

Dance as expression in physical education? Aesthetic experiences, identities, and unusual learning processes

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Abstract

Dance has been a part of physical education (PE) in several countries for a long time. It is, however, marginalized in PE in Sweden and there is a gap between the ambitious goals in the curricula and the actual teaching of dance. Many PE teachers feel generally uncertain about the role of dance in their subject and are insecure about teaching it. PE appears to be dominated by a multiactivity model, underpinned by discourses on health and fitness alongside the logic of sport as bodily movement practices aimed at competition. The aim of this paper is to discuss whether dance and aesthetic experiences can help broaden the understanding and use of the body within PE as part of an identity process. The theoretical references draw on the pedagogue John Dewey's (1934/2005) concepts of experiences and aesthetic judgments. The sociologist Thomas Ziehe's (1986) concept of unusual learning processes is also used to discuss challenges for students' learning. A pedagogical intervention study, consisting of eight PE lessons with dance inspired by Rudolf Laban (1948/1988), was carried out over three classes at a Swedish high school. The empirical material consisted of videotaped lessons, teachers' interviews, and students' written narratives. The results show that the aesthetic dimensions of movement and dance as expression challenge students in PE and offer new learning experiences and, therefore, can be a part of an identity process. Instead of imitating and reproducing movements, the students have an intention to express feelings through dance and create unpredictable movements. PE teachers can use more student-centered teaching instead of direct teaching with its specified movements as a form of social control. New dimensions to subjective experiences and the sensual body can then be given space in PE as a counterweight to sports-related physical activities.

Keywords: physical education, Rudolf Laban, John Dewey, dance as expression, aesthetic experiences

Introduction

Research conducted over the last two decades has indicated the existence of social inequality and unequal opportunities in physical education (PE) despite the subject's social and moral implications. PE appears to be dominated by a multiactivity model, underpinned by discourses on health and fitness accompanied by the logic of sport as bodily movement practices aimed at competition (Larsson & Redelius, 2008; Kirk, 2010; Evans, 2013). Several researchers claim that PE seems to be an arena for masculinity and that girls are subordinated within it. Boys influence the content of PE and girls achieve lower grades in the subject (Flintoff, 2006; Londos, 2010). When the Swedish Board of Education carried out an unannounced inspection of 172 schools in 2010, 65% of the PE content examined was different kinds of ball activities and ballgames. Furthermore, several scholars have argued that neither students nor teachers seem to have an idea of what students are supposed to learn through physical education beyond sweating and having fun (Larsson & Redelius, 2008; Öhman & Quennerstedt, 2008).

Why dance in PE? What do we know about dance in PE? Dance has been a part of the physical education curriculum in several countries for a long time (Buck, 2006). Despite this, studies demonstrate that teaching dance in PE is rare and aesthetic perspectives concerning moving bodies are lacking. PE teachers question the position of dance in their subject and feel uncertain regarding its role and how to teach it (Lundvall & Meckbach, 2008). Whether dance is presented in PE depends on a teacher's competence and pedagogical knowledge (Goodwin, 2010). Mattsson and Lundvall (2015) examined the position of dance as a pedagogical discourse in the Swedish steering documents over time (1962-2011). Three different knowledge areas within dance were found in the text material: dance as a cultural preserver, dance as bodily exercise, and dance as expression. Three pedagogical discourses emerge from these knowledge areas: an identity formation discourse, a public health discourse, and an aesthetic discourse. Throughout the studied period, the public health discourse held the strongest position where the understanding of dance as physical training is related to a healthy lifestyle. Dance as a cultural preserver also held a strong position. The content differs over time, but dance is often used as a method to teach special skills and heterosexual norms and ideals. The aesthetic discourse held the weakest position over time. In the 1960s, aesthetic experiences were often related to female bodily movement. From 1980, coeducation in PE was recommended in Sweden and from that time, aesthetic perspectives became marginalized within the subject. In light of the understandings of the criticisms of PE, it is important to discuss *what* to learn in the subject and *how* to teach it. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to

discuss whether dance as expression and aesthetic experiences can help broaden the understanding and use of the body within physical education as part of an identity process.

Theoretical framework

According to the American pragmatist John Dewey, organisms and the environment they inhabit are always interacting in an ongoing process where both change. In his later works, Dewey uses the concept of transaction. Transactions are ongoing and involve a dual relationship in which both the individual and the environment change (Dewey & Bentley, 1949). Learning can be observed in actions. When we do things, we experience, and we learn from the consequences of our experiences. Dewey is known for “learning by doing,” but it is more correct to talk about learning by reflective experience (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). Two theoretical concepts drawing on John Dewey will be used in this paper. The first is an *aesthetic experience*. This concept can be explained as an intensified experience of fulfillment in an encounter between the organism and the environment (Dewey, 1934/2005). An aesthetic experience is something unique that you will remember afterward as, for example, *that* movement, *that* music, or *that* event. It is a situation when you feel especially present. The second concept is *habits*, which can be explained as predispositions to actions (Dewey, 1938/1997). One will always bring something from the past into the present. Habits are important because more specific habits lead to more differentiated ways of acting. The American philosopher Shannon Sullivan reminds us that transactional bodies and habits are culturally configured. According to Sullivan (2001), a woman’s habit of crossing her legs when she sits in a chair is as much a predisposition of her body in its response to objects like chairs and activities like sitting as it is also a pattern formed in conjunction with cultural customs of “proper” bodily comportment for women (p. 39).

In this study, predispositions of movements are important, and an activity such as dancing is also formed with cultural customs. How, for example, is it acceptable for boys and girls to dance in PE? The third concept is from the German sociologist Thomas Ziehe (1986). He explains that *unusual learning processes* are important to challenge young people’s identities and stereotypes. Situations in learning processes should be created to avoid reproduction. Ziehe highlights and emphasizes the potential of aesthetic learning processes to disturb young people’s perceptions. In dance, this could be explained as *not* using the students’ own music, and *not* teaching dance styles they already know. It needs to be something different and unusual to break the students’ perceptions of dance.

Method

A dance project was conducted in three PE classes in the 8th and 9th grades in one high school in Sweden. Due to logistical reasons there were four PE teachers, and 68 students were working with dance as expression, inspired by the concept of Rudolf Laban. Laban was one of the pioneers in the development of modern dance and is without a doubt one of the most influential theorists on the subject (Buck, 2006). The content was based on the BESS-concept (body, effort, space, and shape), which was developed from Irmgard Bartenieff, who was one of Laban's students (Bartenieff & Davis, 1972). Rather than imitating movements, Laban argued that dance teaching should enable young people to create their own movements from different principles of movements. Every class had eight lessons in the dance project. The students worked with body awareness and movements in space and explored Laban's central concepts of effort, time, space, and flow. The dance project ended with the students' own created choreographies, and they were also given the opportunity to reflect on each other's choreographies.

Pre- and post-semi-structured interviews were used to "give a voice" to PE teachers' experiences in combination with videotaped observations during the PE dance project. Data collection was focused on students' and teachers' actions and narratives, but at the same time taking the whole didactic system into account: the knowledge intended to be learned, teachers' teaching strategies, and the students' learning processes (Amade-Escot, 2006). To strengthen the students' voices, an analysis was made of their narratives from written texts in their logbooks.

Results

In this section, results from the teachers' and students' experiences and the students' habits in the dance project will be presented.

PE teachers' voices.

The PE teachers described a feeling of freedom and that teaching dance as expression broadened their perceptions of *what* and *how* students learn. Rather than imitating movements, the focus changed to the students themselves who created and reflected on their movements. The teachers used more student-centered teaching instead of using direct teaching with specified movements as a form of social control: "We want to change the role of dance in PE and move away from traditional dance. It does not need to be so controlled" (male teacher, pre-interview).

The teachers were aware that it can be a painful and unpleasant experience to be exposed in front of one's peers while dancing. For this reason, the light in the gym was extinguished and replaced by spotlights. The teachers told the students to act freely and that no movements were right or wrong. They wanted the students to express different feelings in movements: "You should feel the music and use the whole sports hall. We will turn off the lights so that you dare to move more" (female teacher, video observation, lesson 1).

The most important result in the study was that the teachers discovered "new" students, different from those who tend to dominate the PE lessons. Teachers also recognized that boys and girls can cooperate and that girls can sometimes take as much physical space as boys do. One of the male teachers stated that: "It surprised me that both boys and girls liked it. They were better than I thought. Boys and girls who normally do not like sports took part. I can assess everyone now" (male teacher, post-interview).

Students' aesthetic experiences.

The students wrote logbooks after every lesson during the dance project. Logbooks are a way to gather pupils' experiences through written texts. Aesthetic judgements can be used to analyze the direction of an aesthetic experience (Dewey, 1934/2005). Most of the students, both boys and girls, expressed positive aesthetic experiences in their texts. They used words such as energy, love, free, fun, and magic. Maya is representative of the students who were constantly positive, and through a section of her logbook explains what dance is for her: "For me, dancing is magic because you can express if you are happy or sad. It can be hard to express how you feel and then you can express it by dancing ... It is better to dance when it is dark in the sports hall. It is nice and fun" (Maya, lesson 1).

Elsa, another girl in the same class, showed a negative aesthetic experience in relation to dance: "Dancing is something some people do as a hobby. It is not something that I am interested in. It is something I do not like. It is difficult and I do not find it fun. I am not a dance person ... I think it is better to dance in the dark, because then no one will see you" (Elsa, lesson 3).

Five categories of students' aesthetic experiences were found in the logbooks. In this study, a majority of the students, both boys and girls, expressed positive aesthetic experiences. Only six students (three boys and three girls) were constantly negative throughout the dance project. They thought that dancing was no fun at all, not important, boring, or difficult. It is interesting to note that there was a group of students who changed their views from positive to negative. They were students who identified themselves as

dancers and their expectations about the dance project did not materialize. They expressed the feeling that the dancing in the project was not what they thought dance *is*. One group of students turned from not feeling anything at all about dance to having a positive aesthetic experience. They were all boys and they wrote after the dance project that they liked to dance and that they had learned to cooperate with their peers.

Students' habits in learning processes.

The results from the dance project show that students can change their habits within a lesson. In this example from lesson 3 in the dance project, the students were working in pairs regarding body balance and weight. Here is the description of how two boys, Peter and Mikael, worked together.

1. The boys do not touch each other. Rather, they are running and chasing each other to avoid bodily contact. The teacher stops the exercise and emphasizes the importance of bodily contact. He is not only talking with the students. He participates himself and he is dancing together with the students.
2. The two boys are now touching each other, but it looks like a wrestling match. It seems like it is acceptable for boys to have bodily contact in sports. The teacher wants the students to explore body movements, so he tells the students to discover the stability of bodies and he urges each of them to find different ways of dancing on top of his partner.
3. Peter is kneeling on all fours and Mikael is balancing on his back. Suddenly he turns a somersault around Peter. It looks like they can continue forever and they do not care about the other students watching them. It is a special situation, an aesthetic experience, and they have modified their habits from not touching to exploring balance and weight in bodily contact (video observation, lesson 3).

This example shows that it is possible to see a change in the way that boys move. The boys' notions of what is permitted for them in terms of bodily contact may have influenced their initial choice of movements. The results show that students are not locked into gender roles and that habits are possible to change.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to discuss whether dance as expression and aesthetic experiences can help broaden the understanding and use of the body within physical education as part of an identity process. Underscoring Dewey's (1934/2005) thoughts on bodies in transaction in a social, cultural, and physical context, the work of Sullivan (2001), a feminist pragmatic, was used to expand thoughts regarding the gendered body, such as the role of habit and meanings. Dance as expression through non-competition and without predetermined movements can challenge a masculine-coded subject. Dance is often associated with something feminine. In this study, the male teachers changed their habits of (not) teaching dance, and in the example given of the two boys dancing together, the students' modified their habits. According to Dewey (1938/1997), habits are crucial and transactions depend on previous habits. More specific habits lead to more differentiated ways of acting. Additionally, Sullivan (2001) reminds us that habits are culturally configured. This example demonstrates that dance as expression can be used to work with identities. According to Michael Gard, who researches the workings and meanings of the human body in the interest of social and educational change, dance can be used to step outside of our comfort zones (Gard, 2008). If a girl is making powerful movements and a boy sensitive movements, who are they then? Dance can therefore be used to explore and discuss identities. This is in line with Ziehe (1986), and the concept of unusual learning processes could be discussed in relation to the students' own choreographies in the dance project. The teachers decided the music, and it was not popular music from the top lists. The students in the study thought that it was "strange" music, but it helped them to create new movements and avoid imitating certain dance styles. Working with unknown music could be one way to create unusual learning processes. The students in this project used their bodies in movements in several new dimensions. For a majority of the students, each task was something they had not done before. The aesthetic dimensions of movement and dance as expression can challenge PE students and offer new learning experiences, which could be seen as a part of an identity process. Instead of imitating and reproducing movements, students can possess an intention to express feelings through dance and create unpredictable movements. New dimensions of subjective experiences and the sensual body can be given space in PE as a counterweight to sports-related physical activities. Such a discussion can add new dimensions to the debate on the nature and purpose of sustainable PE, for both now and the future.

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