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Breaking the Stigma: In the Lives of Boys Who Dance

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Breaking the stigma

In the lives of boys who dance

Dance – its training and social meanings – has a rich history and long-standing association with gender roles in world culture. While dance in some cultures is viewed as a valid vocation for men, the dominant view of Western culture positions concert dance as a predominantly female art form.

In his new book, *Stigma and Perseverance in the Lives of Boys Who Dance*, Doug Risner, Ph.D., M.F.A., associate professor in the Maggie Allesee Department of Dance in Wayne State University's College of Fine, Performing and Communication Arts, investigates the implications of the culture's prejudices toward males who dance and how dance teachers, students and families of male dancers can break the stereotype.

The book chronicles a two-year study in which Risner surveyed 75 male dancers, aged 13 to 22, in Western pre-professional concert dance training. "The experience of male dancers is fascinating in that they are frequently devalued by their culture, yet prized in their field," Risner said. "I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the support, satisfaction and validation they feel in different areas of their lives, and what the people in their lives can do to break the stigmas surrounding the profession."

Wayne State University's 2008 Research Enhancement Program for the arts funded the study for \$38,385. Risner said the grant was transformational for his work. "As a researcher in the performing arts, when you have the additional time, resources and support that comes from this type of funding, people really take notice."

Why do males dance?

Previous efforts to explain and encourage male participation in dance have frequently drawn parallels between sports and dance, often emphasizing competitive athleticism rather than expressive artistry. However, Risner's study found that males' motivation for dancing is very similar to their female counterparts – they dance for the enjoyment of performing, the artistry and opportunity for self-expression.

Risner believes the misconception stems from long-standing prejudices in society which seek to validate male dancing by aligning it with a more acceptable male activity. "It's almost as though to avoid the stigma of homosexuality, we adopted these inaccurate reasons for why males dance," he said. "These attempts are often well-intentioned, but they ultimately minimize the real purpose of dance and what it means to dance students."

The book addresses the statistics that show a significant portion of male dancers are in fact gay or bisexual – and those who aren't are still likely to experience harassment and discrimination. Much of the study's recommendations seek to help dancers, parents and teachers address homophobia by creating an environment of support and acceptance.

Nurturing talent, breaking stereotypes

In order to create an atmosphere that is inclusive of all sexual orientations, dance instructors must recognize and abolish teaching methods and in-class language that reinforce narrow definitions

of femininity and masculinity. Instructors should also recognize the vital role they play in their students' lives – usually one of their most prominent sources of support – and use that influence to be positive role models.

Equally important are the parents and families of male dancers. Risner believes parents should challenge their own biases about gay, lesbian and bisexual people and evaluate whether they knowingly or unknowingly condone anti-gay sentiments. They should also support their sons' training and performances as much as possible, as this is crucial for validating and affirming the dancers' worth and work.

"By doing these things, we may begin to nurture dance students who are less affected by the stigma and stereotype of their chosen field, and in turn, can focus more on their potential as performers and artists," Risner said.



About Dr. Doug Risner:

Dr. Risner received a B.F.A. and M.F.A. in choreography and dance performance, and a Ph.D. in curriculum and teaching with a cultural studies specialization from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. He joined Wayne State University in 2003.

To learn more, visit:
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Photograph by Steve Clarke