

Multicultural Dance/Movement Therapy to Address Adolescent Depression and Anxiety

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ABSTRACT

Depression and anxiety in the United States are becoming more prevalent in the youth population in recent decades and have been exacerbated by COVID-19 pandemic. Rates of poor mental health outcomes are also more prevalent within gender and racial minorities. Current effective interventions to improve adolescent mental health is limited to individual CBT Therapy and some arts programs. Dance Therapy is a well known alternative arts program that has shown to have physiological, mental, and social benefits. However, traditional group dance therapy programs based on Western culture and ideals neither include the unique experiences of the diversifying student population nor do they wholly address students' mental and social needs. Cultural dances, in the context of the Western world, are traditional dance practices that serve different functions within the local culture. Many are ancient practices that have shown to have deep psychological and social benefits. Our paper proposes a new school-based multicultural dance therapy program that incorporates international cultural dances to improve physical, mental, and social health. Further research is needed to prove that physical, mental, and social health issues may be resolved through the therapeutic effects of multicultural dance therapy.

Introduction

Currently, one in five adults in the United States live with some degree of mental illness (NIMH, 2023). Among these illnesses, anxiety and depression are the most common affecting 9.5% and 18% of adults, respectively (Johns Hopkins Medicine, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic worsened conditions and revealed the weaknesses of the US's mental health infrastructure: nearly 50% of young adults now exhibit symptoms of anxiety and depression due to the societal changes brought upon by the pandemic (Lee, 2023). These worsening conditions are even more compounded for our society's vulnerable population: adolescents. As they undergo their most sensitive periods of physical, emotional, and social development, adolescents have experienced great instability and distress due to rapid societal changes in recent times.

While containing the virus through quarantines and restrictions have largely been successful to mitigate the viral spread, the biopsychosocial stressors brought upon by the pandemic may have lasting effects that are not yet entirely clear (de Figueiredo et al., 2021). Global studies conducted throughout the pandemic have shown an increase in stressors caused by the disruption of daily routine and social isolation (de Figueiredo et al., 2021). Unfortunately, this trend in declining adolescent health is only a continuation of a general pattern of worsening mental health that has been only realized in the past few decades (Keyes et al., 2019).

Prevalence of Depression and Anxiety in Adolescents

Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the proportion of adolescents suffering from depression has increased from 8.1% in 2009 to 15.8% in 2019. This mental stress and stunted development led to a spectrum of cases of mild and severe depression in adolescents. Though researchers point to many causes of this crisis, such as the socioeconomic fallout of the “Great Recession” of 2007 and increasing awareness of systemic failures to remedy social inequities, the concrete reasons of the increasing prevalence of adolescent depression are still not entirely clear (Wilson & Dumornay, 2022). Furthermore, the effect of technology on developing minds can’t be ignored (Nebehay & Kelland, 2019). Many experts point to the prevalence of technology and its influence on the lifestyles of the youth, with nearly 80% of adolescents failing to meet the World Health Organization recommendation of an hour of daily physical activity, which may lead to (Nebehay & Kelland, 2019).

The state of adolescent mental health is dire: although the definite connection between technology and social media use has not been established, there is strong evidence of the adolescent users with more frequent use of social media having increased feelings of “suicidal behaviors, depression, and loneliness” (Odgers & Jensen, 2021). Moreover, demographic factors were a significant contributing factor to the severity of mental health issues. Minority populations were disproportionately affected by the pandemic as lower socioeconomic communities were vulnerable to drastic changes in infrastructure and government systems. Therefore, minority youth are the most vulnerable to modern trends of increasing mental health issues in the population.

Current Paradigm for Assessing and Treating Adolescent Mental Health

Despite the increasing awareness of mental health issues, there is little infrastructure that is in place in the US to improve conditions for adolescents on a large scale. This is due to the mismatch between the known importance of addressing adolescent mental health and the unknown cost-effectiveness of these treatments and interventions (Skokauskas et al., 2018). Experts simply do not know yet the potential long-term benefits of mental healthcare programs, and costs of a large scale implementation of programs are shown to be largely prohibitive. According to a 2001 RAND corporation study, annual expenditures for adolescent mental health care (outpatient care, inpatient care, medications, other mental health services) can reach upwards of \$11,681 for individual patients (Strum et al., 2001). This points to a potentially inefficient system of care for adolescents with high costs and slow improvements.

While there have been implementations of school-based interventions, community-based interventions, digital platforms, and individual-/family based interventions, the benefits of each were limited and varied. School-based group and individual cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) was shown to be the best at decreasing depressive symptoms while community based group therapies had “some positive effect on behavioral changes, self-confidence, self-esteem, levels of knowledge, and physical activity” (Das et al, 2016). Though all these therapies were effective, they could not wholly provide physiological, mental, and social benefits in a practical and cost-effective manner.

Dance/Movement Therapy

Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT) has recently been of interest to many healthcare professionals to improve the mental health outcomes of adolescents. Historically, the practice of dance was deeply cultural and meaningful to its practitioners in almost all cultures; dance was performed for entertainment, religious rituals, and social connection. Dance fundamentally brings together the mind and the body and recognizes the two as inseparable (MasterClass, 2021). DMT is a treatment method that has gained recognition and popularity since the 1960s. It uses a combination of music, light exercise, and sensory stimulation to provide a non-pharmacological method to improve physical and mental health. In a Brazilian study on the long term influence of DMT on first year elementary school students, the treatment method was shown to show significant boosts in the participants’ balance and fine motor skills (Anjos & Ferraro, 2018). Other

research has shown DMT had a range of positive outcomes on mental health issues: there was evidence that DMT improved self-body image; provided a release from physical tension, anxiety, and depression; reduced cognitive disorientation; and improved the capacity for communication (Jeong et al., 2003). DMT provides a non-verbal option of expression and release of deeply-rooted issues and emotions. A South Korean study examining middle school students with mild depression revealed that DMT modulates doses of serotonin and dopamine, which leads to a reduction of psychological distress (Jeong et al., 2003). More interesting are the effects of DMT on the more complex aspects of social and emotional health. DMT focuses on expressing oneself through free movement and limited restrictions. In high school students, DMT was shown to increase self-esteem and self-perception. The greatest advantages of using dance as a therapeutic tool is that it may be possible to address multiple avenues of health while keeping costs relatively minimal. DMT can be administered in a class setting and may need many less staff and experts to run the program. Despite all these benefits, there are still limitations within DMT as it is still a relatively new treatment method (Kourkata et al., 2014).

Limitations of Dance and Dance/Movement Therapy in a Western context

One overlooked aspect of DMT is that it exists and operates within a Western context. The most common forms of dance that are widely performed are ballet and jazz/tap. However, in the United States, participation in these types of dance is usually possible only through costly, structured, and formal dance training programs available to a limited portion of the population. In the United States, participation in these types of dance teams/classes is only possible through costly and structured dance programs that are exclusive to a small portion of the population (Jain & Brown, 2001).

Ballet focuses on the perfection of technique and requires years of mastery. Therefore, participation in these types of dances is usually possible only through costly, structured, and formal dance training programs available to a limited portion of the population (Jain & Brown, 2001). Many women of color have felt out of place in an art form that emphasizes perfection and praises European facial and body standards. For a simple but common example, the clean bun hairstyle that all dancers are required to wear is incompatible with the thicker hair texture that many women of color possess (Eyler et al. 2002). Importantly, people feel less inclined to participate in traditional dance classes because of the exclusive standards of ballet or jazz. In fact, studies have shown participants who express that “I just don’t feel like I belong.” also noting that “I don’t have the body type for ballet or jazz dance.” In cultural dances however, like African dance, body type is much less important, and people attend in order to leave feeling better about themselves (Conner et al., 2021).

Although DMT rejects some of the structured and stylized dance forms as ballet and jazz, DMT has deep connections to the Western modern dance movement. Emerging as a firm rejection of the restricted movements and the impossible beauty standards of ballet, the modern dance movement focused on an artist’s ability to express themselves (Langdon, 2012). DMT also seeks to encourage freedom of expression. However, DMT, just like other Western dances, may not fully consider the diversity of experiences within the student population and may not address the needs of minority students.

Cultural Dance

Cultural dance is defined as a practice of a specific group or community which is related to the culture’s traditional practices, sense of spirituality, and social connectedness (Jain & Brown, 2001). The origins of cultural dances are outside of a Western context. Traditionally, cultural dances cover a plethora of functions within the host culture and society. They were used in traditional rituals, celebrations, spirituality, cultural transmission, and social connectedness (Jain & Brown, 2001). Cultural dance examples explored throughout this paper include North American Indian, African, Egyptian, Middle Eastern, Balinese and Chinese groups. Cultural dance historically served specific roles in local

society. In the modern age, cultural dance can have an additional meaning in the modern age. However, cultural dance has been shown to have multiple physical and psychological benefits.

Examples of Cultural Dances

For our paper, we will be examining common cultural dances and suggest the addition of Korean-pop (K-pop) choreography and dancing as a cultural dance. West African dance is the first cultural dance of interest due to its rich history and principles (Conner et al., 2021). Throughout Africa, dance is established as a marking of experiences, encouragement, honor and celebration (New World Encyclopedia 2023). West African dance is a broad category which includes dances from Guinea, Senegal, Ghana, Mali, and the Ivory Coast and has a common principle of bringing communities together to interact and share experiences. Along with representing dynamic energy through flowing rhythms, West African dance represents the “everyday lifestyle” of the community (Conner et al., 2021).

North American Indian dances are a group of diverse dances spanning the tribes across the northern continent that include the Salish Spirit Dance, the Sun Dance, and the Gourd Dance (Jilek 1989). The functions of the dances are unique and differ greatly from dance to dance. The Salish Spirit Dance is a winter rite of passage that involves youth from the tribe to seek out a mentor spirit and learn about the true nature of oneself. The Sun Dance of the Plains tribes is a healing and military dance that is practiced in large groups. Interestingly, the Native Americans used this dance as part of a therapeutic movement during the oppression of the US government in the 19th century. The Sun Dance was meant to achieve “a total change in individuals, to promote spiritual, emotional, and physical health” (Jilek, 1989). Like the Sun Dance, the Gourd dance is meant to honor warriors who are currently active and honor the ground the tribe members stand on (Yazzie 2022).

Even though Tai Chi is characterized as a centuries-old traditional Chinese martial art, our paper argues that it may be considered as a dance through its soft repetitive movements. It is a combination of diaphragmatic-based breathing and methods of relaxation through postures connected by slow, gracious movements. Some main motives of tai chi include development of mind and body interaction, regulatory breathing, hand-eye coordination and calming. Tai Chi is quite popular, widely practiced in various countries, mainly as a form of exercise. Tai Chi is meant to promote good health, memory, focus, digestion, coordination and flexibility, with psychological benefits including improvements in conditions like anxiety and depression (Harvard Health, 2022).

The last cultural dance considered is Korean pop (K-pop) music. While K-pop dancing and music is mainly based on traditionally Western concepts of music, there are special aspects of K-pop that make it a good candidate for a cultural dance. K-pop focuses on the repetition of simple and repetitive movements that are easy to follow. Furthermore, K-pop choreography expresses the ideas and emotions of the music through simple gestures (Park et al., 2022).

Cultural dance promotes physical and mental health benefits comparable to Dance/Movement Therapy

DMT may be effective, but cultural dances were also shown to have similar physical and mental health effects as those of DMT. A study examined the effects of cultural dance and music on adult female American Indian women who previously had not practiced the dance. When examining the psychological state of the participants, the study saw a reduction in the levels of anxiety within the patients within young women from cultural dance education (Skye et al. 1989).

Additionally, traditional West African dance can improve the physical dimensions of health through engagement in a variety of movements and step patterns that can be vigorous or mild for lower intensity workouts. It can improve mental dimensions of health by relieving stress and anxiety (West et al. 2004). By empowering young girls to have confidence in themselves when much of society’s message towards girls and women of color is so negative, cultural dance may even contribute to reducing gender inequality (Kerr-Berry 1994). Studies of traditional African

dance demonstrated reduced BMI and improved fitness among African American women (Engels et al. 2005), lower stress and higher positive affect among college undergraduates (West et al., 2004), and reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety among African adolescents who had experienced trauma (Harris, 2007). The dance can also improve the intellectual dimensions of health by providing new movement information to be analyzed and the spiritual dimension of health providing a relationship with nature, environment and a culture's origin through movement (Thompson 1993). Therefore, culturally oriented dance, and specifically traditional West African dance, has the potential to generate significant health benefits for dancers and communities.

Stronger sense of identity/cultural identity and greater sense of belonging to a group

There has been some evidence that cultural dance also benefits participants' self perception. In a study examining the effects of cultural dance on body image, West African dance was seen to be helpful to reduce weight concerns within African American girls aged between 8-10 years old (Connor et al., 2022). Cultural dances can also be a crucial gateway of spreading cultural awareness and connection throughout a community. With a flexible foundation that can vary based on the focused set of individuals, people are more likely to gravitate towards specific classes that appeal to their passions and background. Additionally, cultural dance encourages more minority populations to participate in such classes, as it promotes global celebration and presents itself as an inclusive program that anyone of any culture, religion or community, can appreciate/

African American girls have been prone to a higher Body Mass Index when compared to Caucasians in a setting like ballet or jazz classes, choreographies and demonstrations are most likely to cooperate more smoothly with a traditional caucasian girl. Additionally, people in class are likely to have a Euro-centric appearance and body shape, therefore, alienating Afro-centric beauty standards (Freedman et al., 2006). In a cultural dance setting, standards are more alike to a specific group and those who are alienated in regular European style classes, feel included when surrounded by individuals who look more similar to them.

Freedom of Expression

The ability to express oneself is particularly important in adolescents as they are undergoing dramatic changes in all three aspects of health.. A study of North American Indian children by Dehyle, includes the children's perspectives on dancing, emphasizing its uniqueness, its innate need for group cooperation and communication, and its success rates even in indifferent environments (Dehyle, 1986). Although cultural dance has certain guidelines and restrictions within its practice, these dance methods are not as focused on recreating precise movements and executing fantastic stunts (with the exception of K-pop). However, the simplicity and the variety of the movements in this K-pop can make spontaneous dancing and expressing oneself easier. Students should be encouraged not to execute precise movements but to reflect one's emotions or a general emotion. There are many options for executing certain choreographies and dress codes can be altered to reflect the ideals of the given culture. Overall, traditional Indian dance and other cultural dances encourage expression, acceptance and mental well-being.

Connection with Community

One very important need that should be fulfilled for adolescents with depression and anxiety is the need for connection to a group or a Sense of Community. Too often patients with these conditions feel alone and disconnected with the rest of the world. Technology has given the advantages of connectivity to the rest of the world, but that may have led the new generations to fail at effectively engaging with their community. With a Sense of Community, adolescents are able to establish their individual and social place in the community and can lead to positive developmental outcomes (Cicognani, et al, 2012) . Establishing strong ties with local community members and dancers with students

will encourage face-to-face interactions with diverse members of the community and may diminish feelings of depression and anxiety.

Proposal of a New Multicultural Dance Program to address anxiety and depression

To prevent and address the prevalence of mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, our dance program will holistically tackle aspects of physical and social health along with mental health. By encouraging regular exercise and forging social connections among the students and community, this program may be able to alleviate the symptoms of anxiety and depression. The program will combine the unique benefits of cultural dance with the philosophy of DMT to create a novel physical education curriculum that is catered to all students. After dance lessons, it is important to allot time for discussions about the culture and ideals behind the lessons.

Physical Health Benefits

The first priority of this program will be to encourage students to be active inside and outside the classroom. Because the program's demographic are adolescent students at school, the movements and choreography of the dances will be relatively simple. Many of the cultural dances have a distinct focus on the beat and rhythm of the songs and will provide a great guide for students to improve coordination. The easy movements will also encourage students to dance outside the classroom and practice on their own.

Mental Health Benefits

The mental health benefits of cultural dance are diverse and multifaceted. While West African dance can greatly better individual self-perception, tai chi decreases stress. By learning various dances, students can practice at home to see therapeutic effects. Our program will focus on encouraging self-confidence and self-expression. Instructors will be trained to help students incorporate emotional expression and release throughout their lessons. Students will not be judged upon their mastery of technique and will focus on participation and completion.

Though our systems preach diversity and have taken measures to create good environments for minority students, much of the extracurricular activities that are pursued by a majority of students have been shown not to be welcoming to students from underrepresented communities. Our dance program is an opportunity to provide spaces where minority students are able to identify or take interest in an alternative practice that encourages their physical and mental health.

Social Health Benefits

This program will be a unique opportunity to truly connect students with their community beyond superficial interactions that mainly dominate social media. The program's goal is to have students connect with a diverse group of community members to encourage meaningful social connections. This program will elucidate to the students the beauty of the community's diversity and aid in their social development to engage meaningfully with the world around them. Furthermore, the program shouldn't be centered around specific dances that are widely known, but should be focused on available local dancers and practitioners of various different cultural practices. The new dances will need to be screened for definite therapeutic benefits.

Table 1. Benefits and relevance of Cultural Dance to Physical, Mental, and Social Health

Cultural Dance Name	Relevance to Physical, Mental, and Social Health	Topics for Discussion
West African Dance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Physical Health: Flowing rhythms naturally loosed the body and allows students to relax - Mental Health: Benefits for African American girls may also be seen if participating with their racial peers. Displaying the diversity of beauty through dance can strengthen self-confidence and affirm one’s identity - Social health: Dancing is often in groups encouraging social interaction and cooperation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● West African dance has been a point of empowerment, encouragement and celebration ● Beauty standards and its impact on students ● The diversity of beauty of all back-grounds and appearances. ● Importance of community and connection
North American Indian Dance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Physical Health: The continuous rhythm and walking patterns provide light exercise - Mental Health: The spiritual roots of these dances can help to make individuals feel much more at ease and hopeful. - Social Health: Promotes the importance of having a connection with the community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Understand the significance of traditional cultural dances in the context of that given culture’s community. ● Importance of community and connection
Tai Chi, originated in China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Physical health: Benefits of tai chi include improved digestion, flexibility, balance and coordination. - Mental Health: In order to fight feelings of distress, tai chi mainly focuses on relaxation techniques which have shown to decrease anxiety and depression. - Social Health: Improving individual balance and centering oneself allows for a cooperative and collaborative community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Benefits of staying grounded and how it can offer different perspectives to stressful situations. ● Students should find the time to find this centered feeling even outside of the classroom
Korean-pop Dance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Physical Health: Basic movements with high tempo beats encourage cardio exercise and can improve basic coordination. - Mental Health: Freestyling and the spontaneous expression of emotions dancing is encouraged. - Social health: K-pop dances focus heavily on collaboration and coordination with a group of people. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Analysis of lyrics and Korean culture. During the discussion, the lyrics of songs can be broken apart and translated to further immerse oneself into Korean culture ● The importance of collaboration and cooperation ● Development of good communication techniques between students

Table 2. Sample Semester Curriculum for School Cultural Dance Program

Lessons	Topics	Descriptions
Weeks 1-2	West African Dance	The teacher will introduce the cultural dance program beginning with West African dance as it places emphasis on empowerment and less emphasis on technical ability. Therefore, the hope is to provide students with confidence to get more comfortable in a new environment like this program.
Weeks 3-4	North American Indian Dance	The North American Indian dance will be performed in one large group with all students included. During this discussion, students can discuss the consequences of gender barriers in sports. North American Indian dance is included in this program to help students understand different alternatives for sports to encourage an accepting environment.
Weeks 5-6	Tai Chi	The teacher should introduce tai chi as a completely different category of cultural dance. This is because it mainly focuses on meditation and relaxing techniques. The teacher should also encourage utilizing tai chi outside of a classroom setting as it does not require equipment and busy movement.
Weeks 7-8	K-Pop Dance	Following West-African dance, the teacher will introduce K-pop dance. Korean pop dance is performed with Korean songs as backing tracks. During discussion, students will gather and translate the lyrics to understand the meaning behind what they are dancing to. By deepening their understanding of lyrics, it will help emphasize the mood of the performance overall and appreciate Korean music and dance.
Week 9	Call-back To Past Weeks/Showcase	In week 5, the teacher will evenly divide students among west African dance, K-pop dance, north American Indian dance and tai chi. After relearning dances from past weeks, students will showcase each dance in a casual class setting. After performances, students will discuss the overall benefits of cultural dancing and explain what they learned during this program in a survey or loose paragraph assignment.

Table 3. Sample Weekly Schedule - West African Dance

Day 1-2	Introduction	There will be a small introduction lecture done by a teacher or a local community member who has experience in the given cultural dance. The lecture can be formulated by mentioning the purpose of learning West-African dance, which is provided in Table 1.
Day 3-4	Learning	The teacher will then play the video tutorial provided and students will start very slowly and should get a gist of the dance.
Day 5-7	Practice	Students will review what was learnt in the previous session and evaluate peers to help catch smaller details about the dance.
Day 8-9	Discussion	During the discussion, students should reflect on overall feelings towards the given dance. Additionally, the teacher should have students share what they noticed in relation to social, mental and physical health, thinking about what was taught on day 1.
Day 10	Performance	At the beginning of class, students should get about 10-15 minutes to review the dance and then perform it in groups of 7 at a time. Note: performance should not be stressful, it is simply to showcase things that one learned throughout the week.

Conclusion and Limitations

As our knowledge of the effects of society and the individual grows, there is a recognition that more comprehensive solutions are required to tackle the complex social and mental health issues of adolescents. Due to evolving prioritization of physical, mental, emotional, and social wellbeing, practices such as Dance/Movement Therapy have become popularized. However, DMT does not account for the importance of cultural identity and lacks engagement with the community. Cultural dance, which focuses on one's emotional and spiritual healing, may be a possible and effective alternative to DMT. But before any drafting or testing of the program, the effectiveness of cultural dances should be systematically verified for the various aspects of health. With the implementation of a multicultural dance program, a cost-effective solution that addresses the holistic aspects of adolescent health is possible.

Cultural dance is demonstrated to have various benefits to health. However, research papers about the effects of cultural dance can't be adequately compared because the measures of improvements in adolescents (weight concerns, heart rate, blood pressure, lower stress, etc.) are different for all the research papers examined. Additionally, poor sample sizes suggest that there needs to be more standardization of testing the cost-effectiveness of various cultural dances. In most of the studies mentioned, there were benefits for dance programs only for girls. Boys were all but ignored in these studies. There needs to be more research conducted on the effectiveness of dance on their mental health. DMT or cultural dance experts should find better ways of incorporating boys and meeting their needs so that they feel safe to express themselves.

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