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A Qualitative Investigation of Commitment to Dance: Findings from the UK Centres for Advanced Training

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Commitment to an activity forms an essential part of the talent development process, yet little is known about the reasons why young people commit to dance training. The aim of this study was to investigate the factors that affect young dancers’ commitment to a selective dance talent scheme. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 committed dancers and transcripts were content analysed. Enjoyment was the most important factor relating to commitment, and stemmed from several sources such as self-expression, movement sensations and feelings associated with performing. Relationships with dance peers and teachers, parental support and the opportunities available on the scheme also enhanced commitment. While some potential barriers to participation were identified, such as concerns about injury, these seemed insufficient to affect the participants’ commitment. The results of the study may help educators to develop young dancers’ talents optimally by enhancing their commitment to training.

Keywords: commitment, adherence, dancing, talent

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Introduction

It has traditionally been assumed that talented artists are born rather than made (e.g. Austin 1982; Evans, Bickel and Pendarvis 2000), yet there have been some research advances in the area of dance talent in recent years. Specifically, talent in dance is now understood to be multi-faceted, comprised of physical, technical, artistic and psychological aspects (Baum, Owen and Oreck 1996; Walker, Nordin-Bates and Redding 2010). In the UK, researchers recently completed a longitudinal interdisciplinary investigation of dance talent among young people enrolled in a selective pre-vocational dance training scheme (Redding, Nordin-Bates and Walker 2011). The young dancers reported healthy psychological profiles and found their learning environment to be challenging and supportive, which in turn predicted higher self-reported creativity and passion for dance. The results also revealed that many of the physical characteristics associated with dance talent, such as strength and flexibility, changed over time, indicating that at least some components of dance talent are trainable rather than innate.

Naturally, in order to improve and progress over time, dancers must remain committed to training. The current study was part of Redding et al.’s (2011) talent research project in recognition of the fact that commitment forms an essential part of the talent development process; without it, a young person is unlikely to develop his or her talents optimally. Indeed, researchers have noted that the attributes required for successful performance are similar to those necessary for lifelong participation in physical activity (Abbott, Collins, Martindale and Sowerby 2002). Of particular relevance to the current study, studies in sport (e.g. Gould, Diffenbach and Moffett 2002; Gould and Maynard 2009) and music (MacNamara, Button and Collins 2010; Talbot-Honeck and Orlick 1998) indicate that elite performers are characterised by
high levels of commitment not only to their domain, but also to *excelling* in their domain. As such, commitment is clearly a relevant concept to investigate within studies of talent, yet little research of this nature exists in dance.

The pursuit of a career in dance often takes much dedicated practice; for young dancers, commitment to training must be made alongside school work and social activities. This is particularly important given that recent research indicates that the main reason for dropping out of dance training is having conflicting demands (Walker, Nordin-Bates and Redding 2012). Empirical studies indicate that participation motives in dance include enjoyment, self-expression, movement sensations, social interactions, an escape from daily life, emotional release, creativity and the feelings associated with performing (Alter 1997; Nieminen 1998; Pickard 2006; Pickard and Bailey 2009; Stinson 1997). For example, Nieminen (1998) found that recreational dancers were motivated by self-expression, social contacts, achievement and performing, fitness, breaking away from daily routines, and preparing for a career; self-expression was rated the most important of these factors.

While these studies provide useful information, participation motives do not represent an in-depth exploration of the reasons behind long-term activity engagement made alongside other life demands, nor do they address how such a commitment is made when training is arduous and there is no guarantee of a successful career. In a study of young ballet dancers as they progressed through training, Pickard (2012) suggested that young dancers are committed to their training predominantly because of their desire to be a professional, yet this is in contrast to the above participation motives which focus mainly on the elements inherent in dance rather than long-term outcomes (Alter 1997; Nieminen 1998; Pickard 2006; Stinson 1997). Because of these discrepancies, further research is required to better understand dance commitment.
Furthermore, existing research into participation motives and commitment in dance has focused either on recreational dancers (Niemenen 1998; Stinson 1997), university dance students (Alter 1997) or young talented ballet dancers (Pickard 2006, 2012). No studies to date have investigated young talented contemporary dancers, despite the popularity of this dance style in the UK (e.g. Dance UK 2009). Therefore the aim of this study was to investigate factors that facilitate young dancers’ commitment to a selective contemporary dance talent scheme.

Sport research in the area of commitment and adherence is far more advanced than that in dance. Being a physical discipline, often requiring dedication to rigorous training, research in this area is relevant to consider in relation to dance investigations. A range of studies in youth sport have consistently found social relationships, perceived competence and, in particular, enjoyment, to be associated with adherence (e.g. Gould, Feltz and Weiss 1985; Klint and Weiss 1986; Ryska, Hohensee, Cooley and Jones 2002; Salguero, González-Boto, Tuero and Márquez 2003). Given the importance of enjoyment to adherence, researchers aimed to better understand why physical activities are enjoyable. Across a range of sports, ages and ethnic backgrounds, common sources of enjoyment include the excitement of the game, challenge, positive social interactions, perceived competence, effort, mastery, goal attainment and movement sensations (Scanlan, Carpenter, Lobel and Simons 1993a; Scanlan and Lewthwaite 1986; Scanlan, Stein and Ravizza 1989; Stein and Scanlan 1992; Wankel and Kreisel 1985; Wankel and Sefton 1989). As with the dance participation motives, intrinsic motives for participating in physical activity tend to be afforded more importance by participants than extrinsic motives (Ryska et al. 2002), which suggests that young people are ‘pulled’ toward participation rather than ‘pushed’ into activities.
Following on from descriptive studies, sport researchers began to adopt or develop theories in order to understand the psychological mechanisms underlying commitment to physical activity. Commitment is conceptualised as a psychological construct reflecting “the desire or resolve to continue sport participation” even in the face of adversity (Scanlan, Carpenter, Schmidt, Simons and Keeler 1993b, p.1). This definition is relevant to dance, which can often involve arduous training combined with physical and emotional hardship (Pickard 2012). The Sport Commitment Model (SCM; Scanlan et al. 1993b) is one of the most prominent models used to investigate commitment in sport contexts. According to this model, sport commitment is predicted by greater enjoyment, involvement opportunities, personal investments and social constraints, and fewer attractive alternatives. Research with youth engaged in a range of sports has found enjoyment and involvement opportunities in particular to predict commitment (Carpenter, Scanlan, Simons and Lobel 1993; Carpenter and Coleman 1998; Scanlan et al. 1993b; Weiss and Weiss 2006). Recently, social support has received sufficient empirical support to warrant inclusion in the model (Scanlan, Russell, Beals and Scanlan 2003; Scanlan, Russell, Magyar and Scanlan 2009; Weiss and Weiss 2007).

While social support has been highlighted as pertinent in more recent investigations using the SCM, several other descriptive and theoretical studies have revealed greater detail as to the role of social relationships play in activity commitment. Within the learning environment, teacher behaviour can influence student participation: perceptions of a task-involving motivational climate (a psychological atmosphere which emphasises task mastery and self-referenced learning; Ames 1992) have been associated with adherence to sport (Boiché and Sarrazin 2009; Le Bars, Gernigon and Ninot 2009). In addition, positive relationships
With likeminded peers have been associated with commitment in qualitative studies of young talented athletes and artists (Fraser-Thomas, Côté and Deakin 2008; Fredricks et al. 2002; Patrick et al. 1999). However, social relationships outside of the learning environment can either support or undermine commitment. Patrick et al. (1999) found that engagement in a talent activity could be deemed as either socially acceptable or unacceptable by young people’s school peers. The extent to which the young person valued the activity versus social status at school subsequently influenced their commitment to the activity. Furthermore, some studies have reported that romantic relationships can lessen commitment to activities (Coakley and White 1992; Scanlan et al. 2009). On the other hand, family support is crucial in long-term activity involvement, for example by providing advice, encouragement and logistical support (e.g. Côté 1999; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde and Whalen 1993; Pickard 2006). As such, social relationships can have divergent effects on commitment and are of interest to explore further in dance.

Finally, a developmental approach to understanding talent development has indicated that the opportunity to sample a range of activities during early development, followed by commitment to one specialised activity during the mid-teens, is associated with both continued sport participation and the attainment of elite status (Carlson 1988; Côté 1999; Côté, Lidor and Hackfort 2009; Fraser-Thomas et al. 2008). Overall therefore, a broad range of factors appear related to physical activity commitment that go beyond those explored in previous dance investigations. However, while the research advances made in sport are relevant to consider in relation to dance, the distinctions between dance and sport mean that dance-specific research is essential.
Dance training often involves learning a variety of dance styles, each with their own steps and terminology, while choreography and performance entail creating and learning extended sequences where technical and artistic goals must be combined. While dance is a physical discipline that employs dancers’ motor skills and athleticism, dancers must also convey the artistic intent of a work during performance whether it be based on narrative or abstract concepts. Expressive ability and creativity are considered key dance talent characteristics, and comprise improvisation, musicality and dynamic range amongst other elements (Walker, Nordin-Bates & Redding, 2010); thus a dancer requires a different set of skills and training methods to an athlete. Also, dance students typically have multiple teachers, which adds to the complexity of the training environment. Therefore, the aim of this study was to support and extend existing research by investigating the factors that affect young dancers’ commitment to a selective dance talent scheme.

Given the diverse factors related to commitment in sport previous studies, and the paucity of available dance research in the area, an exploratory, qualitative approach was adopted. In this way, a broad understanding of various factors that might affect participants’ commitment to dance could emerge inductively. Qualitative designs allow researchers to explore and understand a phenomenon from participants’ perspectives rather than from an a priori conceptualisation (Krauss 2005). Wide-ranging factors derived from the literature reviewed above (individual, social, developmental) that potentially influence dance commitment were considered in order to obtain a comprehensive view. Briefly, this included reasons for dancing, enjoyment sources, the role of social relationships, and other activities which may conflict with dance involvement. Rich description yielded from such a qualitative approach (Patton...
(2002) may then be used to structure interventions designed to enhance commitment and subsequently optimal talent development.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from the Centres for Advanced Training (CATs), UK government-funded talent schemes that offer high-quality part-time dance training to young people between the ages of 10-18 years. Students typically attend two auditions in order to secure a place at one of the CATs, indicating that the study participants are indeed talented. Dance classes run at weekends and after school to enable students to continue attending their mainstream schools and, if they choose, other extracurricular activities.

Nineteen young dancers volunteered to participate in the study following a presentation delivered to students by the first author. In this presentation the aims and objectives of the research, the procedures, potential harm and benefits of taking part, and outcomes of the research were outlined. These were later reinforced in printed information sheets. The participants were recruited from three CATs whose managers expressed an interest in the study. These CATs focus on contemporary dance (centres are referred to as either A, B, or C in the Results), although students also took classes in other styles including ballet, creative dance and professional workshops. Of the participants, 12 were female and seven were male, ranging in age from 11-17 years ($M = 15.21 \pm 2.02$). They trained at their CAT for an average of 6.80 hours ($\pm 1.10$) per week, with an additional 6.96 hours ($\pm 5.17$) per week training at other dance schools. Students who had been attending their CAT for at least three months were selected for the study because they would be in training for significant hours each
week at their CAT and thus were likely to give a rich account of their experiences in, and commitment to, dance (Patton 2002).

Procedure

The study was granted approval by a Higher Education institutional research ethics committee and informed consent was given by all participants. For participants under 16 years of age, parental consent was also obtained. As noted above, participants were given information sheets prior to the interviews to enable them to familiarise themselves with the procedure and aims of the study (Thomas and Nelson 2001). Given the age of the participants it is possible that the presence of a researcher was intimidating. Therefore, it was particularly important to assure participants that there were no right or wrong answers, that their responses would be treated confidentially, that they could be honest about their experiences, that they could ask questions throughout the interview if they were uncertain about a particular question or topic, and that they could choose not to answer certain questions if they felt uncomfortable (Morrow 2008).

It has been highlighted that “children are not used to being asked their opinions and relate their experiences to unknown adults, and probably need to have some familiarity with the researcher” (Morrow and Richards 1996, p.101). Positively, the majority of the participants had some familiarity with the authors from previous data collections as part of the larger talent development research project, which appeared to engender trust as the students were open and responsive during the interviews. Indeed, participants would have been unlikely to volunteer for the study if they had had an unsatisfactory experience with the researchers at a previous time. Furthermore, participants were assured that the research would not impact on their studies, did not form part of an assessment, and that their individual responses would
not be shared with their teachers, indicating that regardless of whether the young
dancers chose to participate in the study or not, their training would not be affected.
Participants were also informed that they could request the presence of an impartial
observer during the interviews, although all declined to do so.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide (see
Appendix) that was created with considerations of existing research and gaps in the
literature. The guide was structured into four sections: (1) introductory questions and
dance training history (e.g. Can you describe when you first started dancing?); (2)
feelings about dance, reasons for dancing and future ambitions (e.g. Could you
describe what your main reasons for dancing are?); (3) potential changes in feelings
about dance, participation and training over time (e.g. Would you say that you are still
dancing for the same reason as when you first started?); and (4) the role of significant
others (e.g. Can you describe what sort of role your parents play in your dance
involvement?). The guide was concise in order to minimise disruption to the students’
busy timetables. Participants were encouraged to ask questions where necessary, and
probe questions were used when further clarification and elaboration were required in
order to reach data saturation (Patton 2002).

Pilot interviews were conducted with four dancers (three trained dancers; the
fourth a CAT graduate now undertaking vocational dance training) in order to assess
the utility of the questions. As a result, some of the questions were re-worded.
Interviews were conducted at a mutually convenient time and space at the relevant
CAT during the dancers’ training day, in a quiet room with no interruptions. All of the
interviews were conducted by the first author and lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Analysis
The interviews were transcribed verbatim and uploaded into NVivo qualitative analysis software. All text was read thoroughly and relevant meaning units extracted and labelled. Meaning units were organised into continuously created and merged categories (themes). From these, a hierarchy emerged that represented relationships between lower- and higher-order themes, and the research question (Patton 2002).

Several steps were taken to enhance trustworthiness. Participants were assured of anonymity and data confidentiality, encouraging them to speak freely. The first author has a dance background, enabling her to empathise with participants and use appropriate probes for each interview. Although this could potentially result in the first author interpreting the data in relation to her own experiences, steps taken during analysis (see below) would have safeguarded against this possibility. Furthermore, the advantages of a shared understanding of certain dance terminology and experiences were felt to outweigh the disadvantages, such as creating trust and subsequently greater depth and honesty of responses. After each interview, the first author wrote a summary of the important themes that had emerged. During analysis, the second author separately coded 10% of the transcripts to ensure agreement on coding density (i.e., percentage of transcript coded). The second author then independently categorised all meaning units. The two versions of the hierarchy were continuously compared and debated until agreement was reached (Patton 2002). Finally, quotations are included in the Results to allow readers to form their own interpretations (Sparkes 1998). Interviews followed the same schedule and generally lasted for similar durations; thus the number of times a theme was mentioned by participants is included in the Results to indicate its importance to the entire sample. However, it is important to note that a theme may be important even if it is only mentioned by a
small number of participants (Krane, Andersen and Strean 1997); therefore, all
themes relevant to the research question are reported below.

Results
Three higher-order themes emerged which created the overall hierarchy of
commitment: Developmental factors; Factors that Facilitate Commitment; and
Potential Barriers to Commitment. Figure 1 shows these themes together with the
lower-order themes from which they were created. Each theme will now be presented
in detail.

Developmental factors
This theme explored the dancers’ backgrounds, current activities and future plans in
order to address developmental factors. In terms of backgrounds, nine students began
dancing at an early age (four or five years old), four began dancing around the age of
10 years, while the remainder came to dance later during their mid-teens, often
through school projects. Sixteen participants reported that they now train for a greater
number of hours per week than when they first started dancing and the majority (18)
felt that their dance training had become more difficult over time. Alongside these
changes in training volume and content, fifteen students noted that their own personal
reasons for dancing had also altered over time, with dance changing from being a
hobby to becoming something that they loved and were considering as a career: “I
think back when I first started I didn’t realise, like, what was going to happen, and
now I just kind of realised that this is exactly what I want to do” (B1). However, four
participants felt that there was no change in their reasons for dancing over time, for
example: “I started because I was intrigued by it and I want to, I don’t know, explore
it more” (C2).
As well as their CAT participation, 14 participants were training at other dance schools, often partaking in several additional weekly classes. Thirteen students participated in at least one other extracurricular activity, relating to music, the dramatic arts, sport or visual art. As such, the young people were pursuing dance training alongside other activities which may have benefited their talent development in dance in terms of strength development and improved musicality for example. In terms of their future plans, 15 participants aimed to pursue a dance career. Four participants were considering dance as part of their career alongside other options.

**Factors that Facilitate Commitment**

This theme was created from lower-order themes relating to positive experiences in the talent scheme, and social relationships inside and outside the scheme that facilitated commitment to dance. Specifically, factors that facilitated commitment were enjoyment, social relationships, course content and being labelled talented.

**Enjoyment.**

The students’ enjoyment of dance was expressed throughout the interviews and was evident not only in their words but also in the enthusiasm with which they described their feelings and experiences. Students reported numerous sources of dance enjoyment and appeared to recognise that enjoyment was important in order to continue training. For example, one participant explained: “…there’s a lot more commitment [at CAT], so I really have to feel like I enjoy it to come, and I do” (A3).

Several of these enjoyment sources generalised across various dance settings (e.g., technique class; creative workshops), while some were specific to performance contexts.

**General dance enjoyment.** In terms of general sources of dance enjoyment, self-expression was an important reason for dancing cited by nine of the participants,
for example: “I just think dancing is such a beautiful way of expressing yourself and feelings” (B2). Moreover, five students explained that dance could be a form of emotional release or escape from problems such as disagreements with friends or pressure about school work. For example:

... if I’ve had a really bad day at school or something then I can go dancing and just forget about it all, and it feels like me, it feels really natural, like what I should do. It’s kind of, like, my escape from everything else (B3).

Therefore, the expressive element of dance was important in providing an outlet for a range of emotions, or as a means to forget negative emotions. Additionally, the physical experience of dancing was in itself highly enjoyable; movement sensations were described by seven participants, apparent in the following quote: “I just love the whole, like, rush of it all...trying to fly across the room” (B1). These examples of emotional and physical connection with dance suggest that the young people were able to lose themselves in this highly enjoyable activity.

However, dance enjoyment was not only derived from expression and physical sensations, but was also found in mastering steps and movement tasks. Task mastery was cited by six participants, who understood that hard work enabled them to reach their technical goals and subsequently increase their self-confidence: “It seems like you keep working at it, and it does work, you do get a lot better” (B6). Furthermore, one participant described the satisfaction from the physical signs of having worked hard: “If I ache the next day I know I’ve done good. It might be hurting me but [laughs] I don’t know, it makes me feel good ’cause I’ve worked really, really hard” (C3). Perhaps because dance has no objective markers with which to monitor progress, such physical signs and symptoms provided reliable evidence of task mastery and progression. Finally, three students reported that creativity – such as creating phrases individually or working collaboratively – was an enjoyable part of
their dance experience: “I like creating stuff. Here, when we’re performing a piece together, when we’re part of the creative process, I like that” (C4). This quote also introduces the role of social relationships in commitment which are further explored below.

Dance performance. Although many of the enjoyment sources could relate to both classes and performances, most (17) students found performing in and of itself to be particularly enjoyable, as one described: “I think the adrenalin rush, it’s everything that’s put towards that performance, it’s all, there’s so much pressure on you but it’s your time to shine. It’s really good!” (C3). This quote illustrates how performing facilitated an enjoyable adrenalin rush or ‘buzz’, which was identified by a further nine participants. Indeed, one participant explained that during performance he could let himself go in a way that was not possible in technique class. Performing also provided dancers with opportunities for task mastery, as six students explained how performance was a means of justifying the hard work that had gone into training and rehearsing: “…the realiseation that all that training has come to something” (C4).

Although task mastery was mentioned in the general dance enjoyment section, the specific achievement associated with performing was distinct from studio-based examples in that it represented a cumulative moment in the dancers’ training year. The combination of heightened pressure to perform well and the accompanying adrenalin rush meant that satisfaction after a performance was greater for most students than after class, which implies that performance opportunities represented an important reason for dancing. Given that performing was such an important source of enjoyment, it is positive to note that seven participants stated that they performed more at the CATs than at their other dance schools, which may have enhanced their commitment to the talent development scheme.
An additional aspect of performing was dancing in front of an audience. The majority of the group enjoyed performing on stage and receiving cheers, feedback and appreciation from those watching. In this sense, tacit audience feedback elicited positive feelings among the participants, but performing was also viewed by four participants as an opportunity to give others pleasure. One participant took this notion further by explaining: “…if you have that kind of passion and you show it, and then the audience receives it, I think you can really, like, change someone’s life” (A6). The enjoyable opportunity, unique to performing, of connecting to those watching illustrates an important social dimension of commitment. The role of social relationships in relation to commitment is further explored below.

Social relationships.

Social relationships emerged strongly as an important facilitator of commitment and includes social relationships within and outside of the CAT in terms of CAT peers, CAT teachers, family and friends, and inspiring relationships.

CAT peers. According to 14 participants, CAT peers were important in terms of friendship, support and, “…being around people who all had the same interests” (A5). Spending time with likeminded peers resulted in close relationships and enabled the participants to cultivate a peer group that served to enhance their identity as dancers. In class the strength of these relationships resulted in encouragement and motivation, as four participants described; for example: “in the class we all spur each other on and give credit if we’ve done something well” (C2). This quote illustrates how friendship and support was manifested in the studio; indeed, seven participants stated that their peers worked together, were able to learn from each other, and that they enjoyed this collaborative atmosphere. While the connection between dancer and audience was an important social dimension to performing, an additional element
specific to performing was being on stage as a group. As one participant described:

“...no-one’s gonna let you down, 'cause everyone’s working not just to make
themselves look good but to make everyone look good in a way, to really prove
yourself as a group” (A1). These findings indicate that social relationships served to
enhance commitment in terms of representing a likeminded peer group as well as a
group of young artists with whom to cooperate.

**CAT teachers**. CAT teachers appeared to represent an important aspect of the
social environment in two related ways: through their relationship with the students
and positive approach, and in their teaching style. First, students appeared to have
good relationships with their teachers, with six describing their teachers as
approachable and helpful in giving valuable advice about dance careers. For example,
one participant explained: “I really trust them...not just with the steps they give us”
(A6). The professional credentials and experience of the CAT staff served to enhance
the extent to which students admired, trusted and sought advice from their teachers:

“...they’ve had so much experience and, like, we just learn loads from them” (C1).

This positive relationship was facilitated through teachers’ motivation and
encouragement to work hard, identified by seven participants, and evidenced in the
following quote: “[Teacher] in a way believes in me and spurs me on in what I can
do” (C2). Such encouragement was also reflected in the way that teachers used
positive and constructive feedback, as one participant explained: “I also like it when
the teachers praise you for, like, doing well on what they’ve corrected you on, 'cause
the teachers like knowing that you’re improving in what you’re doing” (B4). Given
that task mastery emerged as an enjoyment source, feedback of this nature provided
evidence that students’ mastery attempts were indeed successful, which in turn
enhanced their commitment to training.
In addition to their positive approach, staff appeared to teach in a way that emphasised autonomy and equality. Specifically, two students explained that CAT teachers were less controlling than their teachers at other dance schools, while two participants explicitly stated that their teachers did not have favourites. Three participants described how the teachers treated them like adults, which served to enhance their autonomy and confidence: “...we’re treated more as young dancers here, whereas there [other dance school] we’re still children who are learning to dance…and that helps you to believe in yourself a bit more” (B3). Autonomy was also nurtured as students were encouraged to take responsibility for their learning, and indeed there was evidence of this occurring, for example: “I’m kind of really focusing on getting this move right so that next week I’ll be able to show the teacher that I have practiced and that I have concentrated” (B2). Collectively, then, teachers served as both supportive role models and facilitators of autonomy. This emphasis on independent learning with support appeared important in relation to commitment to the scheme.

*Family and friends.* Supportive relationships outside of the CATs were predominantly with parents and friends. The majority of participants (16) felt that their parents were supportive of their dance involvement. Eight dancers described how parents offered advice, help and emotional support when needed. Parents appeared to take a predominantly supportive and facilitative, rather than motivational, role, although some participants did talk of encouragement to continue training, as the following quote demonstrates: “[Mum’s] always said to me, ‘follow your dreams, do what you want’, saying ‘you go to your class and you put in your effort and you’ll get out of it what you put in’…she’s really been helpful” (C3). Alongside this emotional support, parents also provided tangible assistance in terms of transportation to and
from training, rehearsals and performances so that their child could continue to
develop their talents. One student noted: “...without them I wouldn’t be able to do it
really” (A3). Four of the older participants (14 years and above) were aware of the
time and effort dedicated by their parents and expressed gratitude for this: “I think my
mum, well, my parents, know how much I love it so they do it for me, I’m really
lucky about that” (DE3). As such, families were typically perceived as being essential
in the facilitating the students’ commitment to training.

In terms of friends, 14 participants described their non-dancing peers as being
supportive, understanding the time commitments involved in dance training, and
coming to watch performances. Although positive, this appeared less important than
parental support in helping the young dancers stay dedicated to training.

**Inspiring relationships.** Another social aspect that was important in motivating
students and encouraging their commitment came in the form of inspirational figures
and experiences. Participants mentioned several ways in which they had been inspired
to commit to dance. Seven students felt that watching professional dancers was
inspiring, as one explained: “...when I first ever went to see a contemporary
performance, I think that’s when it really clicked, ‘this is what I want to do’” (C3).

Teachers were also inspiring, as illustrated in the following quote: “I just go ‘wow, I
want to be like you, I want to get to where you’ve got to’” (A7). Two participants
explained how watching their peers performing technical exercises in class could be
inspiring. Finally, one student described a school work experience opportunity with
children with disabilities, which helped him to appreciate and optimise his dancing.

Taken together, a variety of experiences could inspire students to push themselves
further to reach their goals.

**Course content.**
Course content was related to student commitment in that it was perceived as challenging and offering several opportunities and experiences that were not available at the participants’ other dance schools. There was a general agreement that training was focused and well-planned, involving plenty of challenge and hard work. In terms of opportunities, five participants explained the variety of opportunities they had experienced at the CATs including workshops with professional choreographers, collaborations with young musicians and performances at various venues which were felt to be professional and personally meaningful. As one explained: “I enjoy everything we do, especially performances and getting to work with different choreographers and stuff, it’s really, really good” (B3). In addition, each CAT is associated with a professional school, company or theatre, usually sharing access to purpose-built dance spaces such as studios and theatres. The combination of the experiences and facilities on offer appeared to have given students a taste of the professional world, providing further inspiration and encouragement to commit to training.

Being labelled talented.

All but one student could recall a time when they had been told they were talented in dance, typically by parents, friends and/or teachers. One participant described how this made him feel: “Good I guess. If anyone tells you you’re succeeding at something, you actually think, ‘oh I’m gonna really go for it, push myself, try and achieve something’” (A6). Being labelled talented provided evidence of a certain level of competence, consequently boosting students’ confidence and motivation to continue training and aim for goals that may previously have appeared out of reach.

Potential Barriers to Commitment
Participants described a number of potential barriers to commitment including worries and concerns, the need to juggle commitments and a lack of support. These factors represented potential barriers and generally did not actually undermine commitment, yet are still important to discuss in the context of participation behaviour.

Worries and concerns.

Participants listed several worries and concerns relating to their dance practice. First, injury was a concern for six participants, for example: “The only worry would be that I got injured and I couldn’t [dance] anymore, ’cause that can happen so easily” (B3). This quote suggests that only a physical barrier such as injury would prevent the dancer from continuing her training. Secondly, six participants cited worries regarding perceived competence. For example, one dancer expressed her concerns about the competitive dance profession: “And there’s so many good dancers as well, like, how do you know if you’re good enough?” (C1). Four participants described having ‘bad days’ which challenged their perceived competence, but these were infrequent. As one participant described: “Obviously there’s been the bad days when I’ve come home going ‘oh my God I’m crap, I’m a terrible dancer, they’re all so much better than me’, and that kind of thing, but they’ve been very, very rare” (A1). The fact that these ‘bad days’ were infrequent indicates that they were insufficient to affect commitment; moreover, worries about competence were typically counteracted by self-initiated coping strategies, such as: “... at the end of every class or whenever I’ve done something good I always cheer or something like that” (C2). In doing so, it appeared that low perceived competence was prevented from affecting commitment; however, this quote does reinforce the importance of positive and instructive feedback from teachers in providing evidence of task mastery and subsequently increasing competence perceptions.
Two participants listed concerns related to aesthetics, such as: “I’m quite muscle-y...I don’t think I’m very elegant” (B5). Demonstrating awareness of the physical ‘ideals’ that exist in some dance forms, some participants were concerned that they would not ‘fit’ such restrictive criteria. Almost in contrast to this, one participant explained concerns relating to body image: “I hope dance doesn’t, like, make me become overly concerned about what I look like or my body” (B3). Notably, only two students highlighted these aesthetic issues, indicating that they were not a major concern for most of the dancers.

Practical issues such as money and travel were discussed by two of the older students, as the dance profession has limited financial rewards and involves travelling when touring. However, participants had realistic and positive outlooks:  
...it’s such a hard industry to get into, it’s not always a guaranteed job is it? So I suppose it might be hard with money and things. But I suppose – it’s more a job that you love than a well-paid job isn’t it, so you just have to do it! (C1).

Awareness of the limited financial gains available from dance careers were insufficient to prevent the participants from trying to achieve their goals; the love of dance apparent in the above quote appeared to override any worries about financial security due to the rewards inherent in dancing itself.

Lack of support.

Despite the majority of participants describing supportive relationships outside of the CATs, three participants stated that their parents were not supportive of their dancing, as the following quote illustrates: “They don’t care. Well, they think it’s just a hobby” (A2). Five participants felt that their siblings were not supportive, usually because the sibling was too young to offer support, or was older and had left home. However, this perceived lack of support did not appear to undermine the participants’ commitment;
a love of dance combined with supportive relationships within the CATs may have
helped the participants to continue training regardless.

In terms of peers outside of dance, one participant felt that her non-dancing
friends were indifferent to her dancing, explaining: “…I don’t really talk about dance
much because they’re not into it” (B4). Four participants mentioned unfriendly
teasing from non-dancing peers; for example, one male reported that he had
occasionally endured negative comments regarding his sexuality. However, these
students did not appear to be affected by negative comments, for example: “…I lost a
lot of friends when I originally started, which was good in a way ’cause then it
showed who were my true friends” (A8). In the face of such experiences, the positive
relationships with CAT peers may have taken on even more importance within the
young dancers’ lives in general. Finally, one participant discussed how her boyfriend
seemed to understand the time commitment required for demanding training, yet was
not entirely supportive:

...he understands that I dance and he accepts it, but… I don’t see him as much and he
got a bit like, ‘oh you dance too much’… and it’s like, ‘oh I wanna do this, just let me
do it, I’ll still see you, isn’t twice a week good enough?’ (A5).

More so than negative comments from non-dancing peers, which appeared relatively
easy to ignore, this romantic relationship undermined the participant’s commitment to
dance, as is further outlined in the below section.

Juggling commitments.

This theme relates to the many different activities and commitments with which the
young people were engaged, and the impact of this on relationships with their family
and friends.

Fifteen students reported that they were juggling many commitments in their
lives, and 12 participants believed that balancing these commitments had become
more difficult over time: “...it has got more difficult...now we’ve started our GCSEs so there’s a lot more homework given, and you’re trying to do stuff and seeing friends has become less” (B4). Participants had to prioritise certain activities in their lives; 11 of the young dancers reported that CAT took priority over other dance training and extracurricular activities, as one explained: “...when they said how often it was...I thought I’d better put everything into coming here” (C4). This was the case even for seven participants who travelled long distances to attend training; indeed, the long journey provided an opportunity to catch up on school work. For example one dancer explained: “We need to get up about quarter to six ’cause our train’s at seven, yeah, bit early. It’s worth it though. I wouldn’t do it if I didn’t want to” (A3). Some of the participants noted that juggling their various commitments had resulted in improved time-management skills which helped them to manage their busy schedules.

In contrast, one dancer had been prioritising spending time with her boyfriend, who, as noted above, was not particularly supportive of her dance involvement. Despite this, the dancer was determined to stay committed to her training, explaining: “I think the main thing’s having a boyfriend, it’s been harder, ’cause it’s like another thing I enjoy as much as dancing [laughs], but I still wanna [dance], it’s just that I need to put more into it...” (A5). Although this young dancer struggled to prioritise her training, she was aware that her ambitions had not changed and that she needed to continue to work hard in order to reach her goals.

While most of the dancers felt that juggling their commitments was manageable and worthwhile, many questions had been raised for one participant. He explained: “Well this has made me wonder if I’d rather go to school, options, spend time with my mates and do sports at school…and it is really thinking ‘am I enjoying myself enough?...is this more important than that?’” (B6). As students grew older
they faced increasing commitments and seemed aware of conflicting interests. For this particular student, participation in other activities such as school work, socialising and other hobbies raised questions as to the relative importance of each activity. For the time being, however, he had decided that dance remained a priority and stayed in training.

**Effects on family and friendships.** Many of the young dancers were aware of the impact their dance training had on the family. Two participants reported that the family spent less time together because of their dance commitments; for example, one student whose parents were divorced explained, “Well I don’t see my dad a lot…’cause I dance on Saturday, and I used to go see him on weekends, but it’s kind of gone out the window now” (C2). One participant described some tension between herself and her father as they disagreed on her priorities: “Sometimes it makes things very tense with dad ’cause he disagrees with a lot of stuff about the amount of time I spend dancing” (A7). As a result, she felt that her father was unsupportive of her dance involvement due to his concerns that dance training reduced the amount of time available for school work. However, she remained dedicated to training as for her, dance remained a priority.

Five participants described how their parents’ own time was affected by transporting them to training, and three students acknowledged the financial impact of their dance involvement on the whole family. Although the CATs widen access through means testing, not all participants benefited from financial assistance, and the financial impact on middle income families with several children was significant. As noted above, some participants expressed gratitude for the sacrifices their parents made in order to support their commitment to dance training. In contrast, nine participants did not perceive any effects on their families; this could be accurate or
could reflect a lack of maturity or understanding of the impact of their activities on
the whole family.

Regarding effects on friendships, although 14 participants felt that their non-
dancing friends were supportive of their dancing, eight of them also noted that they
saw these friends less often due to their training. This was generally perceived as
being negative, for example: “I can’t see them, can’t go to parties at all... I’m missing
everything” (A2). Again, students had to assess the relative importance of their
interests and activities; the fact that the young dancers reported such close friendships
in the CATs may have lessened the impact of seeing other friends less often.
Interestingly however, three dancers did not appear to be affected by seeing their
friends less frequently, as one explained: “My friends at school, they’re always like,
‘you’re dancing all the time, we never get to see you, we haven’t had a proper chat in
ages’, but I don’t mind [laughs], I’d rather be dancing!” (C3). Moreover, three
participants perceived positive effects, such as a greater appreciation of the time that
they were able to spend with these peers, indicating that on the whole commitment to
dance was not lessened as a result.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate factors that affect young dancers’
commitment to a selective dance talent scheme. In doing so this study has made a
novel contribution to research, because without commitment to training, a young
dancer cannot develop his or her talents optimally. Throughout the interviews it
became clear that the participants were passionate about dance in that they liked it,
spent much time engaged in it and valued it highly (Vallerand et al. 2003); they were
also dedicated to their training even in the face of technical challenges and busy
schedules. Overall, enjoyment and social relationships were the most frequently cited factors that influenced dance commitment; course content, developmental factors and additional themes such as juggling activities are also worthy of discussion.

Enjoyment emerged overwhelmingly as the most important factor associated with dance commitment, which supports much previous research (e.g. Gould et al. 1985; Klint and Weiss 1986; Ryska et al. 2002; Salguero et al. 2003). Enjoyment sources cited by the participants bear similarities to participation motives reported in previous dance research, including self-expression, creativity and performing (Alter 1997; Nieminen 1998; Pickard 2006; Stinson 1997). Self-expression in particular was the most frequently cited enjoyment source, suggesting that a personal or emotional connection to the talent activity can have an impact upon an individual’s desire to continue pursuing his or her art. These more artistic factors could be considered dance-specific as other enjoyment sources, such as movement sensations, task mastery and emotional release, have also been cited in sport studies, and could be considered more general as participation motives for physical activities (e.g. Scanlan et al. 1993a; Wankel and Kreisel 1985). Participants were predominantly intrinsically motivated to dance, which supports previous research with talented youth (Csikszentmihalyi et al. 1993; Ryska et al. 2002) and indicates that the elements inherent to dance such as self-expression and task mastery are what drive participation and commitment more than external motives such as praise or pressure from significant others.

While it could be assumed that young people enrolled in selective training programmes are engaged in the single-minded pursuit of excellence, social relationships were essential to the participants’ commitment. The young dancers described their CAT peers as being important in terms of friendship, motivation and
sharing common interests. The importance of peer relationships to activity participation has been reported in previous studies of talented young people (Fraser-Thomas et al. 2008; Fredricks et al. 2002; Patrick et al. 1999). Furthermore, socialising with likeminded peers may have had a positive impact upon the dancers’ identity development and subsequent desire to continue training (Fredricks et al. 2002). Notably, in the current study the importance of peer relationships operated across several dimensions, including not only typical friendship behaviours such as support and encouragement, but also in relation to technical and artistic progress in terms of practicing with one another, collaborating to create work, and performing together.

In addition to peer relationships on the talent development scheme, participants valued their teachers as inspiring role models who encouraged and supported them. Students felt that they were treated like adults by their teachers and were encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning, which appeared to enhance their confidence, motivation and commitment. Such emphasis on personal progression and autonomy relate conceptually to definitions of a task-involving motivational climate (Ames 1992), which have been associated with adherence in sport (Boiché and Sarrazin 2009; Le Bars et al. 2009). Indeed, research with the larger cohort of CAT students indicated that task-involving climate perceptions were associated with adherence (Redding et al. 2011); taken together, teacher behaviour in the studio appears to play a significant role in nurturing dance commitment.

Outside of the talent scheme environment, parental support was an important factor in facilitating the young dancers’ commitment to their training. Participants described receiving emotional, financial and logistical support from their parents, which supports other studies of talented youth (Côté 1999; Csikszentmihalyi et al.
Previous research has indicated that peers outside of the talent activity can have either an encouraging or lessening impact on commitment (Fraser-Thomas et al. 2008; Patrick et al. 1999). In the current study, peers outside of the studio were more likely to support than undermine their friends’ commitment to dance, although this was not universally the case. On the whole, the role of social relationships both within and outside of the dance environment should not be underestimated during a young dancer’s training.

Course content emerged as another factor influencing the young dancers’ commitment. First, lesson content was perceived to be well-structured and challenging, which is positive because balancing challenge and skill level in talent settings is important for building motivation and creating enjoyable experiences (Csikszentmihalyi et al. 1993; Fredricks et al. 2002). Secondly, students were inspired and motivated by numerous opportunities to get a taste of the professional dance world via performances, theatre visits and workshops. This highlights the value of enrichment opportunities in talent schemes that relate to participants’ future aspirations. The finding also supports the role of involvement opportunities as highlighted in the Sport Commitment Model (SCM; Carpenter et al., 1993; Scanlan et al., 1993b; Scanlan et al., 2003). Indeed, the current study concurs with the enjoyment and social support antecedents of the SCM (Carpenter et al. 1993; Carpenter and Coleman 1998; Scanlan et al. 1993b; Weiss and Weiss 2006). However, although the current study did not attempt to test the SCM, it appears that this model may not encompass all of the factors that influence dance commitment. Furthermore, some antecedents in the SCM (involvement alternatives, personal investments and social constraints) did not emerge from the data. Future studies could usefully assess the extent to which sport theories can be applied to dance.
Regarding developmental factors, some researchers suggest that optimal
developmental trajectories for commitment and elite performance exist (e.g., Côté,
Lidor and Hackfort 2009) but the current study was unable to support or contend this
notion in dance. Participants reported varying backgrounds as well as diverse current
levels of dance and extracurricular activity involvement. However, the majority of the
young dancers reported participating in increasing hours of dance training over time,
the content of which had become increasingly difficult, in accordance with most talent
models (e.g., Côté 1999). Furthermore, most participants explained that their reasons
for dancing had changed over time, with dance changing from a recreational activity
to something that many of the young dancers loved and considered as a future career.
This suggests that passion and drive develop over time and demonstrates the influence
that both emotional attachment to an activity and future goals can exert over
participation decisions. Although the importance of love or passion to commitment is
intuitive, this study was the first to highlight it, and further such research is
recommended.

Three additional findings emerged from the current study which are relevant
to the understanding of dance commitment. First, all but one of the participants had
been labelled talented at some point in their dance histories. Although being labelled
talented can lead young people to feel that their abilities are outside of their control,
resulting in poor persistence when confidence is low (Dweck 1986), in the current
study being labelled talented boosted the dancers’ confidence and motivation to
pursue dance. It is possible that the participants already had high levels of confidence
in their abilities and were thus positively affected by such labels (Dweck 1986).
Secondly, some students were inspired by dance performances, teachers and peers to
continue working hard or aim to become a professional dancer. Pickard and Bailey
(2009) similarly noted the importance of such ‘crystallising’ experiences in increasing young dancers’ drive to pursue their art.

Finally, although some participants identified worries and concerns (e.g. injury), for intrinsically motivated dancers, such potential barriers did not appear to lessen commitment. Furthermore, juggling increasing commitments to dance, school and friends was generally deemed manageable and did not appear to affect commitment to dance among the majority of participants. This is in contrast to recent research with dropout students from the same cohort, who indicated that conflicting demands was the most important reason for withdrawing from the CATs (Walker et al. 2012). These dropout students decided to prioritise schoolwork, spending time with family or, most commonly, spending time with friends instead of dance training. However, while many of the participants in the current study acknowledged that their dance commitments limited the amount of time they could spend with family and friends, for the most part this did not have a lessening effect on commitment. The exception to this was one participant’s romantic relationship. Similar findings have been reported in youth sport (Coakley and White 1992) and elite netball (Scanlan et al. 2009) and indicates that more than relationships with family and friends, romantic relationships may have an impact upon adolescents’ commitment to talent activities and are worthy of further research.

Overall, enjoyment underpinned commitment to dance, facilitated by social relationships and the opportunities available on the talent scheme. Future research should continue to explore dance commitment, perhaps by further investigating the emergent themes in this study such as the influence of romantic relationships. The results of this study suggest that educators could facilitate young talented dancers’ commitment to training by emphasising the enjoyable aspects of dance such as self-
expression, movement sensations and creativity. Encouraging dancers to work toward collaborative goals, changing peer leaders regularly and allowing shared group decision making can enhance peer relationships (Redding et al. 2011). Teaching styles that emphasise autonomy and provide a balance between challenge and support also appear important. Furthermore, it has been shown in sport that adopting behaviours including informational and corrective instruction, reinforcement, praise and encouragement after mistakes can enhance enjoyment and intention to continue playing (Smoll and Smith 2002). Finally, dance institutions should aim to provide students with inspiring opportunities such as workshops and theatre visits, while encouraging family support by inviting parents to events.

Conclusion

In order for young people to develop their talents, dedication to training and progression over a sustained period of time is necessary. The current study investigated factors that affect commitment to dance training among young talented dancers. The experiences intrinsic to dance, such as self-expression and movement sensations, underpin the enjoyment that drives dance commitment, facilitated by social relationships and the opportunities that the talent scheme provide. From their enthusiasm for the activity and their positive outlooks, it appeared that many of the young dancers had a genuine passion for dance and drive to succeed, which helped them to overcome potential barriers and maintain their commitment. Importantly, the young people were not driven solely by a single-minded dedication to the pursuit of a professional career, but by intrinsic motivation for dance and the enjoyment derived from engaging with like-minded peers. The role of opportunities such as performances and collaborations enriched the curriculum by broadening the students’
understanding of the nature of the dance sector and further inspiring them to achieve their dreams. Crucial within this was teacher behaviour in facilitating these opportunities as well as providing challenging training and first-hand knowledge of the profession. This study has begun to address the gap in the literature around dance commitment, providing valuable findings and implications for practice. Overall, application of the findings may help educators to enhance their programme retention rates by creating learning environments that optimise enjoyment, enhance peer relationships, balance challenge with support and provide exciting opportunities. By optimising commitment to talent development processes, educators may help to enable young dancers to reach their goals and become successful artists in the future.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

1. Introductory questions
   - Could you describe for me when you first started dancing?
     - Types of dance, how often and where
     - Who initiated dance training
   - Can you describe any other extra-curricular activities you take part in?
     - Did you used to?

2. Feelings about dance
   - Can you remember if you have ever been told that you are talented in dance?
     - Who by?
     - How did it make you feel?
   - Could you tell me a bit about whether you plan to do anything with dance in your future?
   - Can you describe any worries or concerns you might have about dancing?
     - Now?
     - About the future?
   - Do you dance in other schools?
     - Can you describe any differences between these two (or more) types of training you are doing?
   - Can you tell me a bit about what is your CAT training like? Have you had any particularly good or bad times?

3. Changes over time
   - Can you describe what your main reasons for dancing now are?
     - Could you describe what it is about dancing that you most like or enjoy? When do you enjoy it the most?
     - Do you think you are still dancing for the same reason as when you started?
   - Can you tell me how your dance involvement has changed over time?
     - Are you doing more hours, styles, performances?
   - Do you think dance has got easier or harder over time?
     - Dancing itself
     - Training
     - Getting to dance training
     - Fitting dance training in with other commitments such as school exams, chores, friends, etc.

4. Significant others
   - Can you describe what sort of role your parents and/or siblings play in your dance involvement?
     - Did they encourage you?
   - Can you tell me what role you think your teachers play?
   - Can you describe the role of your friends in your dance involvement?
     - Friends in dance
     - Friends outside of dance
Could you describe how your dance involvement affects those around you such as your family and friends? (It might not)

5. Is there anything else you would like to add?


ballroom dancers, ballet dancers and modern dancers. Physical Education & Sport Pedagogy 3, no 1: 22-34.


Figure 1. Hierarchical representation of results.