "You go to dance, you kind of relax, you forget about stuff." Similarly, Nike stated, "If I have a problem I just dance around....When I'm dancing it just seems to take my mind off a lot of things." Charlotte told me, "I thought it [dance] might stress you some, but it just takes your troubles and throws them away for the day." Tom stated, "If you've got like, a problem and you start to dance...you're just thinking about dance, you're not thinking of anything else."

Focus and Concentration

A number of students expanded further on the kind of experience in which they are concentrating fully on dance, describing an intense involvement that was usually not labeled "fun." Zoe said she would describe dance as "fun [but] hard work... 'cause you really have to like concentrate in the class and you really have to...pay attention...you have to think a lot about how you want to make things up and work together with your partner."

Focus was particularly mentioned by students in a performance class at Greenway. Amy said it this way: "I noticed that you really can't go off your focus when you're still on the dance floor, even if you aren't doing anything, you always have to look focused." Lorax said that preparing for performance was "work, work, work, work, work, work, and there's no time for like playing off, if you play off, play off, play off, play off, then it's the day of the performance and you...can get really messed up." However, he indicated that it was fun to work that hard: "Yes, it is, I feel good about myself, to say that I worked really hard on this."

Students at the two other schools described this kind of experience as happening not everyday, but on occasion. When Bill described one favorite day in dance, he said it was good because "I was more focused in, everything was focused on, the swing, rise and fall, everything." And when I asked some students what it felt like on the days when they were "really into it," Desiree said, "I forget everything else and I'm just concentrating on moving my body to the music." Lana said, "Your head's focused on that one thing." Students sometimes struggled to find ways to talk about the relationship between body and mind, moving and thinking. For example, Tim remarked that "dance involves a lot of physical activity...and I guess you use your mind too." Zoe was firmer in her claims: "You have to think a lot about it. You have to think a lot about how you're going to put it together...what movements you're going to do." Lauren described dance as "an art that takes up a lot of thinking into what you're moving." Tykia, however, replied that dance was easier than other classes because "we have to think about stuff [in dance], but you know we ain't got to like just really put our brains to it like solving problems or something like that."

Self

A large number of students mentioned self-expression as a value of their dance class. A small sample follows:

"It's about showing your feelings and expressing to others how you feel without talk.... You get to express your feelings and show people how to do—your thoughts and stuff." (Jennifer)

"It's really wonderful because I get to express myself without really saying stuff." (Robin)

"You can express your feelings. You can express that you might be feeling happy or sad. Or you can express that you're not having a good day. Or you're feeling bad." (Rayon)

"She lets us have a chance to express ourselves and show people our personalities through dancing....it kind of like brings up everybody's personality...and she just gives us a chance to be ourselves."
(Agatha)

This opportunity to be oneself was mentioned by a number of students at Greenway. As Yelnik stated, dance is "just getting to know yourself...if I get into dance, I discover this whole new part of me...dance just kind of lets me out, gets me to know myself." Winona concurred, "You find a different person that you didn't know about yourself before...it really lets me explore my inner self, what I'm really like, who I really am." Charlotte said, "I loved it more than anything else, I felt like I could really be what I could be." Katie added, "I guess now it's sort of a part of me." Amy told me that sometimes she closes her eyes when she dances, "just to become more centered with myself...you can really get somewhere when you're centered because you can sort of drift off and become what you really are, who you really are to yourself." Lauren said that in dance she was

learning a lot about myself...I think lots of people get worried about showing something that nobody's ever seen inside them come out into a dance, and they don't want others to see, they sort of want to lock a part that they have, and I think bringing this out toward other people is something you need to learn in your life.

Donetta, a Johnston student, added, "I can be my own self. I don't have to play a role or anything, I just feel like I can do anything."

Self expression seemed related to self-esteem for many students at all three schools. As Lovena told me, "Everybody can express their feelings by dancing and the more you express your feelings the more you will love yourself." Bill furthered this idea: "I like dance because it gives me a respect for myself.... You make yourself feel good 'cause you've accomplished ...you like it even if there's not one to see it, you like it then it makes you feel good." Kim saw her progress as being related to self-esteem: "It makes you feel good about yourself to be...seeing yourself improve." Bobby's self-esteem in dance was apparent when he boasted,

Some of the shapes—you just feel good when you do them because, man, this is awesome. Nobody else can think of this stuff—I mean, some people can't even do it and you feel good 'cause you can do stuff that other people can't.

Freedom

The opportunity for movement and self expression in dance gave students a sense of freedom. Zoe revealed this view when she told me what she had learned in dance: "just let yourself be free and ...dance how you want to and stuff." Yelnik also spoke of freedom: "I can do whatever I feel like in dancing because there are no real restrictions to it." Alyssa stated that "it feels like you're...free to do anything—like [the teacher] doesn't make you do something." Raksha liked dance because "I don't have to follow anyone else's rules," and Donetta because "I feel free, I don't feel pressured into things."

Freedom was often cited as one way dance differed from other courses. Joseph clarified that "Some of the rules [in other classes] are the same as dance, but I think dance is more open." Dare noted that freedom in dance came from a sense of security: "You're just your own free person there, you can't feel embarrassed, 'cause everybody in there makes mistakes." Lauren spoke extensively when she told me that dance involves what she called "freethinking":

Free thinking is an individual's thoughts that come from the mind, not a textbook. It's spur-of-the-minute thinking. If you ever freethink, you can come up with any answer, but you have to think. You can say, well, "I really want to twirl around a lot in this because I feel like that." That's thinking but it's not coming up with the exact right answer. You can come up with any answer and it'll be right, but you're thinking in a way that appeals to you without feeling, "Is that the right answer, am I supposed to jump, will everybody think I'm stupid if I jump," so I think freethink has a lot to do with how you feel...There's a lot of freethinking here.

Transcendence

Some students alluded to experiences in dancing in which they transcended space and/or time. Lorax commented, "I just let dancing take me where it wants me to go," while Leslie added, "Once I start dancing, it feels like I'm wherever I want to be." Lovena said that place was "a world of imagination." Yelnik told me that "my goal, every time, is just to get in that zone where everything around me just seems to dance, and I can do anything I want." Bill explained that he has the same feeling when dancing that he gets in a special place in the woods, when he leaves "the normal":

I got my favorite spot in the woods where all the leaves are on the ground and they're like gold and there's a lot of birch trees around there and they're all smooth, the bark and stuff...it's like just a whole forest of them down in the valley ...I like to go down there and sit and stuff and just watch the squirrels and stuff 'cause they run around and play and there's a big wide tree that I sit next to and there's a big rock next to it I sit on...it's like a whole new world...after you go over both sides it's back into the normal...like you can go there and get away from everybody.

Discussion

The next step in my interpretation involved reflection on what the student responses meant to me as a dance educator, teacher educator, and curriculum theorist. In keeping with the interpretive research value of making the researcher visible, this reflection may be more personal than some readers find customary. My first sense of these interviews was that they only reported the obvious: The students who liked dance did so because they got to move around, work with their friends, and make up stuff, and they described the feeling they got from it as fun. On one level, there is nothing at all remarkable about the desire of young people to have fun, or the expectation that they should find fun in an elective activity which seems to have no pragmatic value. The prioritizing of fun over achievement is one of those characteristics that marks immaturity at any age beyond early childhood, and does not surprise us in early adolescence. Most teachers and parents, although attempting to encourage mature behavior, seem to hold their breath and wait for young people to outgrow such childish ways. This is certainly true for me, now parenting my second adolescent and reminding him that weekends were made for more than sleeping late, watching television, and hanging out with friends. With a highly developed work ethic myself, I find that most of my own choices for leisure time involve what is easily recognized as productive activity.

Further, I am moved by Cornel West's concern about the American "culture of consumption" that "promotes addictions to stimulation and obsession with comfort and convenience....[and] hedonism in quest of a perennial 'high' in body and mind" (1994, 4546). I do not wish to imply that dance study is about comfort and convenience. However, devoted dancers may be as addicted as obsessive runners to physical stimulation. I have both appreciated and sought the "high" that is possible through dancing.

Despite these cautions, listening to the passion of the young people in this study triggered something else for me. I began wondering why it is practically universal to celebrate play on the part of young children ("play is the child's work") but not for the rest of us. I considered why I have so little fun in my own life, filled with constantly increasing demands and responsibilities. I remembered my adolescent years, when, several years older than the participants in this study, I would close myself in the living room, put on music, and dance. I danced because it felt good to move and to make up my own ways of moving. In fact, it was this experience that motivated me to study dance. Further, the desire to recover something of this pleasurable experience, although in a social setting, undoubtedly was part of my motivation to do this research. Spending time dancing with kids (without the responsibility of teaching them) sent me back to my other responsibilities with aliveness and exhilaration, the same kind that I remembered from my own closet dancing and that some of my informants described.

My analysis of the words of my respondents was thus immersed in my own contradictory feelings about fun. I particularly noticed this the day that I interviewed Charlotte. I knew that Charlotte was a bright and highly motivated child after she had introduced herself in a dance demonstration by declaring how she liked to play

with numbers, stating, "I *love* pre-algebra!" But later, during her interview, when I was trying to understand why she loved algebra and dendrology as well as dance, she looked me straight in the eye and said, "Having fun is the biggest thing in my life." Ordinarily we might expect this kind of comment from those individuals that Cornel West (1994)—and every schoolteacher—are worried about: the ones who want the easy way out of everything. However, Charlotte did not find algebra and dendrology fun because they were easy, but because they were intrinsically satisfying.

Certainly, some things that students need to learn (or that we think they need to learn) are not fun, at least not fun for everyone. But how often we adults consider having fun to be something childish and unimportant, to be engaged in only when work is done. What might the world be like if more people thought about how to make our work more satisfying and pleasurable, rather than something to be endured before we could engage in leisure activities? What might school be like if we promoted learning as important because of its intrinsic pleasure (as it seems to be for young children), not just because of the need to pass a test, get into college, or get a job?

Yet I also have to acknowledge that, even in high school, I was not content with the pleasures I got from my closet dancing. I went on to take dance technique classes that were often frustrating as I struggled to learn alongside students who had begun their dance study at an earlier age and were more skillful than I was. What motivated my involvement beyond the point where it was just fun? And what is the motivation now for my not only dancing with kids, but also carrying out a study that has meant far more hours analyzing data than dancing? Since I am beyond the need to seek promotion, that extrinsic factor does not provide the motivation. What intrinsic factors make hard work sometimes more satisfying than that which comes more easily?

A number of scholars have contributed ways of understanding various kinds of human experiences that relate to fun. During the 1970s there was a great deal of theoretical interest in the topic of play among physical educators, particularly in terms of how play differs from work and whether or not sport can be considered a form of play. Carolyn Thomas reviewed much of this literature, as well as older theories, in a chapter in her 1983 publication. Although noting that play is first of all an activity which has certain objective characteristics, Thomas also affirms play as an attitude, or a way of approaching any activity. As an attitude, play involves choice (we play because we want to), freedom (the player maintains control), intrinsic rather than extrinsic rewards, and heightened focus or concentration. Thomas concludes that:

the play stance allows man to become, in a way, available to himself for understanding the world, others, and himself. It heightens awareness and requires that the player respond. Such awareness and response can then serve as the basis for a variety of knowledges. (1983, 75)

This kind of attitude seems to describe what I often experience in dance, and what many of my young informants seemed to find. Yet I also find it while doing research, as well as other engaging activities which are part of my work. Further, the noble understanding of play defined here ignores activities that we experience as "playing around" or "goofing off." I looked further for theorists who went beyond the work-play duality and described other ways of understanding different kinds of engagement in human activity.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is one of the best-known theorists whose writing relates to this topic. In his (1975) work, he coined the term "flow" to describe experiences that are intrinsically motivating, and noted that such experiences were found "between boredom and anxiety," as a transcendent state. Flow experiences, in Csikszentmihalyi's view, can occur only in activities that involve challenge, but not so much challenge as to produce anxiety. Individuals need to feel in control of their actions and environment in order to experience flow. Further, such an activity is "autolenic," meaning that "it appears to need no goals or rewards external to itself" (1975, 47).

In Csikszentmihalyi's 1991 work, he explores "experience that makes life better" (1991, 45), and identifies two kinds which he calls "pleasure" and "enjoyment." He notes that "most people first think that happiness consists

in experiencing pleasure: good food, good sex, all the comforts money can buy...Pleasure is a feeling of contentment that one achieves whenever...expectations met by biological programs or by social conditioning have been met" (1991, 45). Enjoyment, according to Csikszentmihalyi, goes beyond satisfying a need or desire, to achieve "something unexpected, perhaps something even unimagined before" (1991, 46). He goes on to say that enjoyment is more difficult to achieve than pleasure:

We can achieve pleasure without any investment of psychic energy, whereas enjoyment happens only as a result of unusual investments of attention.... It is for this reason that...the self does not grow as a consequence of pleasurable experiences. Complexity requires investing in goals that are new, that are relatively challenging. (1991, 46-47)

While drawn to Csikszentmihalyi's description, I am still concerned about a dualistic and hierarchical schema in which the lower category (pleasure) seems to be related to the body and the upper category (enjoyment) to the mind.

Elizabeth Hirschman (1983) describes three kinds of experiences, which she refers to as "aesthetic," "escapist," and "agentic" experiences. She defines aesthetic experiences as "those that absorb one's full attention and arouse one's senses and emotions to a state of transcendence [sic]" (1983, 157). In her study, individuals in such experiences described themselves as being "carried off into it...sort of 'give myself up' to it" (1983, 161). Escapist experiences were "sought as desirable substitutes for a presently anxious or unpleasant state" (1983, 157). Agentic experiences were defined as "those that the individual uses in an instrumental fashion to acquire information or learning" (1983, 157).

I find such a triangular model helpful in thinking about the lives and experiences of adolescents as revealed in this study. I will discuss below three kinds of experiences that roughly parallel Hirschman's three categories, attempting to integrate what I heard from students into a theoretical framework.

The first are the kind that we only do because they are a means to a desirable end (such as a job or a diploma). Hirschman described such activities as agentic; in everyday language, we usually call them work. In adolescent language, they are boring and no fun. My previous research with high school students (1993) supports the assertion that most school classes fall into this category for most adolescents. Many educators (and politicians) do not seem to object to this state of affairs, because they too view school as a means to an end. They blame the students for whom extrinsic motivation (grades and future jobs) is insufficient to lead to engagement and achievement.

As a liberal educator, it would be tempting to say that students should not have to do anything in school that is not fun, and that it is the teacher's job to make learning seem like play and not work. Yet I also know the experience of working with others who only want to do "the fun stuff," and who leave the rest to colleagues or partners. Cleaning the toilet and attending committee meetings are not intrinsically motivating for most people. I think all young people need to learn that there are some things we do not because they are intrinsically rewarding, but because each member of a community or family has responsibilities to others.

Further, I agree that adolescents need to learn that there are long-term goals for which immediate sacrifices are necessary. All too often, however, adults set the long-term goals and then expect students to automatically be willing to make the sacrifices. When even well-educated and hard-working middle class individuals still lose their jobs in massive cutbacks among major corporations, and the increase in new jobs is still primarily within the poorly-paying service sector, many students quite reasonably mistrust adult assurances that working hard in school is the ticket to a good job. Further, many young people lack adult role models in their communities who have achieved economic success and stability through hard work and staying in school.

The second category of human experience involves the goofing off, playing around kind, which we describe as fun or play, although this is not what sport sociologists usually refer to as play. These are the kind of activities

that Cornel West cautioned us against, Csikszentmihalyi referred to as pleasure, and Hirschman referred to as escapist. In schools, teachers try to restrict such activities, and parents may try to do the same after school. We tell students they are a waste of time, and should be engaged in for only limited moments, even though they "feel good," meaning that they provide sensory, bodily pleasure.

Most people do not expect these kinds of activities to occur during school hours past elementary school, where we still indulgently have time for "recess." However, dancing is an activity that does feel good much of the time for many people who do it. Dennis Monk (1996) points out that there is a biological basis for pleasure in music; certainly the same is true for dance. Our culture's devaluing of sensory pleasure is one reason that all the arts have been devalued in education; the current emphasis on cognitive aspects of arts education is a reaction to that devaluing. At the same time, students who have danced in recreational settings outside of school, and who value dance because it feels good, understandably feel resistant when they encounter dance in educational settings where more is expected and not all of it offers what they know as pleasure. This resistance may be enhanced when teachers attempt to motivate students by telling them that dance will be "a lot of fun."

I recognize that many activities in which young people find sensory pleasure may be considered not only a waste of time but also dangerous or destructive. However, I am not willing to give it up as an important source of meaning and value in human life. Those who have studied the creative process have long recognized that the "aha" moments themselves, while they must be preceded by productive work, most often come during times of relaxing or playing around (Ghiselin 1952). I also know that, as the stress in my own work has increased, I need a vacation that involves no productive work in order to recharge. While I think we need to look at why we have created a culture in which work is so stressful that we need to recover by doing nothing, I also think we need to teach young people the value of pleasure, and help them find nondestructive opportunities for it. Certainly, for at least some students, dance may be one of these opportunities.

The third category of human experience involves the kind that is challenging and engaging, where the boundaries of work and play break down. Csikszentmihalyi called this kind of experience enjoyment, while Hirschman used the term aesthetic. Most teachers would agree that this is what we most want students to experience in school. Yet students do not become engaged in all activities that are challenging and growth producing. The other conditions that theorists note as necessary for this kind of experience to occur are less likely to happen in school, particularly choice, freedom, a sense of control, and an emphasis on intrinsic motivation. As long as courses in school are about fulfilling a teacher's requirements rather than setting and meeting one's own, and as long as grades are held out as the most important kind of reward, flow experiences are likely to be rare.

Conclusions

In terms of this particular study, it appears that a number of students found dance to be challenging, engaging, and personally meaningful (the third category of experience described above—enjoyment or aesthetic experience). Although they may have participated in some activities more fully than in others, they seemed to understand that the best kind of experience took the most investment. There were students who experienced dance in this category at all three schools, although more students at the private school spoke of it. It was sometimes but not always called "fun."

Some students clearly approached dance as a way to "play around" (the second category— pleasure or escapist experience). For some, this kind of fun was all that dance was. These students seemed to participate as long as they "felt like it," and perhaps had occasional experiences that might fit the third category.

We must be cautious, however, in trying to categorize any particular student who simply says that dance is fun. I do not know that we can always tell whether that student is referring to category two or category three. It is possible that some students may not have the language to describe transformative experiences or that they may be uncomfortable doing so.

Finally, some students found dance to be boring and no fun (the first category—work or agentic experience) and were not motivated to participate. Without the intrinsic motivators of pleasure or enjoyment, extrinsic ones become more important to facilitate engagement. Unlike required subjects at these schools, electives like dance did not have to be passed for students to be promoted to the next grade, so this extrinsic motivator was absent. While there can be other extrinsic motivators for dancing (physical fitness, for example, or being well-thought-of by the teacher), these students did not recognize or respond to them. Lacking both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, students who experienced dance in this first category had no reason to be engaged.

Unfortunately, like all interpretive studies, this study cannot give us directions for making students like dance or take it more seriously. Any suggestions I have for engaging students come as much or more from my years of experience in the field than from this study. To begin with, there may be times when we want to use extrinsic motivators to promote dance activities that students are not likely to find engaging, but I think these should be rare. Some examples might be learning how to prevent injuries or attending to a peer's performance (even if it is boring) out of respect for the person. We need to avoid treating dance education like medicine that is good for students in order to make dance seem more like other school subjects.

I think that we need to acknowledge the significance of both pleasure and enjoyment in dance, and use strategies that make it more likely for students to experience dance as satisfying on both of these levels. For example, adolescents who do not know how to do a particular movement, and are thus not successful in performing it, will rarely find the experience a good one. Similarly, adolescents who are simply told to "make up a dance" without having any idea of how to go about doing it will not be likely to invest in the activity. We need to use strategies that give all students the best possible chances for success if they are to experience pleasure in moving and in knowing. We also need to make visible our own enthusiasm for dance. If we want students to go beyond pleasure to enjoyment, we need to do more, to challenge students beyond their current level of skill and knowledge while giving them the tools to be able to get there. We also need to give them choice, freedom, and a sense of control, so that they are motivating themselves, rather than depending on teachers to make it "fun." It may also be helpful for teachers to describe the three different kinds of experiences, and to confirm that all are important, but in different ways. I think it is relevant for teachers to share their hopes that students will find some experiences in dance that are challenging, engaging, and meaningful; at the same time, they must make clear that a teacher cannot make this happen unless students choose to invest in the experience.

While I think that skills in teaching, not just dancing, are essential if teachers are to get students to engage in dance, this paper is not the place to describe the pedagogical skills needed to be a successful dance teacher. It is also clear to me that pedagogical skills may not be enough. Some students, despite our best attempts, will not like dance. While I recognize the implication that courses which are not required are not important, I would not want to see dance required for all adolescents. In fact, as I indicate below, I would be inclined to require very few specific courses for adolescents.

This study, however, speaks to far more than dance classes and to more variables than pedagogical strategies. It is clear that most schools have failed to motivate student engagement by drawing the sharp dichotomy between work and play, and by using extrinsic motivators to encourage students to sacrifice pleasure for the sake of more schoolwork. Some have tried the hopeful compromise of "balance" between work and play, using as much recess or as many elective courses as necessary to get students to tolerate their work. Certainly all educators want students to become more engaged in learning. Engagement is a necessary though not sufficient goal for education. We need to avoid romanticizing involvement as the solution to all the problems we see with schools and society. Activities in any of the three categories I have described above have the potential to be destructive or trivial as well as life-enhancing. Obsession with any activity, no matter how productive, pleasurable, or meaningful it is, can be problematic. Unless we also teach adolescents to reflect upon the gains and losses that come with each choice they make, simply offering more enjoyable activities will not be very helpful. Ultimately, if we wish students to become more engaged in education and make more life-enhancing choices, we need to rethink what is so important that it should be required, and how to convince students that it is

important enough for them to learn. In disagreement with current practice, I would not require many subjects beyond the levels that students study in elementary schools. I agree with Nel Noddings (1992), a former math teacher, that algebra is not necessary for all students and that serious study in any discipline should be reserved for those who have the passion to make the necessary discipline rewarding. Noddings believes that caring for self and caring for others are among the areas that are so important they should be mandated for all students; she thinks that much of the current curriculum could be incorporated into a curriculum oriented around themes of care. I also agree with David Purpel (1989) that issues of social justice and compassion are important enough in a democratic society that we should make them central for all students.

Further, I agree with these authors that all students should have significant opportunity to find nondestructive activities in which they may become deeply engaged, if they are to avoid the aimlessness and despair that seems to characterize so much contemporary life. In order for such activities to be engaging, students must be allowed choice, freedom, and control, and there must be an emphasis on intrinsic motivation.

I think schools should put far more energy into encouraging adolescents to begin engaging in a lifelong search for what is meaningful and purposeful. This would focus not just on a future career, but on what makes life worth living, both individually and collectively. We need to help students reflect upon the choices available to them, and the gains and losses that come with each choice they make. This is no panacea, but I see little hope that most adolescents will ever become engaged in learning if we continue to teach them that important learning is something they are made to do (for their own good), while offering a few trivialized electives to make the "important" work of school more palatable.

As noted earlier, an interpretive study such as this one cannot give definitive answers regarding why some kids get "into it" more than others, or how teachers might predict or control student engagement in dance classes. Interpretive research typically raises more questions than it answers. For me, this study continues to generate questions regarding my own life choices. It has also raised questions about issues in arts education, particularly the current emphasis on cognition and standards, and the necessity to listen to the voices of young people as we make policy decisions that affect their lives.

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APPENDIX I

Sample Questions from Interview

How old are you? How long have you gone to this school?

Did you choose to take this class or get put in it? If you chose it, why?

Had you taken dance before? Where?

If yes: How is this class like and different from other dance classes you have taken?

Describe a favorite experience from this class. Describe a least favorite experience.

Talk to me about how this class is like and different from other classes you take at school.

(At Lewisburg only): I've noticed that some kids get into dance, and some don't. Some get into it at some times but not others. What do you think makes a difference in terms of people getting into it?

Can you describe how it feels to really get into it, to really dance?

Do you live with your parents? How do they (or whoever else serves as guardians) feel about your taking dance at school? Tell me about your family.

How do your friends respond to your taking dance at school?

If a new student wanted to know whether or not to take dance at school, how would you describe it for them?

Have you learned anything? If yes, what have you learned? Is that important?

Should dance be required for everyone in middle school?

APPENDIX II

Students Interviewed, by Grade Level, Race, and Gender

| | wf | bf | wm | bm | om |
|------------------|----|----|----|----|----|
| Johnston School | | | | | |
| 6th grade | 5 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 1 |
| 8th grade | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Greenway School | | | | | |
| 5th grade | 4 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 0 |
| 6th grade | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| 7th grade | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 8th grade | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Lewisburg School | | | | | |
| 7th grade | 2 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| 8th grade | 4 | 6 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| TOTALS | 25 | 11 | 11 | 4 | 1 |

wf: white females

bf: black females

wm: white males

bm: black males

om: other males