

## **Unsettling dance and “disadvantage” in the curriculum**

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### **Abstract**

Australian governments have shifted towards the global trend of national curricula, and the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), is developing a school curriculum for Australia. Over the past 20 years dance has been located in numerous worldwide primary and secondary school curriculum documents and, within this context, dance educators successfully argued for the inclusion of dance.

Addressing conference themes “Dance and Social Justice” and “Curriculum and Hegemony,” this paper explores the concept of disadvantage within dance. In particular, attempts are made to unsettle deficit views of those “disadvantaged” in the development of a more socially-just dance curriculum for all young people. The paper considers power discrepancies inherent in the notions of class, bodies, gender, ability, and race that face dance educators and students. In Australia’s culturally and linguistically diverse society, how might students encounter the dance curriculum so that it connects with their lives and communities? How might school-based learning via the dance curriculum offer opportunities for pedagogical innovation where the life world of the student becomes a key focus for skill and creativity? Further questions and challenges for dance educators in developing a more socially-just dance curriculum are identified.

Work towards an inclusive dance curriculum is grounded in the authors’ embodied practices as dance educators in schools and with university pre-service teachers. Critically reflective discussion focuses on how we might value the contribution of dance to “building a democratic, equitable, and just society – a society that is prosperous, cohesive, and culturally diverse, and that values Australia’s Indigenous cultures as a key part of the nation’s history, present and future” (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008, p. 4). Dance could play its part in the pursuit of curricular justice for a reconstruction of mainstream curriculum and pedagogy that transforms young people’s lives for a genuine Australian “Education Revolution.”

*Keywords:* disadvantage, social justice, curriculum

### **Australian context**

Background information is important for understanding notions of “disadvantage” in relation to dance in Australian schools. As the sixth largest country in the world, Australia has a population density of two people per square kilometre (Australia Facts, 2009). The population of 23 million is spread mainly around major coastal cities and includes those with colonial or migrant heritages from the past 200 years, as well as urban Aboriginal people displaced by early colonisation. Smaller communities live in regional and remote areas, including Aboriginal people using native languages and maintaining cultural traditions.

Census data from 2011 shows that while more than 300 different languages are spoken in Australia, 76.8% of Australians speak only English at home. Recent migrants to Australia primarily include those from the United Kingdom, India, and China (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Australia has the fourth highest percentage of people living in poverty compared to other OECD countries, with 1 in 10 Australian children living in poverty (Hattam & Prosser, 2008).

Australia therefore requires a curriculum that appreciates the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse young people, following an earlier call for an educational system that serves equally, “all of the diverse Australian population” (Connell, 1993, p. 325). This paper aims to add to discourses concerning the contribution of dance to “the central role of education in building a democratic, equitable, and just society” (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008, p. 4).

Over the past 20 years, Australian politicians have embraced the global trend of developing “national curricula” and the current government is presently developing a new Australia-wide school curriculum. A significant tension is that this curriculum is driven by neoliberal economic reform that is indicative of social engineering and control, exemplified by “achievement standards” for all students, while supporting equity of access for all. Dance has been located in numerous school curriculum documents worldwide and within this context, Australian educators successfully argued for the inclusion of dance in the new curriculum.

### **Social justice**

Literature traces origins of the contested concept of social justice to late 20<sup>th</sup> century notions of both disadvantage and of human or civil rights, framed by economic and political currents (Bankston, 2010). We write this paper pondering our experiences as dance educators and reflecting upon the term “disadvantage” in relation to diverse young people and dance in school curricula. We have worked with marginalised groups considered to be disadvantaged in locations where students lack social and cultural capital to engage with the hegemony of school curriculum. Here we find interesting points of geophysical difference linked by the term “disadvantage” in relation to our approaches to developing relevant dance pedagogies and curricula that meet the needs and interests of diverse young people.

Addressing the diversity brought by learners may lead to us to feel “overwhelmed” (Risner and Stinson, 2010), but we are ambitious in our roles as educators to advocate for more socially-just dance curricula that embrace an understanding and the value of the real lives of diverse young people. As noted in other countries, legislation alone cannot provide for equal access to dance in schools (Risner, 2007), and we have concerns about the content and requirements of a curriculum in dance for all students.

Now working in teacher education, we find common interests in the transformative potential of dance in changing school cultures. While common themes in dance education literature may claim the potential of dance in schools to improve young people’s lives, those from differing social classes and cultures often embody skills and interests that are not served or valued in school curricula and examination systems. Despite equal opportunity policies in schools for all students, opportunities are not equal, and inequity continues to be replicated through schooling (Hattam, Brennan, Zipin, & Comber, 2009). An uncritical lauding of dance sees it as “transformative,” being both democratic and empowering, but dance can also maintain the status quo and division between groups (Phillips-Fein, 2007). We are conscious that body practices such as dance are shaped by social constructs including class, gender,

ability, and race, and that not all young people interested in dance benefit equally, nor realise their potential even when offered a dance curriculum in school.

### **“Disadvantage”**

Following Hattam and Prosser (2008), we seek to unsettle deficit views of students and re-narrate how the term “disadvantage” is used in the context of dance education. Understanding the workings and uses of power in a pluralistic society is a complex and important matter for educators concerned with those who are less advantaged. Children enter schooling from different structural positions and with different social habitus, where they embody distinctive qualities of cultural disposition or “habitus” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Schooling reproduces social stratification by maintaining a pre-existing order. There is always a gap between students who are endowed with unequal amounts of cultural capital. This gap separates the holders of inherited cultural capital from those who lack it, and leads to a subsequent disconnect with the things that are valued in the school. The curriculum may make no authentic connection with less advantaged students’ learning and their community values, and, in failing to engage them, allows these students to miss out in significant ways.

We are concerned with the development of a genuinely transformative and empowering dance curriculum that meets the needs of those groups traditionally categorised as “disadvantaged” by adopting a pluralist approach to teaching dance with diverse school students. These aspirations allow us to think about assumptions that many of us have concerning dance and the dancing body. We provide questions as headings for the next three sections to guide our thinking about critical social issues in dance education such as “gender, diversity, and cultural context” (Risner, 2007, p. 965): What and whose dance is included in the school curriculum? Who can dance? Which bodies can dance? From each question, we formulate challenges for dance educators concerned with curriculum change.

### **What and whose dance is included in the school curriculum?**

Because such a wide range of activities is labeled as “dance,” a key consideration for those constructing dance curricula is, “What dance is included in the school curriculum?” Our first question requires consideration of the “dominant Western paradigm for teaching dance” (Shapiro, 1998, p. v) as well as approaches to power and differences that highlight tensions in practices. Dance curricula that stem from Western traditions and exclude dance forms from other traditions may be regarded as problematic, as they may have little cultural relevance or meaning for many learners (Dils, 2007). Tensions may arise from differing orientations towards the creative process and/or technical skills for performance, such as “creative dance,” “social dances,” and “contemporary” dances drawing upon “folk” and “classical” traditions.

To resolve deliberations about which kinds of dance might be taught, school dance curricula developed in Australia and elsewhere over recent decades usually draw upon foundational principles from the modern dance movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most curriculum documents designate that students will work with the body as the instrument and movement as the medium of dance, with this basic foundation usually leading to the introduction of specific styles in later years of school (ACARA, 2011). These approaches include the development of technical skills and student-centred, creative processes (Smith-Autard, 1994; Bolwell, 1998). Such influences have formed the dance curriculum hegemony of schools and it is perhaps timely to consider the effects of more recent developments when considering whose dance culture is represented in schools.

Stinson (2007) notes that many educators writing about curriculum identify a particular tension between teaching Western high art and teaching local culture. Additionally, Risner (2007) considers criticism of dominant Western traditions in dance education from anthropologists interested in non-Western dance. The “arts” status may apply only to some dance forms (Bolwell, 1998), which is perhaps problematic when dance is located within an “arts” curriculum. Criticism is made of strong Euro-centrism where non-Western forms of dance are conceived of as “primitive,” and theatrical dance promoted as superior (Risner, 2007), limiting curricular developments that include indigenous dance forms. In a multi-cultural society, do we accept the Western concept of what dance and art are, or do we redefine these by exploring non-Western forms? We find resonance with Risner and Stinson (2010), who suggest we might consider all dance forms “ethnic” and might begin to work toward reconsidering how we think of all dance in terms of broadening students’ understanding of the possibilities of dance as a “cultural” enterprise that seeks to create empathy and acceptance of difference.

Student diversity relating to dance and matters of class, gender, bodies, abilities, race, and ethnicity is central to the new Australian curriculum, since the National Curriculum Board states that “The curriculum should be based on the assumptions that all students can learn and that every student matters” (2009, p. 8).

A challenge for those concerned with a developing dance curriculum for all students is therefore this: *How might the dance curriculum meet the needs and interests of all children and young people with their diverse cultural traditions in our multi-cultural Australian society?*

### **Who can dance?**

As noted by Risner (2007), gender equity is identified as a key social issue in dance, and highlights disparities in power for males and females. Our second question, therefore, requires a consideration of the social construction of gender, as well as issues around material equity as they influence participation in dance study (Risner, 2007, p. 967). A Western European cultural paradigm denotes dance as a female activity (Hasbrook, 1993, as cited in Risner, 2007). Socially embedded assumptions about gender continue to support such notions, as dance works to maintain the status quo by contributing to the construction of gender roles and acceptable social behaviour (Phillips-Fein, 2007).

We are interested in the processes that reproduce a gender system, as well as the possibilities for agency in the context of dance. From the early years, sensory and physical experiences of babies and toddlers are mediated by cultural expectations of what is considered to be appropriate male and female behaviour. At school, where mental capacity is often given precedence over activities of the body, dance and physical education are the significant exceptions. These learning areas fight for educational legitimacy but can reinforce deeply engrained prejudices that are expressed in gendered terms. We ponder how participation in dance influences the way young people understand bodies and gender, as well as the way in which gender identities become embodied (Blume, 2003). Risner (2003) asserts that children reproduce narrow stereotypes, where movements are intrinsically limited to a recognisable gender identity. Consequently, both males and females may be restricted in dance by an underpinning ideology that men must be powerful whilst girls must be graceful and controlled (Drummond, 2011).

Issues of equity continue to surface for dance in schools, causing us to consider who has the symbolic material and cultural capital necessary to access dance in schools. While efforts to bring dance into public schools are key in the development of more accessible and equitable dance for all, the social and economic capital for access to dance is still varied (Risner 2007). A hierarchy of dance “haves” and “have nots” is produced in the classroom, where those who have studied dance direct assumptions and take for granted ideas about what dance should look like and what counts as dance. They also demonstrate a level of skill that is unavailable to others with less experience or opportunity. This leads to achievement and success for already advantaged young people who may live in high socio-economic areas and are able to access dance as a result of parental encouragement and financial support. In contrast, groups of young males and females living in low socio-economic demographic areas, or categorised marginally such as “indigenous” or “recent migrants,” may be disadvantaged.

Our second challenge for dance educators is therefore this: *How do we equally reach such disenfranchised populations of young females and males, as well as those who already have access to dance outside of school?*

### **Which bodies can dance? PossAbilities?**

Matters of physical and intellectual ability within the diversity spectrum are also central for educators who increasingly work with diverse abilities. Dance focuses on the body and movement, prompting our third question above, where we consider which bodies are acceptable for dance. As Connell suggests, it is through “social institutions and discourses that bodies are given meaning as society has a range of body practices which address, sort, and modify bodies” (2000, p. 58). Dance may therefore be liberating when dancers are freed through movement, or constraining if pigeonholed into stereotypes and idealised forms (Green, 2001).

The tendency to privilege “ideal” bodies in dance is shaped by popular culture with advertisements of perfect young people with desirable bodies. Western dance privileges the youthful, waif-like, slender bodies for girls and muscular, lean bodies for males. Anything else is marginalised. This highlights the objectification of the female body and mirrors asymmetrical power relations between men and women in society. In dance, the body is scrutinised in terms of size, shape, technique, and flexibility. How the body is socially located and habituated through dance training and education influences body image, power, and pressure to meet aesthetic and cultural ideals. This affects students’ sense of self, values they attach to dance and the way dance is taught. We therefore call for an inclusiveness that extends to those with different bodies and those who are “able” in different ways.

Literature focusing on dance for school students with disabilities is limited. However, the disability arts sector and the field of dance studies provide insight into developments that support a more inclusive approach to dance in schools by offering opportunities for disabled and non-disabled students to work together (Benjamin, 2010). Inclusive dance pedagogy poses questions that relate to the “possAbilities” for diverse dancing bodies. In using the term “possAbilities,” focus is not drawn to deficits of the body, but rather asks, “What can you do with your body? How can you do this with your body?,” an approach that acknowledges and values differing cultures of the body by drawing them together.

Shapiro (1998) reminds us that while historically the body had been thought of as a tool or instrument objectified for the sake of dance, the body is also a source of knowledge and is inscribed with power relations. Hence, dance can connect the movement curriculum to

students' lives, utilizing dance as a vehicle for self and social understanding. Bodies provide an emotional mapping of who we are and how we have been shaped by dominant society. How might we challenge this hegemony of the body to value different cultures of the body in dance, including bodies that hear, see, and travel differently than the idealised dancing body?

Our third challenge to educators, therefore, is, *How can we work towards a dance curriculum that includes all body types, shapes, and sizes, and demonstrates "possAbilities"?*

### **A critical pedagogy in dance**

We conclude by noting Risner's (2007) suggestion that "the effort to bring dance into the public schools is key to developing a more accessible and equitable dance education for all" (pp. 967-975).

We are mindful of contradictions located in curriculum developments that support the development of human capital for the economy, and socially just visions of the potential of education to support a more equitable society (Sellar, 2005). The new Australia-wide school curriculum appears colonised by dominant new managerial discourses with the presence of an emerging, redefined social justice ideology that privileges individual rights, choice, and flexibility (Pitt, 1998; Sellar, 2005). Educators might consider how dance in schools is constructed within the context of neo-liberal ideologies, in addition to ways that may be at odds with progressive educational policies and practices. Yet, schools are powerful, educational institutions that might promote transformative, student-centred learning with an inclusive and accessible dance curriculum in which students are not disadvantaged.

We suggest that dance educators may move forward by using critical pedagogy as a way to address issues of "disadvantage" in dance. Critical pedagogies ask teachers to confront their beliefs, theories, and assumptions. They are encouraged to adopt enquiring, critical, and reflective frames of mind (Smyth, 2000, 2001) and to interrogate their teaching and identify the knowledge and skills being valued, groups being privileged, and control of communication in classes. In this spirit, we are interested in an enacted curriculum that is inclusive of diverse students, with pedagogies that intend to challenge and alter inequalities in a practical way, and make learning experiences inclusive, better, and more fair for all. A huge and daunting challenge, yes, but an important one. In this vein, Tinning (2002) argues for "modest" pedagogies that first attempt to orient ways of thinking about a socially just education. These thinking processes might then enable the development of practices that focus on the local level to support change in tangible ways.

Furthermore, notions of deficit can be unsettled by re-narrating disenfranchised students' experiences as positive in their difference to the dominant curriculum hegemony. Such re-narration may include the use of students' lived experiences from their home or community cultural traditions, or via popular culture in dance. Such approaches are effective as they draw on students' "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992, cited in Hattam et al., 2009) to move from a deficit to asset perspective by connecting with students' life worlds. This approach assumes that students are competent and have gained knowledge from their life experiences. In this way, deficit views of disenfranchised communities, such as recent migrants and indigenous groups, may be challenged and young people empowered.

Such approaches aim to provide opportunities for those in disadvantaged circumstances who lack cultural, social, or economic capital. Therefore, teachers must understand pedagogy as a critical and transformative process that is both vital and enabling to justice. This paper has

drawn upon literature to identify the location of social justice concerns for a new Australia-wide school dance curriculum that promotes equity by reducing disadvantage and prejudice. This will require achievement standards that “instead provide for intelligence that is ‘not less’ than that of learners from more ‘advantaged’ places” (Hattam et al., 2009, p. 309).

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