

# Exploring the Experiences of Festival Choreographers in Teaching Dance in Leyte

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## Abstract

Festival choreographers are central to preserving Filipino cultural heritage through dance, particularly in the vibrant celebrations held across Leyte. Despite their essential role, limited research has explored their real-life experiences in teaching and sustaining festival dances. This study investigates the motivations, struggles, and coping strategies of choreographers in selected municipalities of Leyte. Anchored on a qualitative multiple case study design, four participants were selected through purposive sampling, and data were gathered using semi-structured interviews. Using the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan) as a lens, this research explores how choreographers experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their creative and professional journeys as they navigate the demands of festival dance.

Thematic analysis revealed two major themes. The first theme highlights the challenges choreographers regularly encounter, such as *financial insecurities, lack of institutional support, and limited access to training and development*. These obstacles impact not only their teaching but also their personal and professional lives. The second theme focuses on coping mechanisms. Many choreographers *diversify their income, pursue alternative career paths, and adopt digital tools to adapt and grow*.

Despite these difficulties, the choreographers remain passionate and driven by a strong sense of purpose. Their motivation stems from their love for dance, their commitment to mentoring young performers, and their deep desire to preserve Filipino traditions through movement. This study underscores the need to acknowledge and support festival choreographers as cultural educators and tradition bearers. Providing them with consistent assistance, opportunities, and recognition is key to ensuring that intangible cultural heritage continues to thrive for future generations.

**Keywords:** Festival choreographers, teaching dance, Eastern Visayas, qualitative multiple case study, experiences

## Introduction

Leyte, a province in the Visayas region of the Philippines, has a rich tradition of festival celebrations deeply embedded in its local culture and history. Central to these vibrant expressions are festival choreographers, who play a crucial role in both preserving and innovating traditional practices through dance instruction. By contributing to various community-based and regional festivals, they position dance not only as a performance art but also as a vital educational and cultural tool. Historically, festivals such as the Lubi-Lubi Festival of Barugo and the Lawig Festival of Palompon have served as key cultural events where dance reflects community narratives, historical memory, and social values (Batohinog, 2021).

Festival choreographers in Leyte also contribute to achieving national and global cultural development goals. Their work aligns with Sustainable Development Goals particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) by embedding cultural heritage in community-based dance education. This is consistent with the School of Living Traditions (SLT) program of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA), which promotes the non-formal transmission of indigenous practices through mentor-apprentice models (National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 2019). De Guzman Quadra (2022) highlights the global recognition of SLTs through UNESCO's Register of Good Safeguarding Practices, reinforcing their strategic importance in protecting intangible heritage. Further, the NCCA's Philippine Cultural Education Program (PCEP), institutionalized through the National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009 (RA 10066), calls for the integration of cultural education in both formal and informal learning systems (National Commission for Culture and the Arts, n.d.).

In line with this, Recuerdo (2025) notes how choreographers in festivals such as those in Pintuyan, Southern Leyte, actively promote civic values and environmental awareness, supporting sustainable development efforts through the lens of cultural performance. Despite their impact, the lived realities of festival choreographers often remain invisible. While their public performances are celebrated, their personal challenges, motivations, and educational strategies are rarely documented.

There are very few studies about this topic even though choreographers play important roles in culture, education, and society roles (UNESCO, 2021; NCCA, 2022). Choreographers face multiple barriers, including insufficient resources, limited government support, and the need to meet varying community expectations (Blanco & Alcantara, 2020; Lico, 2018). These challenges highlight the need to explore how choreographers maintain their motivation and adapt their practices in increasingly complex teaching environments.

Given their central role, this study aimed to explore the experiences of festival choreographers in Leyte, particularly in the context of community-based festival dance education. It sought to understand the challenges they encounter in teaching traditional and contemporary dances, including financial, institutional, and pedagogical barriers. Additionally, the study aimed to identify the coping mechanisms they adopt to sustain their teaching practices and cultural roles despite these constraints. Guided by Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes that human motivation is driven by the fulfilment of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When these needs are supported, individuals are more likely to be intrinsically motivated, creative, and resilient in their roles. The research also examined how choreographers remain motivated and committed to their work by fulfilling psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Overall, the study intended to contribute to a deeper understanding of how these cultural educators navigate their roles, and to inform future support systems and policies that strengthen cultural preservation through dance education.

This study is significant because it highlights the often-overlooked voices and lived experiences of festival choreographers in Leyte, who play a vital role in preserving and transmitting cultural heritage through dance. By exploring their challenges, motivations, and teaching practices, the study provides insights that can benefit various sectors. Festival choreographers themselves will gain recognition for their efforts, and the findings may support the enhancement of their teaching methods and strengthen their access to support systems. Students and community members can develop a deeper appreciation for local culture and the individuals who sustain these traditions. Local government units (LGUs) and cultural organizations may use the results to design more responsive programs and support mechanisms tailored to the needs of cultural practitioners. Furthermore, future researchers and educators can draw upon this study as a valuable reference for related work in dance education, cultural preservation, and community-based teaching.

## **2.0 Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative multiple case study design to explore the experiences of festival choreographers in Leyte. Yin (2018) emphasized that qualitative multiple case studies are ideal when researchers seek in-depth exploration across several bounded cases to identify both unique contextual insights and common patterns. A qualitative multiple-case study typically involves a small number of richly detailed cases, often three to five, to allow for deep contextual analysis and cross-case comparison while maintaining methodological rigor and manageability (Patnaik & Pandey, 2019). By examining multiple cases across different festival contexts, the study identified shared themes, challenges, and coping strategies among choreographers, while also acknowledging the unique cultural and situational differences within each case.

### **Research Locale**

The study was conducted in selected municipalities within Leyte that are known for their active participation in cultural festivals and community-based dance traditions. These areas were chosen to support a smooth and consistent data collection process. Each locality holds annual events that feature both traditional and modern festival dances choreographed by local artists and cultural advocates. These celebrations play a vital role in shaping community identity, fostering cultural pride, and preserving Waray-Waray intangible heritage.

Some of the research sites were more urbanized, often receiving support from local government units and partner institutions to host large-scale festivals and competitions. Others, while smaller and less populated, continued to promote grassroots cultural activities, where choreographers collaborated closely with schools, barangays, and civic groups. This range of contexts allowed for a deeper understanding of how choreographers navigate both well-supported and modest cultural environments in teaching festival dance.

### **Research Participants**

The participants in this study consisted of four (4) selected festival choreographers from the selected towns in Leyte. Using purposive sampling, the researcher identified choreographers who had substantial experience in teaching dance for local festivals and were actively involved in community-based cultural events. These individuals were chosen based on specific criteria, including their number of years in practice, involvement in major cultural festivals, and their recognized roles as educators or tradition bearers within their communities. As a qualitative multiple case study, each participant represented a distinct “case,” allowing for an in-depth exploration of individual teaching contexts, challenges, and strategies. The inclusion of four participants provided a manageable yet diverse range of perspectives, ensuring meaningful insights into the transmission of cultural heritage through festival dance education in Leyte.

### **Research Instrument**

The primary research instrument for this study was a semi-structured interview guide, designed to gather in-depth insights into the participants’ experiences in teaching festival dance. The guide consisted of open-ended questions aligned with the study’s objectives and allowed flexibility for follow-up and probing questions. Additionally, field notes and relevant documents (such as festival materials or choreography outlines) were used to support data triangulation.

The interview guide was carefully reviewed by three experts in research, culture, and dance education to ensure its validity. The experts assessed the appropriateness of the questions and their alignment with the study's goals. Using face validity, they identified items that were confusing, too lengthy, or potentially leading. After revisions, the interview guide was approved, and a certificate of validation was issued as proof of its readiness for data collection.

#### **Data Gathering Procedure**

Prior to data collection, the researcher secured approval from the research adviser and obtained permission from the proper authorities in each selected municipality. Informed consent was also secured from each participant, with a clear explanation of the study's purpose, voluntary nature, and confidentiality measures. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any time. The semi-structured interviews, validated by experts, served as the main tool for data collection. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on the availability and preference of each participant. Each session lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes and was conducted in a language comfortable for the participant (English, Filipino, or Waray). With the participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded for accuracy, and the researcher also took field notes. After each session, recordings were transcribed and organized for analysis.

#### **Data Analysis**

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2019): (1) *familiarization with the data*, (2) *generating initial codes*, (3) *searching for themes*, (4) *reviewing themes*, (5) *defining and naming themes*, and (6) *producing the final report*. This method allowed for a systematic examination of recurring patterns while preserving the authenticity of participants' voices.

In line with the multiple case study approach, the researcher also applied cross-case analysis as described by Yin (2018). This involved comparing themes across participants to identify both similarities and differences in their lived experiences. This dual approach enhanced the depth and breadth of insights into the motivations, challenges, and coping mechanisms of festival choreographers across the selected communities.

#### **Ethical Considerations**

The study observed strict ethical standards to protect the rights and welfare of all participants. Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview, based on the template patterned from the World Health Organization, which clearly outlined the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the assurance of confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reports to protect the identities of the participants. All audio recordings and related documents were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher.

This research complied with the ethical policies embedded by the Research Ethics Committee of Leyte Normal University (LNU). These policies included the submission and approval of key requirements such as the study protocol, technical review certificate, non-disclosure agreement (NDA), study protocol self-assessment, and informed consent self-assessment. These procedures ensured that the study met both institutional and national standards of ethical research practice.

In addition, the study adhered to the principles outlined in the National Ethical Guidelines for Health and Health-Related Research (NEGHRR, 2022) and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) Memorandum Order No. 15, Series of 2019, which promote respect for persons, beneficence, and justice in research. These frameworks guided the researcher in ensuring that all participants were treated with dignity, transparency, and fairness throughout the entire study process.

#### **Trustworthiness**

To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was ensured through triangulation using interview transcripts, field notes, and expert validations. Transferability was addressed by providing rich descriptions of the research setting and participant backgrounds, allowing readers to assess applicability to other contexts. Dependability was achieved by maintaining detailed documentation of the research process, while confirmability was supported through the researcher's audit trail and adherence to participants' authentic responses rather than personal bias.

#### **Reflexivity**

The researcher was also a festival choreographer, which played a significant role throughout the study. This background provided cultural familiarity and helped establish trust and rapport with participants, contributing to richer data collection. However, this positionality also presented a risk of bias and subjective interpretation. To address this, the researcher engaged in reflexive journaling to monitor personal assumptions and maintained transparency during the research process. Feedback from peers and research mentors was regularly sought to critically assess interpretations and ensure that the findings reflected the participants' genuine experiences rather than being shaped by the researcher's personal background.

### **4.0 Results and Discussion**

This section presents the themes that emerged from the interview transcripts of festival choreographers from various towns in Leyte. The findings reflect their collective experiences in teaching dance in the context of

community festivals. The responses were analyzed thematically, and key themes and subthemes were developed. Each theme is supported by academic literature to ensure reliability and relevance.

Based on the results of the interview transcripts, two major themes emerged regarding the lived experiences of festival choreographers in Leyte: (1) Challenges of Festival Choreographers in Teaching Dance, and (2) Coping Mechanisms of Festival Choreographers. These themes reflect both the external and internal factors affecting their professional and cultural roles, including financial struggles, shifts in teaching strategies, and their continuous drive to uphold local dance traditions.

### **Challenges of Festival Choreographers in Teaching Dance**

Festival choreographers in Leyte face a variety of ongoing challenges that affect their roles as cultural transmitters, educators, and artists. These challenges include issues of financial instability, lack of structured support systems, and limited access to training resources. Effective dance instructors and choreographers require not only creativity, physical stamina, and persistence, but also strong interpersonal and motivational abilities, and must be capable of managing time and resources under pressure ("Teaching Dance Sport Instructional Guide: Development and Evaluation," 2025).

Festival choreographers in Leyte experience persistent financial and professional precarity rooted in the project-based nature of festival work. Similar to creative workers globally, these choreographers lack stable contracts and rely on intermittent engagements, referred to as "breadwinning strategies ... recalibrated" due to insecure working conditions (Pertierra et al., 2024). Many of them rely on invitations from schools or local government units during cultural events, with no guarantee of continuity. Ashton (2023) describes such employment conditions in the creative industry as "portfolio precarity," where artists must constantly secure new gigs to survive. This mirrors the participants' experiences of inconsistent income and dependence on short-term engagements.

Beyond finances, there is a lack of institutional support, which limits opportunities for training, professional growth, and sustainable mentorship. Participants highlighted the absence of systematic programs for choreographer development. In this context, choreographers often function as self-trained educators with few institutional avenues for advancement.

Furthermore, choreographers also noted the difficulty of accessing adequate training venues or equipment. They often rehearse in multipurpose halls or outdoor spaces, which may not be conducive to structured dance education. In many educational settings, small practice spaces, poor audio equipment, and substandard dance floors significantly limit the quality of dance instruction (Ding & Ling, 2024).

### **Theme 1: Financial Insecurity**

Choreographers frequently mentioned unstable income due to the irregular nature of festival work. Since most local government units do not provide permanent employment for choreographers, their livelihood often depends on short-term projects, honoraria, or sponsorships. While their role is central to the success of cultural celebrations, they are typically hired on short-term contracts or given honorariums that do not match the time, effort, and creative labor they invest. Payments are often delayed or insufficient, and choreographers frequently have to cover their own costs for rehearsals, costumes, and transportation. Industry data shows that dance professionals, including choreographers, often earn below a living wage, frequently taking on multiple gigs or outside jobs to make ends meet (Dance NYC, 2023).

Significant Statement 1: "Most of the time, we are only called when there is a festival or competition. After that, wala na. So, we have to find other ways to earn." (*Translated Language - FC4*)

Significant Statement 2: "Even when we give our best effort, the compensation does not always match the workload, especially with all the rehearsals and preparations." (*Translated Language - FC6*)

### **Theme 2: Lack of Institutional Support**

Several participants expressed frustration over the absence of long-term institutional support or structured programs for choreographers. Many Filipino choreographers and cultural practitioners continue their creative work with minimal institutional backing, often lacking stable funding, adequate facilities, and technical or training support, a reality that undermines their sustainability and professional growth (Lamentillo, 2023). Unlike teachers in the formal education system, festival choreographers are not given stable platforms for growth or recognition. Choreographers and cultural practitioners frequently operate with minimal institutional support, encountering inconsistent funding, inadequate technical provisions, and a noticeable absence of structured backing from cultural organizations or educational institutions, a situation that places the burden of resources, skills training, and program continuity squarely on their shoulders (Lobo, 2023).

Significant Statement 1: "There is no official program for us choreographers. We are invited, yes, but there is no continuity. Every year, parang panibago na naman lahat." (*Translated Language - FC1*)

This supports what Rousham (2024) describes dance professionals often encounter structural exclusion, low pay, and financial strain due to institutional barriers meaning many artists must navigate short-term contracts and underfunded systems without adequate support from arts organizations or grant bodies.



### **Theme 3: Limited Access to Training and Development**

Participants shared that while they have passion and experience, there are few opportunities for professional growth through workshops, seminars, or scholarships. This theme mirrors the findings of Androshchuk et al. (2023) that examined how higher education institutions train choreographers. They highlight that while creative skills are prioritized, there are gaps in ongoing professional development, with insufficient structured support to help future choreographers develop pedagogical competence and adapt to new teaching methods.

Significant Statement 1: *"We need more training not just for dance steps, but also for how to handle students and teach choreography properly."* (Translated Language - FC3)

Significant Statement 2: *"Sometimes we just watch YouTube or TikTok to find ideas, but it's different when we are trained by professionals."* (Translated Language - FC7)

#### **Coping Mechanisms of Festival Choreographers**

Despite the challenges, festival choreographers continue to find ways to sustain their practice and passion. Their coping mechanisms include diversifying income and career pathways and embracing technology and digital tools. This aligns with the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as key motivational drivers.

This supports the study by Christa St. John (2021), which explains how digital tools can help dance practitioners reach wider audiences and maintain engagement. De Las Heras-Fernández et al. (2023) emphasize that professional dancers commonly draw on psychological coping strategies such as seeking social support, applying mental rehearsal, or using problem-focused techniques to manage performance-related stress and pressure. Choreographers also turn to digital platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and Messenger to teach and promote dance.

This mirrors findings from Kraus et al. (2019), who note that digital platforms are reshaping dance pedagogy by allowing creative instruction beyond the physical studio. These tools help choreographers maintain visibility, share performances, and mentor students remotely offering a hybrid mode of engagement that expands their educational reach. Additionally, many participants expressed deep personal and cultural motivation to continue their work. Even in the absence of financial gain, they described their role as a cultural obligation to inspire youth, promote heritage, and keep traditional dances alive. Ho (2019) highlights those cultural practitioners often draw strength from the validation of their communities, finding purpose in their cultural identity rather than institutional support.

The findings suggest that while choreographers in Leyte face structural barriers such as financial precarity, limited training access, and lack of formal support, they also demonstrate remarkable ingenuity in sustaining their roles. By pursuing portfolio careers, integrating digital tools, and anchoring their work in cultural pride, they continue to serve as key agents of community engagement and heritage transmission. These insights suggest the importance of policy recognition, professional training programs, and digital resource support to further empower community-based choreographers in the Philippine cultural sector.

### **Theme 1: Diversifying Income and Career Pathways**

To manage financial insecurity, many choreographers pursue alternative income sources such as teaching in schools, engaging in small businesses, or working in local government units. To cope with financial instability and seasonal work cycles, many choreographers and cultural practitioners in the Philippines are increasingly **diversifying their income streams and career paths**, engaging in activities such as teaching, freelance gigs, digital content creation, and participating in business-literacy workshops. These strategies help them sustain their artistic pursuits and professional livelihoods (DTI, 2024).

Significant Statement 1: *"I work as a teacher now, but I still choreograph when I'm invited by schools or LGUs. That way, I can balance both."* (Translated Language - FC2)

Significant Statement 2: *"Aside from dancing, I do make-up services, host events, and sell food online."* (Translated Language - FC8)

This reflects the concept discussed by Wood (2021), where upon graduation, many dance artists including choreographers rely on freelance models, such as artist-led collectives, project-based jobs, and dance agencies, to diversify income and sustain their careers, reflecting the need for entrepreneurial and adaptable skill sets.

### **Theme 2: Embracing Technology and Digital Tools**

Many participants have turned to online platforms to continue teaching and promoting dance. Platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube serve as both promotional and instructional tools. Choreographers are increasingly integrating technology and digital tools such as AI-assisted ideation platforms, online tutorials, and social media to support creative workflows, enhance choreography development, and broaden audience reach (Liu & Sra, 2024; Lobo et al., 2024). In addition, Ni (2024) express that choreographers and dance educators are increasingly applying deep learning and AI-based technologies to enhance dance teaching and practice, enabling more accurate motion analysis, personalized feedback, and improved pedagogical outcomes.

Significant Statement 1: “Sometimes I upload short dance videos online, just to stay connected with my students and to keep the passion alive.” (Translated Language - FC6)

Significant Statement 2: “We use Messenger and Facebook groups for coordinating practices and giving feedback.” (Translated Language - FC5)

### Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of festival choreographers in teaching dance in Leyte, revealing both the challenges they face and the strategies they use to cope. Findings showed that choreographers encounter financial instability, limited institutional support, and inadequate access to training resources. Despite these barriers, they demonstrate resilience and creativity by diversifying their income, using digital platforms, and staying committed to preserving cultural traditions. Their stories highlight the vital role they play in sustaining local heritage through dance, emphasizing the need for greater recognition, support, and investment in community-based cultural practitioners.

### Recommendations

In light of the findings, it is recommended that local government units, cultural agencies, and educational institutions provide sustained support to festival choreographers through formal recognition, training programs, financial grants, and access to proper rehearsal spaces. Strengthening partnerships between choreographers and local stakeholders can enhance the transmission of cultural heritage while also promoting their professional growth. Additionally, integrating community-based dance instruction into formal arts education and offering digital resources can empower choreographers to continue their work more effectively and inclusively.

### AI Acknowledgment

This study utilized artificial intelligence (AI) tools, to assist in various stages of the research process. These tools were employed to support grammar refinement, synthesis of related literature, and citation formatting. However, all content generated was critically reviewed, edited, and validated by the researcher to ensure accuracy, contextual relevance, and alignment with academic standards. The researcher remains solely responsible for the interpretation, analysis, and final presentation of the study.

### Authors Bionote

Aldwin Argelles Taño is a licensed professional teacher, a dedicated festival choreographer who is now a candidate for Master of Arts in Education major in Physical Education at Leyte Normal University located in Tacloban City. With extensive experience in choreographing for cultural festivals such as the Pintados-Kasadyaan, he has committed himself to promoting local heritage and empowering young performers through dance education. His passion for preserving intangible cultural traditions is reflected in both his artistic work and academic pursuits. This study is a testament to his advocacy for recognizing and supporting the vital role of community-based cultural educators in the Philippines.

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