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The research and creative implementation of dance therapy practices for female survivors of sexual abuse

Caitlin M. McAvoy
James Madison University

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The Research and Creative Implementation of
Dance Therapy Practices for Female
Survivors of Sexual Abuse

An Honors Program Project Presented to
The Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Visual and Performing Arts
James Madison University

By Caitlin Marie McAvoy

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of School of Theatre and Dance, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Program.

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

Project Advisor: Katherine Arecchi, M.F.A.
Associate Professor, Musical Theatre

Reader: Cynthia Thompson, M.F.A.
Associate Director, School of Theatre
and Dance

Reader: Kate Trammell, M.F.A.
Professor, Dance

HONORS PROGRAM APPROVAL:

Philip Frana, Ph.D.,
Interim Director, Honors Program

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Preface

This Senior Honors Thesis had its inception when I first learned about the Hillcrest Scholarship in my freshman year at James Madison University. “The Hillcrest Service/Leadership Scholarship provides up to \$5,000 in financial assistance to carry out an off-campus summer enrichment experience following the junior year. Students may use the scholarship to engage in a service-learning project, to participate in civic engagement, or to carry out another service- or leadership-related initiative. Students, with the aid of their faculty mentors, are encouraged to design unique projects that help them meet their academic and/or career goals” (Honors Program Scholarships).

The moment I was introduced to this scholarship I could not stop imagining the infinite possibilities. Through a year and a half of brainstorming and research I created what is now my Hillcrest Scholarship project and the idea behind this Senior Honors Thesis. Through the Hillcrest Scholarship for Service and Leadership I conducted a week-long dance therapy camp in August of 2014 for young, female survivors of sexual abuse in Sibiu, Romania. This project lead me to deepen my research into dance therapy and to delve into the process of creating more programs of this nature for young women both internationally and domestically.

Acknowledgements

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Thank you to all who have helped create and refine my Hillcrest Scholarship for Service and Leadership proposal including Dr. Melinda Adams, Jared Diener, Dr. Barry Fulk, and Karen Allison. Without this scholarship I would not have even dreamt of this idea and the opportunity to implement it is beyond what I ever imagined of my JMU experience. Not only has it informed my Senior Honors Thesis, but it has helped shape my future work as an artist and a humanitarian.

Thank you.

Abstract

Dance Therapy focuses on the body as the medium to the mind (About Dance/Movement Therapy). Dance Therapy has documented benefits in helping victims of sexual abuse, because many of these victims undergo the emotions of body shame and self-hatred as well as the distinct feeling of loss of their physical selves. (Liu 112). The country of Romania has one of the highest numbers of rape victims under the age of 18 than of any other developed country in the world (Liu 121). With this information a Dance Therapy camp was created and implemented in Sibiu, Romania for a group of 28 female survivors of sexual abuse under the age of 18. This camp included the use of performance as a therapeutic tool in order to gain insight on the benefits of performance within the scope of Dance Therapy. Through the observation of behavior and the reading of journals written by the participants it was determined that Dance Therapy has a profound benefit on young victims of sexual abuse as a way to cultivate artistic creativity. The added element of the performance was a source of empowerment for the participants and gave them a platform to express their stories and experiences.

Introduction

In a survey done by the American Psychological Association reports that “one in four women in the Developed countries will be sexually abused before their eighteenth birthday” (About Dance/Movement Therapy). The number of reported incidents of sexual abuse has increased 32% over the past two decades. According to the Third Wave foundation some of this increase is due to women through the third and fourth wave of Feminism feeling they have a platform to speak out on instead of hiding their experiences, which is a positive change, but now that it is out in the open it’s time to stop talking about rape and start actively working to change the lives of the victims of rape.

Through the artistic medium of dance, this paper will examine the history of dance therapy, what populations this therapy works best for and why. It will also analyze the practical implementation of the dance therapy program I created and implanted for a group of 28 Romanian girls between the ages of 5 and 17 who are all survivors of sexual abuse. Additionally, the aspect of performance as a complimentary tool to dance therapy will also be examined as a relatively new concept to dance therapy pedagogy.

Performance as a tool for dance therapy is an idea that is truly in its infancy, but through the research and practical work the results prove that the results could make significant changes in the fight for female equality and empowerment.

Literature Review

Dance Therapy has its inception in the 1940's. It stemmed from two different and new ideas in the early 20th century, those being Psychology and Modern dance.

In the early 1900's Psychology has seen a major boom with the emergence of psychologists such as Freud and Jung. Freud in particular developed the concept of "talk therapy"(Freud 54), which popularized the convention of having sessions with a therapist in order to orally work through specific problems in a patient's life. This was the beginning of research into mental diseases and disabilities that have previously been ignored or misunderstood by science and medicine. Before this time people who dealt with issues of the mind, such as post traumatic and eating/body dysmorphic disorders like the girls at Deborah House deal with, were asked to keep quiet or sent to asylums (Liu 117). They were treated as nuisances instead of individuals in need of help just as anyone with some sort of physical ailment. Psychology began conversations into these mental challenges to begin treatments that were not solely drug related.

During this same point in history, Modern dance emerged in American culture. Leaders such as Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham developed Modern dance in "rebellion to the strict and technical concepts of Ballet"(Graham 43). Modern dance focused on the connection of the body and mind as opposed to Ballet's conventions of precision and aesthetic (Graham 87).

During the 1940's Mary Stark Whitehouse was both a Modern dancer under Martha Graham as well as a student of psychology. She took her expertise in both fields to create what is now known as Dance Therapy with her original techniques called "Authentic Movement." "In the practice of Authentic Movement, the body is the gateway of awareness itself. It informs the creative process, contemplative practice, and healing on all levels"(Whitehouse 6). Whitehouse believed that physical techniques could more safely and comfortably express the innermost thoughts of the mind without having to cognitively relive the experience. She saw the abstraction of physical movement as a cathartic release of unconscious qualms.

Her ideas began to spread, and in 1966 the American Dance Therapy Association was formed. The ADTA has been instrumental in making dance therapy popular in the United States by raising awareness of this form of therapy. Its mission is to "further the emotional, cognitive, physical and social integration of the individual. Through movement, DMT can help individuals with a wide range of psychological disorders achieve greater self-expression" (About Dance/Movement Therapy).

Dance Therapy has been known to actively treat autism spectrum disorders, cancer and terminal illness patients, dementia and arthritis in the elderly, and individuals suffering from psychological trauma of various kinds.

Dance Therapy for victims of sexual abuse has a long history. The effects of sexual abuse include, "Post traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, self-harm, depression, flashbacks, and eating disorders" (About Dance/Movement Therapy).

Victims of sexual abuse often blame their bodies for the rape. They believe if they looked physically different then this wouldn't have happened to them. Because of this skewed thought most victims of sexual abuse think only in negative terms about their bodies and often develop eating disorders. "One in two victims of rape will develop an eating disorder in his/her lifetime" (About Dance/Movement Therapy). Victims simply come to hate their physical selves. Dance Therapy encourages these victims to reconnect to their bodies and establish a positive opinion of their physical selves.

Through movement techniques patients are asked to explore the physical range of their bodies and creativity of movement without judgment or thought. Once free movement is achieved, techniques are added that connect the body to a specific memory whether it be about a loved one, a happy time, a sad time, an angry time, etc. in each person's life. "They create movement based around these ideals and in an abstract way are able to work through the emotions of these memories in ways language cannot" (About Dance/Movement Therapy). Through added techniques of journaling and talk back sessions victims of sexual abuse have reported a reevaluation of their bodies.

In one report a woman who underwent dance therapy for sexual abuse victims attested, "I have the ability to look at myself and not see a victim. The haunting memories my body holds are now just part of the newfound memories I have made reconnecting with my body in sessions. I will never lose the experience of my rape, but I have found that I am more than my rape through these exercises"

(About Dance/Movement Therapy). The presence of sexual abuse and rape culture is a high profile issue in the 21st century, and the country of Romania has one of the highest sexual abuse statistics of any in the world.

Romania remained one of the last Communist countries in Europe after World War II until 1989. Due to this fact the nation is still in a state of recovery and is the second poorest nation in the European Union. Money is scarce, and in an interview with Eugene Groza, founder of Deborah House - Romania, he said lower class men have to outsource to neighboring nations such as Italy and Moldova in order to find work leaving their wives and children alone and vulnerable (Groza). This is especially true for the Romanian Gypsy population. Contrary to popular belief the ethnic Gypsies hold the title of “Gypsy” with pride, though Romania has declared it politically correct to call the ethnic group, “Roma” (Sandu).

Romanian Gypsies are amongst the poorest ethnicities in the already poor nation of Romania. They are often homeless, jobless, and notorious for gang activity and illegal activities. They are often publicized by their conventions of marrying off the girls at extremely young ages – sometimes as young as ten years of age – as bargaining methods between the various clans. They are seen as nuisances, scum, and undesirable, which make it particularly hard to find a stable, legitimate career. “Romanian Gypsies make up around 15% of the Romanian population” (An Address by the Prime Minister of Romania).

Romanian Gypsies have also had a rich ancestry of unique music and dance that has been severely muted by their financial struggle during and after the

Communist reign. “The music has created its own genre that has been popularized in Europe and the United States often being paired with traditional gypsy/folk dance and colorful costuming” (Sandu). The Gypsy population is a cultural hub, and though their culture has been muted, they can still be found celebrating the same music, dance, and outfitting in present day Romania on a daily basis. Many of the girls at Deborah House are Gypsy Romanians. Legally, their ethnic information must not be disclosed, but social worker, Larisa Sandu stated, “Over half of the girls are Gypsies. Though Gypsies are known as being dark featured, that is a misconception. Blonde and blue eyed Gypsies are just as common” (Sandu).

“The factors of low income, absence of father and husband figures, and a cultural norm of using women as bargaining currency all contribute to the reason why Romania has one of the highest sexual abuse statistics in the world”(Groza). Romania is also known for having a high rate of eating disorders amongst young women. Its numbers rival the United States. In both countries “one in six women will suffer from an eating disorder before the age of 22” (Liu 112).

In short, many of Romania’s young women encounter an immense amount of struggle with body image and self-worth. Because of this, the young women at Deborah House in Romania are the perfect candidates for a dance therapy program. Being a nation that is still recovering from years of Communist oppression the funding for the Arts is nearly obsolete. It requires outside sourcing in order to provide the Arts for these girls.

“Being involved in the Performing Arts has many different benefits including raising communication skills, self-pride, and calmness in pressure-filled situations”(American Alliance for Theatre Education) Most Dance Therapy programs do not end in a performance, and if they do they are performed in front of family and friends. It is the hypothesis of this paper that omitting performance leaves out an important part of the process of Dance Therapy: value as an artist. The victims are spending time working through dance to attain a new sense of self and self-expression. The addition of a performance opportunity only heightens that attitude as they get to share their experiences with others. It is surprising there is not more research and practice into the values of performance for victims of abuse. This is an area new Dance Therapists need to begin researching in.

Overall, Dance Therapy proves highly effective for victims of sexual abuse of which there is an abundance of in Romania due to many contributing factors. More research needs to be done on victims under the age of 18 as well as the benefits or lack thereof of performance opportunities for those participating in dance therapy programs.

Project Design

The project consists of a one-week dance camp at Deborah House in Sibiu, Romania in August 2014. The participants include the 28 female residents of Deborah House between the ages of five and seventeen with a mean age range of 14. The content of the camp infuses elements of dance technique and choreographic creativity by the students through dance therapy exercises and games. This work culminates in a final performance in the town park of Sibiu at the end of the week.

The dance therapy techniques were attained from various written research and from Kate Trammell's "Dance in Community" class taken at James Madison University in the spring of 2014, which was part of the final project proposal for the Hillcrest Scholarship for Service and Leadership.

In Trammell's class techniques were learned on how to develop dance therapy programs for various demographics of people including children, the elderly, and special needs individuals. The class' final project was to create a program based on a specific demographic not addressed in class. Through that research project and mentorship with Trammell the curriculum for Deborah House – Romania was created. Trammell stressed the idea of focusing dance therapy programs around one specific theme. The theme focused on in this project was positive body image. This was chosen based on the adolescent ages of the girls and their history of sexual abuse and eating disorders. We expressed this through idea that each girl was an important dancer and artist. Many, if not most, dance therapy programs do not culminate in a largely seen final performance outside of family and friends. It was

decided that this program would include a performance in line with the expression that each girl is an important dancer and artist; their work deserves to be seen. Though the research on performance as a part of dance therapy is sparse, it was kept to see how the girls would be affected by the act of performance for a large number of people. The curriculum is listed below:

THE CURRICULUM

Listen for positive comments for how the girls are feeling about the experience. Write down their comments to share when you return

This week you are dancers! Treat them like the most important ballerinas in the world.

MONDAY NIGHT:

- Warm-up (watch and follow): talk about the final performance
- Human knot
- Name Game – assess language skills
- Journal Assignment: Tell me something that has made you happy today?
 - To Caitlin

MONDAY NIGHT: READ BOOK 1 PART 1

TUESDAY SESSION 1

- Name Game review – ask if anyone remembers all movements – reward with Jolly Ranchers
- Warm-up: Share about journal assignment
- Technique: Posture and arm and leg positions
- Music game: draw or write, then talk about it
- Show music

CRAFT: Wands

TUESDAY SESSION 2

- Warm-up: Review Posture and arm and leg positions
- Technique: waltz turns and leaps
- Get into partners and create small dances using technique
- Share – to music
- Cool down: 5 people share something they learned or liked from today-reward!
- Journal assignment: Write about someone you love.
 - To Caitlin

TUESDAY NIGHT: READ BOOK 1 PART 2 (Crafts if time allows.)

WEDNESDAY SESSION 1:

- Warm-up: Share about journal
- Name game
- Review small dances

- Add to choreography

CRAFT: Tutus

WEDNESDAY SESSION 2

- Warm-up
- Write the person's name exercise
- Add the exercise to the dance
- Run through
- Cool down: 5 people share something they learned or liked from today
- Journal: How does dance make you feel?
 - To Caitlin

WEDNESDAY NIGHT: Read Book Part 3 and Friendship bracelets and nail polish

THURSDAY SESSION 1

- Heads on Stomachs
- Warm-up: Share about journal assignment
- Ask anyone if they want to share part of their dance they created.
- Add to choreography
- Run through
- Cool down

CRAFT: Tutus

THURSDAY SESSION 2

- Warm-up
- Run through choreography
- Add beginning and ending
- Run through
- Cool down: 5 people share something they learned or liked from today
- Journal assignment: Add To Caitlin.

THURSDAY NIGHT:

- Warm-up: Human knot?
- Run through with all choreography together
- Learn bows
- Cool down: Heads on stomachs

FRIDAY SESSION 1

- Warm-up: Share about journal assignment
- Run through choreography

- Clean
- Free dance
- Cool down: What are you excited for?

CRAFT: Try on leotards and tights

FRIDAY SESSION 2

- Warm-up: Free Dance
- Run through choreography
- Pictures – wear JMU
- Clean
- Cool down: What have you learned?

FRIDAY NIGHT:

- Get into costumes
- Run through choreography
- Run through bows
- Ask what they have learned?
- Read book
- Present necklaces

SATURDAY:

- Breakfast
- Run through choreography
- Get dressed
- Run through choreography
- Go to Town Square
- Perform
- Bows
- Take pictures
- Go home
- Take pictures
- Free time together – hike

SUNDAY:

- Exit exercise:
 - Finish book
 - Present slideshow of the week
 - Write down address for penpal-ing
 - Hugs and pictures

Each day was designed with the specific aspects of reflective journaling, dance technique, a dance therapy game, and choreography creation to support the idea of positive body image. Each girl was given a pre-made package of a bag filled with a journal, pen, and nail polish as an extra treat in all shades for the girl who loved pink and the girl who loved black. The first choice in creating this curriculum of positive body image was the medium of dance. Ballet was chosen specifically to support this theme.

Ballet is known for its gorgeous dancers and beautiful aesthetics (Graham 87). It is often the fantasy of young girls around the world as a dream job. Because of this universal ideal as well as my personal expertise in the field as a trained Ballerina for 18 years, Ballet was the right fit.

The other primary logistics included group sizing and the schedule. The 28 girls were divided up into three groups based on age, and each group received a one hour session in the morning, 15 minutes for each element of journaling/warm-ups, Ballet technique, dance therapy game, and choreography. In the afternoon after lunch and downtown we had a daily craft activity that contributed to the final performance. In the evening after dinner all three groups met for an hour session to take the choreography created in the morning and synthesize it into the final dance, and later in the week to run dress rehearsals of the final dance. All meals and housing were provided by Deborah House.

The dance therapy games used were as listed: The Name Game, The Music Game, The Name Writing exercise, Person You Love exercise, and journaling

prompts. These were developed through Trammell's class techniques, research, and synthesis of the two.

The Name Game was a way to get to know the girls and get the girls working to use their bodies in an expressive way. The girls are gathered in a large circle and go around one by one stating their name, an emotion they are feeling, and a movement associated with that emotion. For instance, one girl might say, "Anna, sleepy" and stretch her arms out in a yawn to express "sleepy." Everyone repeats the girl's name, emotion, and physical movement after her. Once one girl has gone the next girl goes and then all repeat backwards to the start until every girl in the circle has gone.

The next exercise used is The Music Game. This game was created as a tool of expression and creativity for the girls to work with before getting into creating their own choreography for the final dance. A piece of music plays, and the girls are prompted to move and dance in response to the music. A plethora of music is played such as Classical piano, Broadway show tunes, clean hip-hop, traditional African music, etc. The girls may be split up in half to watch each other dance and learn from each other's creativity.

The third exercise utilized in the curriculum is The Name Writing exercise. This exercise asks each girl to write a person's name they love. They write that on the ground, in the air, and they explore writing that name with other body parts such as elbows, feet and knees. Then they are asked to write their loved one's name on a part of their body they remember that person whether it be their heart, hands,

arms, etc. At the end of the exercise they write the person's name in the sky as a send-off. This exercise has potential to tap into some dark memories in the girls' pasts if they choose a person from their home lives. The hopes is that they movement they create in connection to their loved one becomes choreography that they hold with meaning in the dance as part of their creative expression of themselves.

The last exercise utilized is The Person you Love exercise. This exercise pairs up the girls again the girls pick a person they love. It can be the same person or different person as the day before with the previous exercise. With that partner they think of something they really enjoyed doing with that person, then act it out/dance it out with their partner each taking turns. It could be baking cookies with a grandparent, going to the beach, watching television, etc. At the end the girls are asked to perform for one another. That movement is utilized in the final dance as well.

All elements of the curriculum and project design were created to support the theme of female empowerment and positive body image through the encouragement of each one of them as an important dancer and artist with unique life stories that are worth sharing. Inside and outside the classroom all adults were asked to treat the girls in this manner in order to cultivate a safe and open environment to truly explore their creative selves. The hopes of this curriculum and environment were for the girls to see themselves in a new light and to tap into unrealized, creative

potential in order to express their beautiful and dark stories in a safe medium that they have not been exposed to before.

It must be noted that the actual implantation of the program faced numerous challenges. Due to error with financial aid close to one third of the funds for the program were lost. This left my team scrambling to adjust the budget and fundraise in order to provide the intended program. Additionally, two days before departure my mother was in a very serious accident with our horse. Both are healthy now, but due to the internal damages sustained my mom was not fit to fly. This was hugely challenging, because I was depending on her as a teacher in her 35th year to be a great asset in helping me conduct the program. Due to encouragement from her, though, my dad and I decided to continue on the trip. On our departure date the plane was severely delayed. With the numerous layovers it takes to get to Sibiu, Romania our trip was pushed back another 24 hours. This was the only pocket of time Deborah House had for the program unless I wanted to wait until the subsequent summer, so I cut the program down into a four day event and completed the above. During the time of the unraveling events I felt that this trip was an impossible idea, but after completing the program I know that all the difficulties made it all the more significant to my personal experience as an advocate for the Arts and as an individual fighting for the things I want to achieve in my life. I am thankful for the challenges and I am even more thankful that they were overcome so that this delightful work could influence my life indefinitely.

Findings

After the trip there were a number of successes and failures alike. It was difficult to measure the findings, since the project was based solely on human experience, but through the avenues of reading journals and receiving feedback from the present faculty and staff at Deborah House I gained some information on how to better improve this project for future endeavors.

The overall scheduling of the week was a benefit to the girls. The girls were engaged in their dance classes due to the small groups, but also had plenty of downtime in meals and crafts in order to allow the camp feel to come through. As the teacher of the event it was a great schedule as well. I was able to rest over the meals and synthesize their choreography after dinner in time for the evening rehearsal. The time and effort put into creating the schedule was worth it.

The three concepts of technique, dance therapy/choreography, and journaling were also a great way to organize the week. After class the girls spent much of their downtime teaching each other the various ballet techniques learned in the different classes. They practiced in front of mirrors and asked for individual attention. Larissa Sandu, one of the staff at Deborah House expressed how much the girls told her the technique made them feel like “true ballerinas.”

The dance therapy/choreography section had some success as well. Overall, the four dance therapy games were not as specific to the theme of female empowerment and positive body image as I had hoped. In retrospect I should have chosen games that focused on the individual instead of loved ones. Games that

have the girls identify parts of their physical selves and personalities would have been much more conducive to the theme.

Though the dance therapy games utilized were not specific to the theme, the choreography aspect was one of the strongest parts to the curriculum. Through the use of games and technique the dancers had a plethora of material to make choreography out of. In their journals many wrote that they didn't know they could make up their own dances. One girl, Dezi – age 7, wrote, "I am a dancer and a creator. I never knew I could be those things, but I'm very good at both of them." This and the input of other journals speaks to the ownership the girls felt over their work. The entire performance was their own creation, and that fact is a strong aspect to the curriculum.

The strongest aspect, though, is the performance element. Providing the girls tutus, leotards, tights, and necklaces for the performance alone changed the way they danced. Once they received these elements they created three rules of performance to add onto the three I previously made. My three were, "No speaking onstage, look at me to remember the choreography, and smile." They added, "Shoulders down, eyes up," and my favorite rule, "If it's good you get candy. If it's not you do it again until it's good." The sheer fact that they created their own performance rules showed the immense pride and ownership put into their work.

When they got to the venue and performed they could not stop giggling and smiling throughout the dance. Afterwards one of the girls, Ella told me, "I am a

beautiful ballerina.” That comment was just what the curriculum was meant to show the girls.

The biggest weakness to the curriculum is the lack of sustainability. We did participate in an exit exercise, which showed a slideshow of the week and the reading of a book entitled, “You are Loved.” But, the work will not be satisfied until a fulltime dance therapist can be at Deborah House or funding can be made available so the girls can attend dance or other arts related classes on a weekly basis to keep their creative minds active. With more funding the girls’ can continue to grow in the understanding of themselves as artists and empowered women.

Though the project is not sustainable at this point in time, the impact made in that week is important. Just as many camps in the United States for special populations such as burn victims and special needs individuals, just because camps happen only once a year does not mean they are not important.

This project was created in order to awake the creativity inside these girls with such dark lives in order to express themselves as empowered, beautiful women. This project did that.

Conclusion

This project is the beginning of a new idea in the world of Dance Therapy. Victims of sexual abuse lose the ownership they have of their physical bodies to an attacker. Dance Therapy is an effective tool in reconnecting the victim to her body and finding that ownership once again. The girls at Deborah House – Romania started left the week feeling like artists, creators, and beautiful dancers. This realization is only the beginnings of their journey as empowered women and creative spirits, but the room to grow in these areas is exponential.

Performance as an added element is perhaps the most successful tool in the healing process of victims of sexual abuse. The realization these victims had that their stories are worth expressing and can be made into valuable pieces of art is not only worthwhile to them as individuals, but has the opportunity to have a significant impact on the world at large in getting a chance to witness these empowered stories. This could truly be the setting of a new trend in Art and advocating for change.

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