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## Sensing the direction of leadership and social identity in dance education

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### ABSTRACT

There is a clear consensus that skills relating to creating, performing, and appreciating dance are all critical to the learning experience. The Social Identity in Leadership (SIL) model, recently applied in sports coaching environments, argues that leadership is best understood in terms of the relationship between the leader and followers within a particular social or cultural group. SIL addresses how individuals who share a common social identity collaborate to lead other members of the community and influence them. Despite potential application benefits, this theory has yet to be defined and contextualised in dance environments. Accordingly, the aim of this study was to determine current approaches to the delivery of dance with regard to motivating learners to initiate, then sustain and extend their engagement. Specifically, we sought to discover the approaches to leadership currently applied by dance teachers and to determine if the principles of SIL are used. Based on a review of current literature about the application of SIL in teaching and coaching contexts, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight experienced dance teachers. Five themes emerged from the data that provide evidence to suggest that, whilst not as yet clearly defined, the principles of SIL were employed by the dance teachers.

### LAY SUMMARY

This study explored the application and relevance of social identity theory in dance education. SIL principles are not yet formally defined in dance practice, nor are they theoretically conceptualised in the dance education literature; however, there is evidence to suggest that principles of SIL were employed by the dance teachers interviewed in this study.

Implications for practice

- SIL principles are yet to be defined for dance practice environments, but seem to offer (if not underpin) current positive practice.
- SIL principles should be explored for application in dance education with a view to encourage motivation and the lifelong benefits of dance.


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## Introduction

In dance education, both performance and process are critical to the dance learning experience (Smith-Autard 1994). The drive of dance education is primarily to get learners to perform to the best of their abilities whilst also gaining understanding and learning through the embodied physical, cognitive, creative, aesthetic, and artistic processes that are put in place in the dance sessions (Pickard 2022). These processes are indeed of increasing interest because of their performance, social and emotional well-being, and creativity outcomes in educational settings. For example, the constant practice allows a learner to master the dance moves, which, in turn, enhances their performance as well as contributes to development of creativity where learners may come up with new dance styles. On the other hand, the participation in the dance lessons with other learners creates a sense of belonging which contributes to the emotional and social well-being of learners.

In both community (dance studio) and educational settings, dance is generally taught and learnt as a group activity. In group activities, it is established that when individuals feel a meaningful attachment to the group, their thought processes and actions can adjust to their social identity (Adarves-Yorno, Postmes, and Alexander Haslam 2006). In this way, social identity is informed by cultural norms, values, beliefs, and goals that are common to a group activity (such as dance) and is important for engagement and motivation (Anderson, Leyland, and Ling 2017). Comparable to sports engagement, where individuals develop their self-worth and sense of who they are as a person from their psychological connection to their activity groups (Slater et al. 2014); a dance learner could therefore develop their social identity through participation in specific group dance activities (e.g. Salsa dance group, Cheer leading teams) (Ntoumanis 2001). Nevertheless, a determining factor in the success of any group activity or learning process is the effectiveness of the leader or teacher of the group (Hakim 2015). The extent to which a leader influences and defines the group's sense of common social identity is important as it can put them in a position to influence what they believe, value and how they act and learn (Reicher, Haslam, and Platow 2018). Leadership specific to dance is currently acknowledged as resting in the skills of the individual and their leadership identity that includes notions of artist, individual, and community membership (Alexandre 2017). However, the majority of the literature on leadership in dance is focused on leading the art of dance as opposed to leading its teaching (Köngäs, Määttä, and Uusiautti 2022). For example, the literature focuses on choreographers who come up with new dance moves and attempt to get learners to master the new dance moves.

A social identity approach to leadership is of increasing attention in sport and exercise contexts, and evidence suggests that, by engaging in identity leadership, leaders can positively impact a variety of performance and health-related outcomes in group members (Stevens, Rees, and Cruwys 2021). These performance and health-related outcomes also mirror current drivers of dance education, suggesting that a social identity approach to leadership in dance may also be of interest to the field.

## Social identity in leadership

The Social Identity in Leadership (SIL) model argues that leadership is best understood in terms of the relationship between the leader and followers within a particular social or

cultural group. The theory of SIL (Tajfel and Turner 1978) comprehends how individuals who share a common social identity collaborate to lead other members of the community and influence them. If this approach is applied in a teaching and learning environment for general physical activity, according to SIL, a teacher's actions and identity can, for example, play a key role in both promoting (the short-term buy-in) and then building and sustaining (the longer term 'love affair with the activity') engagement (Duffy 2020). Similarly, if applied in more specific dance contexts, SIL can concern with how shared social identities can arise from dance styles or teaching/coaching approaches, and may inform how cultural contexts in dance can contribute towards leadership processes. In this way, leadership styles and the process through which a dance leader initially presents and subsequently identifies with the group in addition to the cultural context of the class (e.g. a Hip Hop, Ballet, or Ballroom dance styles) may prove important for a better understanding of engagement, motivation, and learning in dance and in turn how health benefits through dance can be increased.

Although the application of SIL as an approach to group delivery of activities appears pertinent to understanding how a shared common social identity can positively influence members of the community, to date, there is little evidence that outlines social identity leadership principles applied in group dance activities. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the current approaches to the delivery of dance in schools and studio settings which may shape engagement and inform future developments dance education outcomes.

## Methods

### *Research philosophy*

Research philosophy is a set of beliefs that inform the approach taken in carrying out a study, in this study, the philosophy employed was interpretivism. The interpretive approach allowed the researchers to explore and understand the unique experiences of dance teachers and the leadership practices they applied while interacting with different learners in dance studio and community contexts (Thorne 2016). The teachers discussed what they learned from their interactions with the learners, and described how the interactions informed their teaching and leadership approaches to dance (Mkansi and Acheampong 2012).

### *Participants*

Participants were recruited from a network of experienced dance teachers in the UK using a purposive sampling approach (Patton 2022). Information about the study was sent using a flyer, in order to get a range of experiences and views, the criteria for inclusion was that teachers needed to be working across different age groups (Kirkby et al. 2012). Eleven teachers responded positively, and eight participants were available for interview in the given timeframe. The mean length of dance teaching experience amongst the interviewees was 11 years (range 5–20 years). The aim of the study was to determine the participants' leadership approaches within their dance teaching and practice.

## Procedure

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews that were based on a review of current literature relating to the application of SIL in teaching and coaching contexts (Patton 2022). This enabled the researchers to get a clearer insight into the dance teachers' experience of SIL. The interviews were undertaken online using MS Teams application (Microsoft Teams, Version 1.6.00.35961). Prior to carrying out the interviews, ethical approval was obtained from the researchers' institution (Study ID S000633). APA ethical guidelines and code of conduct were used to ensure the dignity of participants was respected (Sutton and Austin 2015). Written consent was obtained from all participants. The audio recording of the interviews was essential, as it facilitated the collection of conclusive, qualitative data for analysis (Lobe, Morgan, and Hoffman 2020). Each interview had a varying duration; overall, they lasted between 10 and 44 minutes. The variation in the duration was attributed to each participant's ability to articulate their understanding of SIL, as this is a relatively new concept and terminology to be applied to dance (Lobe, Morgan, and Hoffman 2020). Certain participants displayed enthusiasm in offering elaborate information, whereas others favoured concise and succinct responses. The audio recordings of the interviews were deleted once the transcription was finalised and anonymised.

## Data analysis

Data were analysed using the Reflexive Thematic Analysis technique. This technique was used in order to develop themes and analyse them to get insights into the research topic (Wickham and Wickham 2016). To develop initial codes and themes, a software program used in qualitative research (NVivo, Version 12 Plus) was employed.

In terms of the approach to the analysis of the data set, Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was adopted. Byrne (2022) defines RTA as a method which is flexible and comprehensible to the point of easily being adopted in qualitative research studies (Page 5). RTA provides a more contemporary approach to its precursor, Thematic Analysis (TA) (Braun and Clarke 2006) that is now criticised because of its lack of distinction and clarity (Braun and Clarke 2019). RTA makes it easier to see and apprehend patterns or themes within the dataset, and compared to several other diverse methods, such as codebook thematic analysis, utilising different points of reference, this is a particularly flexible form of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2020). Initially, the RTA process applied an inductive approach of open coding, this enabled the codes to emerge without being driven by any specific theories or frameworks. This is in contrast to deductively analysed and coded data, which typically provides a less rich description of the dataset overall (Braun and Clarke 2020). The themes that were subsequently derived from the codes, however, were deductively generated, as they concerned the meanings and meaningfulness of the data set in relation to the interview questions and overall research questions (Byrne 2022). Consequently, the analysis used both inductive and deductive approaches at various stages of the analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019).

## Results

The Table 1 below shows the codes, subthemes and themes that emerged in the coding process.

**Table 1.** Thematic structure of perceived personal responses, characteristics, and determinants.

Higher order theme	Lower order theme	Data codes
Creating a nurturing and inclusive learning environment ( <i>n</i> = 16).	Encouraging engagement and participation ( <i>n</i> = 6)	Individualised attention and support ( <i>n</i> = 2)
	Building a positive learning environment ( <i>n</i> = 10)	Building confidence through feedback ( <i>n</i> = 1) Creating a relaxed and happy environment ( <i>n</i> = 1) Making sure everyone feel included ( <i>n</i> = 1)
Engagement and community building ( <i>n</i> = 17)	Fostering Positive Social Interaction and Engagement ( <i>n</i> = 6)	Personal connections and meaning relationships ( <i>n</i> = 2)
	Establishing trust and reputation ( <i>n</i> = 3) Building community and inclusivity ( <i>n</i> = 8)	Establishing trust ( <i>n</i> = 1) Promoting a sense of belonging ( <i>n</i> = 2)
Adaptive and Personalised Teaching Approaches ( <i>n</i> = 12)	Personalised instruction ( <i>n</i> = 3)	Individualised attention ( <i>n</i> = 1)
	Inclusivity ( <i>n</i> = 1) Differentiation and flexibility ( <i>n</i> = 8)	Inclusive teaching ( <i>n</i> = 1) Tailoring instruction to individual needs ( <i>n</i> = 4)
Effective communication strategies ( <i>n</i> = 11)	Openness and Responsiveness ( <i>n</i> = 7)	Encouraging open and honest dialogue ( <i>n</i> = 2)
	Effective communication and instruction ( <i>n</i> = 4)	Clear instruction and demonstration ( <i>n</i> = 1)
Fostering creativity and diversity in dance education ( <i>n</i> = 11)	Fostering creativity and self-expression ( <i>n</i> = 9)	Encouraging expression ( <i>n</i> = 2)
	Embracing diversity and change ( <i>n</i> = 2)	Embracing diverse backgrounds ( <i>n</i> = 1)

**Appendix** further elaborates on the coding process to include quotations for each theme.

Five distinct themes emerged that are now discussed.

### Theme 1: creating a nurturing and inclusive learning environment

Developing an inclusive and nurturing learning environment was a prominent theme that emphasised the importance of fostering a supportive and welcoming atmosphere in dance education. For instance, Participant 1 stated, '... so making everyone feel relaxed and safe and happy in; before the dancing starts.' Similarly, Participant 4 affirmed the theme by stating, 'It is a safe environment, and they can move in; there is no danger or anything like that.' These reflections indicate that the physical and emotional atmosphere of the classroom is integral to student engagement and learning.

Among the ways of creating a nurturing and inclusive learning environment is establishing relationships with learners. For instance, participant 9 stated that 'I found it is all down to the relationship that you built with them, of course, obviously, like 50% of it, I would say, is obviously your knowledge and experience, and you are teaching skills, and offering them a good class knowing what you are doing, and giving them the correct feedback so that they are progressing and they are improving, and then the other 50% is about the relationship that you built with them'

Based on results obtained from data analysis, the nurturing and inclusive environment is created through providing learners with individualised attention and support, making sure everyone feels included, and generally creating a happy and relaxed environment (Houser and Kriellaars 2023). Providing individualised attention and support helps the teacher build relationships with the learners making them feel important and valued. On

the other hand, creating a happy and relaxed environment makes learners feel free to express themselves and even try out new knowledge and skills since there is no fear of being punished for making mistakes. This encourages learning among the students.

## **Theme 2: engagement and community building**

Similarly, community engagement and relationship building was a central theme in the current thematic analysis. Participant 2 expressed the significance of community bonds, stating, 'I am in a nurturing environment, and I am a caring community space where if you want to learn to dance, you can come.' Participant 3 expanded on this theme by emphasising the aspect of community building, stating that: '... that is extra to the classes and how you engage the families and things as well, so how maybe like theatre trips or residential ...'. Thus, the two statements illustrate how dance educators prioritise not only the teaching of dance but also the nurturing of a supportive network.

It can be deduced from the results that some of the ways in which engagement and community building are achieved are the establishment of personal connections, meaningful relationships, and trust, and promoting a sense of belonging. Establishing relationships makes learners feel part of the group, and this motivates them to continue coming to school and taking part in the dance activities prescribed by the teacher. Such relationships also increase the level of trust learners have in educators, and this makes it easier for them to follow instructions and carry out the tasks they are asked to by the educator. In short, engagement and community building make learners feel that they belong, and this motivates them to behave according to the set standards within this community.

## **Theme 3: adaptive and personalised teaching approaches**

Another key theme from the interviews is adaptive and personalised teaching approaches. For example, Participant 5 stated that, 'It is a relatively small class, which allows me to focus on every individual, and I will also give fair feedback to everyone on time.' Similarly, Participant 6 offered insight into adapting teaching methods to varied abilities, indicating that: 'I adapt to how they come in. So, I will start of lead back, and then if it has to flip, I will.' Adapting teaching to the individual characteristics of students allows educators to provide more effective and meaningful dance instruction.

One of the adaptive and personalised teaching approaches used by participants is inclusive teaching. This is where teachers cater to the needs of every individual. For example, participant 9 stated that 'Using relevant music, so I found that this works really well with teenagers; if you are kind of in the now, let's say, about what teenagers are listening to, and you use that, it does not really make a difference to them what style it is, it is like contemporary modern jazz tab or whatever, and it is a good way to keep their interest and kind of make them focus in the class'.

Based on the results, educators can achieve adaptive and personalised teaching through individualised attention, which involves tailoring instructions and interactions to meet the specific needs of each learner. For example, in dancing, individualised attention may involve instructing the learner on the moves they have to make in order to execute a certain dancing style perfectly. It may also involve emphasising different dance styles for different learners based on their strengths. Individualised attention

ensures that there is maximum learning since the specific challenges of the learner are effectively addressed.

The results also suggest that adaptive and personalised teaching can be achieved through inclusive teaching, which involves creating an environment where all learners are treated equally and feel valued. This includes paying attention to each learner and addressing their concerns when they raise them. However, the downside of taking an individualised approach is it is time consuming and, in some cases, impractical. For example, in situations where the teacher has many students in class, it is hard to pay attention to each learner and address their problems.

#### **Theme 4: effective communication strategies**

The theme 'Effective Communication Strategies' was also prominent in the interviews carried out. For example, Participant 1's stated that, 'So it's that communication keeping it up and up, and then keeping the emails going'. This implies that the approach is important in establishing a positive learning environment where students feel at ease. This theme was affirmed by Participant 8, who noted that, 'I think the first thing that I try to do is to gain their trust and show lots of interest in them, make sort of general conversation.' This quote further highlights the necessity of effective communication not only in teaching dance but also in building trust and setting expectations for new students.

Two main ways of achieving effective communication are clear instruction and encouraging open and honest dialogue. A teacher can only manage to communicate effectively if they provide clear instructions about what they expect learners to do. For instance, in dance education, this may involve the teacher informing the learners of the dance activities they will engage in and even demonstrating how he/she expects the learners to execute those activities. Open and honest dialogue, on the other hand, involves both the teacher and learners being sincere with each other, which includes admitting when they are wrong. This helps to establish trust between learners and their teacher, and as a result, learners are more motivated to come to school and participate in learning activities.

#### **Theme 5: fostering creativity and diversity in dance education**

Lastly, there is the theme of fostering creativity and diversity in dance education. For instance, participant 4 states that 'Fun and creative. My current classes are very small, so I use that as a plus, and so the children practically get what at what tuition.' This approach underscores the commitment to not just teaching dance techniques but also nurturing creative expression and individual voices. Meanwhile, Participant 7 shed light on inclusivity, remarking, "... they get a little bag with some sort of goodies in it, so that is to make them feel more inclusive already that they are part of the school.'

On recognising diversity in the classroom and incorporating it in the teaching approach, participant 9 indicated that 'you have to be able at some point during the class to approach each of them specifically, whether it is with a certain kind of feedback which is just for them and or I learned things about them, like things that are irrelevant to dancing. So, for example, at some point during the class, you can mention something

funny that they have told you outside of class or make a joke or something.’ This demonstrates a conscious effort among dance educators to create environments that are not only creatively stimulating but also welcoming to a diverse range of students. By doing so, they ensure that dance education is accessible and enriching for everyone, regardless of their background or skill level.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine current approaches to the delivery of dance with regard to motivating learners to sustain and extend their engagement. Specifically, we sought to discover the approaches to leadership applied by dance teachers in school and studio dance classes that may shape engagement and inform future developments in dance education outcomes.

First of all, evidence emerged from the data to confirm that teachers felt a need to make a concerted and consistent effort to build relationships with their dance learners. The teachers believed that this allowed them to provide an inclusive environment for dance, enabled individualised support, built confidence, and increased satisfaction in participating dance activities. These factors also align with Cameron’s (2004) multi-dimensional conceptualisation of social identity, where belonging, togetherness and positive feelings or emotions towards a group influence group members in diverse ways. These include gaining intrinsic enjoyment from membership alone or from the feeling of togetherness and friendships gained within the group.

Engagement and community building was also a strong theme across the teachers where trust, reputation and the development personal connections within the group were associated with their social identity. In addition to developing an inclusive environment for the group where all members belonged, the teachers also applied approaches such providing ‘branded’ dance attire so that the dancers could affiliate both intrinsically and extrinsically with their group. In youth athletes, this approach is known to support the social identity of a group and the degree to which a collection of individuals is perceived to be a group as a whole (Martin et al., 2016).

Whilst the constructs of SIL such as ‘groupness,’ inclusion and belonging were clearly prominent themes that emerged from the data, creativity and its development alongside diversity were also important features that the teachers discussed. These findings may be seen as contradictory, however, the importance of creating ‘safe spaces’ as conducive environments for making mistakes without consequences, also require elements associated with SIL such as a strong sense of trust and belonging, and are essential to creative processes within dance environments (Castro et al. 2018).

## Conclusion

This study explores the leadership approaches adopted by educators in dance education, which influences the overall performance of learners. The study puts emphasis on one particular leadership style, the social identity style of leadership. Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts developed from the interviews carried out among 9 participants provided five key themes, which are creating a nurturing and inclusive learning environment, community engagement and building, adaptive and personalised teaching

approaches, effective communication strategies, and fostering creativity and diversity in dance education. These results suggest that the application of Social Identity Leadership in dance education promotes students' engagement because it creates an environment where all learners feel that they are part of and integral to the group.

This study contributes significantly to dance education by highlighting how Social Identity Leadership (SIL) can enhance the teaching and learning environment for dance through increased student engagement and motivation to dance. Feelings of belonging to a dance group can also create a safer and more inclusive environment for the dancers. Increased motivation and belonging have the potential, therefore to enhance the self-efficacy, overall performance and wellbeing of the dance learner. The findings in this study are therefore relevant for dance educators who wish to improve dance learning overall and impact performance and health-related outcomes in group members

The overall health, well-being and inclusive impact of SIL leadership approaches in dance teaching and learning are evidenced in this research. We therefore advocate that teaching programmes should incorporate leadership development and knowledge on how to apply leadership styles like SIL to enhance teaching outcomes overall. Finally, theoretically, with SIL showing potential of improving student engagement in dance education, it implies that more research should be carried out in this area to establish how this leadership style can best be applied to achieve optimal result.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

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## Appendix

### Coding process

Higher-order theme	Lower-order theme	Data codes	Quotes
Creating a nurturing and inclusive learning environment ( <i>n</i> = 16)	Encouraging Engagement and Participation ( <i>n</i> = 6)	Individualised attention and support ( <i>n</i> = 2)	You have to be able to be relatable and sympathetic to their needs, and in today's society, everyone has a sub-story, and everyone wants to be heard, though it's really important that if you want to make it make a successful dance school or a successful dance class, you have to be sympathetic and kind to those people that need you because they want to be seen, and as dancers, we all want to be seen, so sometimes that means being a shoulder to speak to and cry on.
		Building confidence through feedback ( <i>n</i> = 1)	So, every time to shy students I see a movement that is really not really good, but to them, it is improved. So, I will give instant feedback and give them confidence
	Building a positive learning environment ( <i>n</i> = 10)	Creating a relaxed and happy environment ( <i>n</i> = 1)	I think it is for me, it would be like having that teacher repour, so making everyone feel relaxed and safe and happy in, before the dancing starts
		Making sure everyone feel included ( <i>n</i> = 1)	It is keeping everything calm and safe but also fun having that fun aspect as well and making sure everyone feels included too
Engagement and community building ( <i>n</i> = 17)	Fostering Positive Social Interaction and Engagement ( <i>n</i> = 6)	Personal connections and meaning relationships ( <i>n</i> = 2)	So, the first is getting to know each other, and maybe doing some talk, some chat at the beginning
	Establishing trust and reputation ( <i>n</i> = 3)	Establishing trust ( <i>n</i> = 1)	So, you are having meaningful relationships with people, and they look at you as not a parent or figure, but somebody they trust, somebody, they rely on somebody they believe in, and you have believed in them, you've given them the courage to do whatever they've chosen to do
	Building community and inclusivity ( <i>n</i> = 8)	Promoting a sense of belonging ( <i>n</i> = 2)	I have a dancer who joined us in January, and she has made a big point of telling me how different the atmosphere is in our school, how friendly everyone is and how it feels like a big family, and everyone is really supportive of each other.

(Continued)

(Continued).

Higher-order theme	Lower-order theme	Data codes	Quotes
Adaptive and Personalised Teaching Approaches ( <i>n</i> = 12)	Personalised instruction ( <i>n</i> = 3)	Individualised attention ( <i>n</i> = 1)	I keep my class sizes small so that the children can really get a really worthwhile experience and lots of individual attention.
	Inclusivity ( <i>n</i> = 2)	Inclusive teaching ( <i>n</i> = 2)	So, I have to put that child at the center of my teaching strategy to make sure that I'm inclusive, that they're having a wholesome experience, but so that everyone else feels that they are heard and seen too, and normally 9 times out of 10 teaching in an inclusive way, benefits everybody. Using relevant music, so I found that this works really well with teenagers; if you are kind of in the now, let's say, about what teenagers are listening to, and you use that, it does not really make a difference to them what style it is, it is like contemporary modern jazz tab or whatever, and it is a good way to keep their interest and kind of make them focus in the class
	Differentiation and flexibility ( <i>n</i> = 8)	Tailoring instruction to individual needs ( <i>n</i> = 4)	Yes, absolutely. You have to. It's never fun for anybody to go into class and just feel like they're treated like a number, and I think you have to get to know individuals, you have to get to know what makes them tick, you also have to really get to know what engages as a person, what actually is going to make them want to join in.
Effective communication strategies ( <i>n</i> = 11)	Openness and Responsiveness ( <i>n</i> = 7)	Encouraging open and honest dialogue ( <i>n</i> = 2)	I think taking feedback from them is really important and allowing them to see you make mistakes and acknowledge the fact that you have made a mistake.
	Effective communication and instruction ( <i>n</i> = 4)	Clear instruction and demonstration ( <i>n</i> = 1)	I am very much a demonstrator, so I will stand in front of my class, I will dance it with them, so they have got a visual, but then I will use audio cues. So, see the terms so They can get a bit familiar and associate what term goes with what move.
Fostering creativity and diversity in dance education ( <i>n</i> = 11)	Fostering creativity and self-expression ( <i>n</i> = 9)	Encouraging expression ( <i>n</i> = 2)	Giving them opportunities to perform they want to perform opportunities to and do a little short back to fight that.
	Embracing diversity and change ( <i>n</i> = 2)	Embracing diverse backgrounds ( <i>n</i> = 2)	Ethnicities have never been an issue, but again, I do not have a particularly diverse group of people in my school just because of the areas that we teach in. You have to be able at some point during the class to approach each of them specifically, whether it is with a certain kind of feedback which is just for them and or I learned things about them, like things that are irrelevant to dancing. So, for example, at some point during the class, you can mention something funny that they have told you outside of class or make a joke or something.