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## Incorporating Somatic Practices and Theory on the High School Dance Team

### **Introduction**

In observing a High School Dance Team member, one might note their consistent poise and structure, and correctly infer that they are expected to meet strict standards at all times. This observation is a result of the strong traditions which have roots in military practices that determine the modern day organization of the dance team and its goals. Because these traditions are so established, it is often automatically assumed that they are the best way to structure a dance team. However, common features such as authoritarian coaching, overly competitive attitudes, and a hierarchical structure are negatively impacting thousands of dancers in the US. Instead of questioning how effective these practices are in producing the most developmentally and socially optimal outcomes in dancers, coaches often perpetuate the same system that was imposed on them in their dance team experiences, creating a vicious cycle. In addition to non-reflexive coaches, there is a lack of academic research on high school dance teams that further indicates a gap in understanding about how this common high school organization affects students. But, there is research in other dance fields (particularly in dance studios) that have addressed similar problems, and these studies have found somatic practices to be a positive integration. By gaining a comprehensive understanding of somatic theory, we can develop a new way to think about the high school dance team, approaches to leading them, and how to achieve the team bonding, positive trait development, and improved self esteem that many expect while still accomplishing its goals.

In this essay, I argue that current practices within high school dance teams may negatively impact many high school dancers, and therefore, need reform. Based on generally optimistic conclusions from past research, it is worth considering how to build somatic theory into the foundation of high school dance team curricula and organization more deeply. With this in mind, I will explore how certain somatic practices may be integrated into the dance team specifically, and infer how this integration could improve the mental health and self esteem of high school dance team members.

### **What's Wrong with High School Dance Teams?**

In order to address the problems of high school dance teams, we must first understand what they are. It's important to note that these problems are not inherently problematic, but are conducive to a negative environment in this context.

#### *The Hierarchy*

From my experience as a high school dance team member and time observing other teams we came in contact with, I noticed some key similarities in the organization of a dance team that may negatively affect a dancer's experience. First, they are typically built on a hierarchy where “the chain of command begins with the director, followed by the captain and officers, the seniors, and then team members” (Sawyer). In this structure the director (or coach) directs all officers and team members on all matters and has the final say on all decision making. Dance officers and sometimes social officers may offer input, and are the only team members that have any additional influence. Dance officers are also responsible for leading the team through practices, which may include taking attendance, surveilling appearance, leading a warm up, teaching technical skills, teaching or cleaning<sup>1</sup> choreography, and reporting any issues to the coaches. Furthermore, they may be granted exclusive access to certain assets, privileges, and opportunities that are not offered to other team members.

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<sup>1</sup> The cleaning process includes meticulous, detailed instructions on each step of a piece of choreography with the goal of maximizing precision.

Though the intent of this structure is to maintain order, structure and consistency, the dynamic it creates between the coaches, officers, and team members produces an environment that encourages superior/inferior and other binary paradigms within the team. This may lead to lower self esteem and build tension between those with more power and those with less, resulting in an atmosphere of animosity.

Studies reported in “Social Hierarchy and Depression: The Role of Emotion Suppression” by Langner et al. provide evidence that a lower social status is associated with emotion (particularly anger) suppression which is linked to depressive symptoms. The study defines depressive symptoms based on the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale which ranks the frequency of experiencing twenty positive and negative emotions or situations (5). Briefly, these emotions and situations may describe how happy or sad you are, your views of yourself or your current situation in life, how you feel about the future, the extent of your motivation, and your perspective on relationships with others. In this study, Lagner et al. notes that emotion suppression is more commonly used by those with lower status, specifically women, as a way to “avoid conflict” (1). Although their focus is on a much larger scale and the implications of a lower social class in society are likely much greater than those in a high school organization, we can infer that there is some sort of negative impact, even in this smaller setting. Additionally, the study by Langner et al. can be generalized to suggest that any emotion suppression can have negative effects on one’s mental health. The hierarchical structure of dance teams facilitates a restriction of avenues for team members to effectively advocate for themselves or express their thoughts and concerns. This may cause members to have more negative feelings in regards to their participation on the dance team such as losing interest, lacking attention or motivation in practices, and being unhappy.

*The Competitive Nature*

There are two sides to the “competitive nature” of dance. The first involves going to competitions, performing for judges, and working to receive an award over other competitors, and the second can be seen on a more micro level where dancers are encouraged (and often forced) to compare themselves to other dancers. Here, I will focus on the first aspect.

A qualitative study by Kristen DeMaria in “Competitive Dance: The Physiological and Psychological Effects” demonstrates the pros and cons to competitions from the perspective of competitive and formerly competitive dancers. Through a survey, dancers expressed a belief that competing is a good way to get feedback from judges, gain confidence, develop an advanced skill set, build community and support, and develop life skills (DeMaria 35-49). Negative impacts include increased injury, burnout, increased pressure and stress, more self doubt, and a poor body image (DeMaria 49-61). I do not intend to assess whether the pros outweigh the cons or vice versa. Rather, I present both sides in order to later explore whether incorporating somatic practices can maintain the advantages of competing while still correcting for the disadvantages.

Demaria also notes how there is a “loss of artistic integrity” in dance competitions, arguing that competition culture now focuses more on who can do the most difficult trick. This may also harm mental health by fostering more harsh comparisons to other teams that may have students with more technical experience. Furthermore, there is less space for personal expression and discovery since the artistic nature of dance is what offers these opportunities. Although many dancers may find a sense of satisfaction from the rigor that competition culture has (Baston & Schwartz 47), there is a lot of individuality that is lost in the process, especially when a dancer’s main focus is to be better than another team or even other dancers on their own team.

*Authoritarian Coaching Practices*

Authoritarian coaching may injure the self esteem of dancers and inhibit their growth. An authoritarian teacher may be described as one that is overly controlling or aggressive, that tries to intimidate, humiliate, or belittle students (Lakes 4). Examples may include calling out and humiliating students in public for not exactly meeting strict expectations or constantly monitoring the appearance, conversations, and behavior of students (Lakes 4). The negative impacts of these practices are exacerbated when students aren't provided explanations for censorship that involve collaborative, critical thinking on social and/or team expectations. Authoritarianism also suggests that the class is "teacher-centered" where "success is based totally on achievement of the teacher's objectives through the responses specified by the teacher" (Dragon 28). The class may also be led with a "Do as I say and don't complain" attitude where students are expected to adhere to directions without questions (Burnidge 38). These authoritarian practices are prevalent in all Western dance culture and many feel they should be addressed (Lakes). In the context of a high school dance team it is particularly important to address these practices and their impacts because students are at a stage where they are honing their sense of autonomy and self esteem. Furthermore, any educational institution should be able to support this level of individual growth and provide an environment suitable for self discovery. Authoritarian coaching makes it difficult to facilitate this kind of environment.

Authoritarian coaches may also use strict surveillance as a means to ensure that dancers adhere to strict expectations. In "Weighing in on Surveillance," Anne Dryburgh and Sylvie Fortin apply Michael Foucault's theory of surveillance to the dance studio. They compare a ballerina's environment to a Panopticon, where dancers are surveilled so much that they sense surveillance even when it is absent and begin to constantly surveil themselves in order to conform to the "ideal" dancer. This is also true for a high school dance team. Members are surveilled at all times, in and

outside of practice by the coaches and even by their own peers, especially those that hold an officer position. Dance team members are not only encouraged to pursue conformity to the dance abilities and physical appearance of the “ideal” member, but to their social status and personality.

With so much surveillance of team members, these authoritarian practices are bound to support the excessive use of a third person view of the self such that “the internal journey or body-intelligence of the dancer becomes secondary or negated completely” (Burnidge 39). This can lead to Cartesian bifurcation, where the mind and body are viewed as wholly separate entities (Burnidge 39). One might argue that some third person perspective is necessary for precision dance. For example, using a mirror, a coach or officer calling out mistakes, or watching and critiquing a video of yourself or the team can be used to ensure that everyone is on the same page. However, moderation is necessary and students should understand that the goal is to learn where their mistakes are and improve upon them rather than to label them as “good” or “bad.” For example, comments about the quality of their dancing such as “be sharper,” “get your back leg up in your leap,” or “use more facial expressions” are typically unhelpful and may heighten the dancer’s insecurities. Dancers need space to explore movement to better understand the meaning of those phrases or to find something that helps them achieve the movement successfully on their own rather than to be criticized for not meeting expectations they are unsure how to meet.

### *Is it Worth Fixing?*

You might be wondering whether the high school dance team as an institution is worth saving if it truly has all of these problems. Perhaps students would be better off with an entirely new dance curriculum. I don’t think this is necessarily the case. While adding another option for dance in public schools wouldn’t hurt, there are thousands of students who participate in competitive or team dance, so there must be something appealing about it. After facilitating focus groups consisting of competitive and formerly competitive dancers, Dawn Zinga et al. concluded that “the process of

training and development provided challenges for the dancers, but the end product—the dancing—provided liberation and satisfaction” (116). Students and parents expect positive outcomes by being a part of a high school dance team, so our primary focus should be to improve their experience.

### **Defining Somatics**

Before considering how somatic practices may be integrated to improve the high school dance team, it's important to understand the premises of somatic theory. Its core values include the “creative process, subjective experience... reflective practice,” and increasing self awareness (Dragon 30). Furthermore, it emphasizes that “the body, mind, spirit and emotions are integrated,” and that recognizing this is the key to many “educational experiences” (Dragon 30). The most commonly accepted definition of Somatics is the one by Thomas Hanna which focuses on the “inner experiential body” (Green). According to Hanna:

The soma, being internally perceived, is categorically distinct from a body, not because the subject is different but because the mode of viewpoint is different: it is immediate proprioception—a sensory mode that provides unique data. Somatics then is the field of study dealing with somatic phenomena: i.e., the human being as experienced by himself (or herself) from the inside. (341–43; qtd in Burnidge 39)

In other words, somatics is the study of self awareness, or how we sense our body and its movement from within.

Although Somatics is usually centered on viewing the self from a first-person point of view, this definition should be expanded to consider the organization and approach to teaching a movement based class. Many researchers who use Hanna's definition also indicate that these ideas may be used in how a class is taught in addition to the content. For example, Anne Burnidge points out that the original goal of somatic education was “facilitating psychophysical elements such as

breath, dynamic alignment, whole-body connectivity, body awareness, and neuromuscular efficiency” (38). But, she then indicates that the idea has expanded to be more inclusive of the “teaching and learning setting,” and provides evidence of this possibility by describing how she has used this concept to develop her teaching style (38). Jill Green also declares a preference for Hanna’s definition, but acknowledges the “need to apply a broader definition of somatic knowledge” and explores “Somatic Knowledge as Methodology.” Furthermore, she introduces an even more macro-level thinking of somatics that she refers to as “social somatic theory” which “addresses sociopolitical issues related to somatic theory and practice.” She explains how other researchers have explored this concept, demonstrating a more broad understanding of the significance of somatics in the field. Glenna Batson also outlines the history of somatics and its narrow definition in “Somatics Studies and Dance,” but references a “somatic learning environment” or “context.” Although she writes specifically about a somatic centered class, she is no longer studying the self and proprioceptive point of view in these analyses. Rather, she explores *how* somatic practices and education are facilitated.

Though it seems that many researchers in the field agree that somatics covers more content than previously defined, there is no new formal definition that is representative of those concepts. Therefore, I propose a more broad definition: the study of how any movement, action, system, process, etc can allow for self awareness and personal growth within a given context of history and space, or how self awareness and personal growth may be facilitated in our given context, history, and space with a complete view of the body, mind, spirit, and emotions as a whole. This reflects somatic values and allows us to additionally recognize how we fit into our existing world, which is still different from the third person point of view that Hanna notes is a significant distinction. It also allows us to recognize how such reflection may be facilitated and that this facilitation is not independent of our context. It is kind of a marriage between Hanna’s theories and Rudolf Laban’s



theories (another pioneer in somatics), as it reflects the Laban theories of Shape (how we “bridge” to our environment), and the Inner/Outer or Self/Other thematic duality (Studd and Cox 166-67; 51-52). For this paper I will use the revised definition, as it provides more accessible avenues for achieving somatic values within the unique context of a high school dance team.

### **Applications of Somatics on the High School Dance Team**

Most past studies of somatics focus on the dance studio, so it’s important to note the most relevant distinctions between studios and dance teams to recognize the need to study them separately when considering how somatic practices may be implemented in the dance world.

First, dance teams have different goals than studios, and they have unique origins and traditions that require separate analyses. First, while a dance studio’s primary purpose is to teach technique, a high school dance team may expect some prior technical training to join (Hernandez). The level of technical training is typically assessed through an audition, and dancers may be placed on a varsity or elite team for advanced skill or a junior varsity team for less (Sawyer). Although dance teams may teach or practice technical skills, their primary goals include fostering school spirit, performing at school events (such as halftime at sports events or pep rallies), and competing, in addition to teaching life skills (Sawyer). Secondly, dance teams have a distinct history and a unique dance style. They were created as a development of Pep Squads (which cheered and performed military based drills with a “swing flair” at school events) in East Texas in the 1940s (Pennington). The strong military influences can be seen not only in the precision based performance, but in the hierarchical organization and values such as unwavering respect for authority, rigorous training and practices, and “selfless service,” which the US Army Values describes partly as “the commitment of each team member to go a little further, endure a little longer, and look a little closer to see how he or she can add to the effort.”

Though there are significant differences between studios and dance teams, they do have some similarities. For example, neither of them have an “off season,” as opposed to most other sports, meaning they are working or performing year round. Additionally, authoritarian and teacher-centered methods are prevalent in both. Enforced comparison is a theme common to each field, and as mentioned earlier, strict surveillance is a key method for facilitating conformity in the dance world.

Applying somatic knowledge to the dance team setting will require great effort, and should not end here. Current studies are either based on theoretical frameworks or experiments with pedagogy in a class setting based on somatic education training. In this section, I will present what has been done on this subject, explore how their findings may be applied in this new context, and infer the value of this application. However, my goal here is to offer a new lens with which we can analyze and improve dance teams to encourage more research on this topic.

#### *Theoretical Applications and Approach*

The coach’s perception of dancers and how the coach values the growth of every student is of utmost importance. One of the most important things a coach can do is to “acknowledge the distinct humanness and wholeness of each student” which may be done by “creat[ing] a nonjudgmental and safe environment, conducive to inner exploration, self-learning, and growth” (Jill Green). This can be facilitated in a variety of ways. In her paper “Somatics in the Dance Studio: Embodying Feminist/Democratic Pedagogy,” Anne Burnidge outlines somatically influenced approaches and highlights their value by juxtaposing them to the traditional approaches. These include but are not limited to being student-centered, viewing the student as an “agent of self change,” and being process-oriented (Burnidge 41-42). These principles may be achieved through facilitating deliberate dialogue, embracing the feminist value of inquiry, and valuing all voices as students develop self awareness (Burnidge). Coaches cannot implement somatics on the dance team

without appreciating and honoring the process that students go through and recognizing the agency of their students. According to Mainwaring and Krasnow, “dancers need encouragement to nurture self esteem and instill self belief...teacher confidence in student’s abilities can provide the encouragement and motivation needed for continued effort” (17). This shows that the way a coach demonstrates support for students and how they perceive students can have a great impact on a dancer’s attitude and self-perception. Furthermore, these values leave no room for common authoritarian practices such as strict surveillance or humiliating students. A coach showing respect and uplifting each individual as equal and important members of the team while actively demonstrating an appreciation for each unique perspective can promote a more positive team dynamic.

### *Practical Applications*

There are an endless amount of ways that somatics can be incorporated practically on a dance team. As mentioned earlier, somatics was originally all about increasing body awareness to maximize movement efficiency. These concepts can be applied to warm ups, teaching techniques, or otherwise incorporating somatic practices directly into the curriculum. Though this would have many benefits, I will focus on practical applications that could directly improve the mental health of team members.

The most important application for somatics to thrive on dance teams is to have coaches educated on somatic practices and theory. As students should understand the intent of their coach's pedagogical practices, the coach should understand the value of their pedagogy and how to achieve their pedagogical goals. In other words, the practical approach to a somatically informed class is not a widespread, step-by-step guide or pre-made curriculum that every dance team adheres to strictly. This is not to say that coaches shouldn't share their journeys and ideas. As there is a collection of academic thought on somatics in dance studios and general dance education, there should be a field

of dance team coaches networking and presenting findings on best practices when incorporating somatics on high school dance teams. With a more widespread understanding of the concept, coaches and teachers may be more willing to embrace somatic influence. However, coaches must have a comprehensive understanding of somatics to be able to create a flexible and dynamic curriculum that can meet the needs of their unique group of dancers.

One way a coach might begin to apply somatic theory in their dance curriculum is by using it to construct a more efficient practice schedule. Batson and Schwartz use the Feldenkrais Method theories on intentional and frequent rest to reconsider how to optimize training schedules for dancers. They found that the recommended equal ratio of rest and effort gives dancers a chance to listen to their body, understand how they learn best, and how their body can achieve movement (Batson and Schwartz 51). They are then able to better execute movement with less opportunity for injury (Batson and Schwartz 54). One student found that this allowed her to “engage in the classes she was taking with more satisfaction and presence” (Batson and Schwartz 51). This suggests that an improved practice schedule may motivate students to participate more actively, thus making practices more effective in teaching new content. Furthermore, resting intervals may give students a chance to feel more confident in themselves because they can make decisions that feel right in their own body. Knowing what they need to do to successfully execute movement can be empowering and will allow dancer’s to execute that movement more consistently. Moshe Feldenkrais, the founder of the Feldenkrais Method, “believed that no new organization could emerge from continuous repetition of a movement pattern, especially without awareness” (Batson and Schwartz 50). Though many might argue that repetition develops “muscle memory,” a dancer may be creating bad habits by not understanding the mechanics of it instead. Furthermore, according to Psychologist Lynda Mainwaring and Dance Professor Donna Krasnow, “repeating material over and over with no time for reflection and feedback can result in repeating the same errors, and thus produce diminished self

esteem” (20). This understanding of rest may be considered when practicing new steps or choreography by incorporating intentional rest periods.

### *Value of Application*

There are many possible benefits to applying somatic practices on a dance team, especially for the mental health of dancers and giving them more to take from their experiences on the dance team. The central goal of somatics, increasing self awareness, has great value in and of itself. According to Burnidge, “awakening to deep self-awareness can enhance a sense of the self, cultivate growth, and change and encourage self-confidence” (44). In other words, being in a safe space where you can grow to better understand and appreciate your body and develop a toolset for thinking about and approaching life inside and outside the dance studio is empowering. Furthermore, a somatic perspective can eliminate the culture of comparison that typically comes with competition which can help build community, thus emphasizing the value of collaboration (Mainwaring and Krasnow 16). In Burnidge’s “somatically based community,” her goal is to “invite members to be an integral part of a cocreative environment and in turn to ask each member to be accountable for the role that they play in the class and in their own learning process” (44). In her application of somatics, we can see the focus on collaborative effort with the “co-creative” process as well as an emphasis on gaining independence and learning to hold yourself accountable. In this environment, the primary goal of discouraging comparisons is reinforced because everyone is working together instead of competing to be the best, thereby evading many of the consequences that come with that culture. All of these outcomes are far more conducive to positive effects on the mental health and enthusiasm of dance team members.

### **Obstacles to Applying Somatic Practices in the High School Dance Team**

Although there appears to be many advantages to incorporating somatic practices into a high school dance team, it would not be an easy task and this analysis alone surely leaves some concerns

for its feasibility. For example, is there still room for leadership positions in a somatically informed organization? A strictly non-authoritarian, non-hierarchical structure that is purely based on somatic theory would likely require the abolishment of leadership positions as well as a shift in the coach's role. This is because having a leadership position implies that you have higher status than other members and that your primary responsibility is to directly guide, instruct, or lead them, thereby taking away their sense of independence and autonomy. Furthermore, high school dancers should hardly be expected to have the somatic training necessary to facilitate the required environment for somatic education. However, many coaches would likely be hesitant to take away these positions, perhaps in fear that the team won't get anything done, especially if they are used to giving dance officers a lot of authority and responsibility in running the team. It is true that the coach would have to be more present and active to achieve somatic implementation. However, the Coaches time constraint and abundance of other responsibilities may also be a concern, as it may inhibit them from being able to fully participate in all practices. Costly or possibly unattainable solutions such as having another assistant or two who can be responsible for team logistics may not be feasible for every team. This may require a hybrid organization. It's important to note that not every team can or will be the same, so I will not attempt to prescribe a solution to these concerns, but rather point them out and recognize the need for further experimentation and research on these issues.

Another obstacle to implementing somatic practices is that both students and coaches alike will be hesitant to attempt such change. With a rigor-based ideology so pervasive in the dance world, some dancers may feel a "sense of guilt or dis-ease at the freedom of movement and sense of effortlessness afforded by somatics" (Batson and Schwartz 47). Additionally, Anne Burnidge admits that her students with a traditional training background did "not always embrace [her] 'soma-feminist' approach" (39). Although both speak to the eventual success and positive response to leading a somatically informed class, it was not easy to start. This is why it is important for

coaches to be comfortable with somatic theory so they can invite students to be comfortable in it with them. However, as Donna Dragon notes, there is a long history of authoritarian practices in dance with a “teaching as I was taught” approach (27). With such strong traditions on the dance team, coaches may have a hard time seeing the value in changing their curriculum. The first, most important step to address this is to encourage self-reflexive coaching. As Anne Burnidge works to constantly improve her pedagogical methods (46), coaches should question everything about how their actions and practices impact the team and whether strongly held traditions are truly beneficial to the growth of their dancers.

### **Conclusion**

The current organization and curriculum of high school dance teams create an environment that does not value dancers as individuals, likely fostering suboptimal mental health effects on dancers and weakening the integrity of community. Integrating somatic practices on high school dance teams appears to have great potential for improving the experiences of members across the country. Current knowledge on somatic practices indicate that it is possible to produce many of the same positive outcomes that dance teams have now with a somatically informed approach. However, these outcomes would need to be facilitated in new ways, some of which were outlined here, and some of which still need to be discovered. Furthermore, there are an abundance of additional benefits that come with this new approach by creating a community that nurtures self awareness, builds self confidence, and provides a safe place for exploration and development. However, it would not be an easy or straightforward process. This is a subject that requires further investigation by coaches, somatics experts, and other researchers in the field to create a culture of constant inquiry and growth in the ideology of dance team coaching.

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