

Student teachers' developing identities as dance educators: Opportunities and challenges

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Abstract

In New Zealand, dance is well established as part of The Arts learning area in the national curriculum, with a mandate that all children have opportunities to learn dance as part of their classroom program at primary school. Although this should ensure that dance has a visible and valued place in New Zealand education, many generalist teachers still lack confidence and subject knowledge to teach dance. This is of great concern to dance educators involved in initial teacher education, as opportunities to explore dance pedagogies in university-based courses are increasingly limited. Student teachers need quality experiences in schools to develop their dance knowledge in relation to classroom practice as they develop their professional identity. This paper reports on a case study investigating one particular group of student teachers' experiences of teaching dance in the classroom. The participants were undergraduate student teachers in their fourth and final year of a Bachelor of Teaching degree. The purpose of the study was to find out what opportunities they had to teach dance, what encouragement and support they received from other teachers, and how well they perceived their university courses prepared them to teach dance in the classroom. Two students agreed to record and reflect on their experiences of teaching dance during their final placement in primary schools. Data was collected at the end of the practicum through a questionnaire and a semi-structured group interview. The findings of the study have informed our course design and will further contribute to national and international research in the field of initial teacher education and dance in schools.

Keywords: dance education, classroom, student teacher

Introduction

The Arts learning area is well established in the New Zealand curriculum, with a mandate that all children have opportunities to learn dance, drama, music, and visual arts as part of their elementary education (Ministry of Education, 2007). While this should ensure that dance education is visible and valued in New Zealand primary schools, this is often not

the case, as generalist teachers are expected to teach dance regardless of their prior knowledge or experiences (Melchior, 2011). With growing pressure on teachers to raise student achievement in numeracy and literacy, and changes to the way teacher education programs are taught in the university environment, it is hardly surprising that many primary teachers lack motivation and confidence to teach dance. This is of great concern to dance educators involved in initial teacher education, where university-based courses have increasingly limited opportunities for practical exploration of dance curriculum content and pedagogical processes. Student teachers need quality experiences in schools to develop their dance knowledge in relation to effective classroom practice as they develop their personal and professional identities as teachers (Hennessy, Rolfe, & Chedzoy, 2001).

In this paper, I report on the dance component of a case study (2014) I conducted in collaboration with my drama colleague, investigating a particular group of student teachers' experiences of teaching dance and/or drama in the primary classroom and the impact of these experiences on their emerging beliefs and aspirations as teachers. The participants were undergraduate students in their fourth year of a Bachelor of Teaching degree who were embarking on their final seven-week teaching experience (TE) in primary schools. They had completed a core-curriculum arts course, *Teaching and Learning in the Arts*, in their second year of study, and two optional dance and drama courses, *Performing Arts Curriculum Studies 1 and 2*, in their third and fourth year, respectively.

The purpose of the study was to find out what opportunities the students had to teach dance and/or drama in the classroom, what encouragement and support they received from more experienced teachers, and how well they perceived their university courses had prepared them to teach dance and drama. The students were asked to record and reflect on these experiences in relation to their personal goals and aspirations as teachers. The paper draws on interview data collected at the end of the practicum through a questionnaire and a semi-structured group interview.

Background

This inquiry was originally inspired by Hennessy, Rolfe, and Chedzoy's (2001) research considering factors influencing the development of trainee teachers' confidence to teach dance, drama, music, and the visual arts in primary schools in England. Their study concluded that the actual situated experience in the classroom was the most important factor in stimulating confidence to teach the arts, as the practice of teaching enabled the student teachers to develop their knowledge of the children and identify their learning needs and

interests. These factors had a greater influence on their ability to teach the arts than knowledge about the arts. This reinforces other research findings (Alton-Lee, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2000) that teachers' subject content knowledge has no consistent relationship to student achievement, while pedagogical knowledge has consistent and strong links. Although the student teachers in Hennessy et al.'s (2001) study had less exposure to dance than any other arts subjects, opportunities to teach dance, with support and constructive feedback from an experienced teacher, outweighed all other factors, including the interaction between prior experience and the contents of initial teacher education programs. Positive responses from the children was also highly motivating. I wanted to test my assumptions that student teachers would have similar experiences and responses in New Zealand primary schools.

Methodology

A qualitative case study approach was chosen in order to identify and explain participants' lived experiences of dance in the classroom. The case study provides opportunities for learning within an area of interest, with a focus on the essence or structure of an experience where the quality of participants' learned knowledge is of fundamental importance (Merriam, 1998).

My concern for (and involvement with) the trainee teachers was underpinned by an ethos of caring, and I have changed their names to protect their identities. Trustworthiness was established through transparency of method and member checking, ensuring that the data represented their experiences in the way they intended them to be told (Lincon & Guba, 1985, cited in Melchior, 2006, p. 40). I fostered a sense of collaboration by informing and consulting the participants throughout the research process.

Research participants

Seven student teachers enrolled in *Performing Arts Curriculum Study 2* (EPOL 365) were purposefully chosen to participate in the research. Of these, two students (Ruby and Anna) identified as dance specialists. They both had considerable prior knowledge and experience as dancers and as dance teachers in private studios. Although they would have been qualified to teach dance at the secondary level, they had chosen to become generalist primary teachers. Their goals and aspirations were to teach dance as an integral part of their classroom program in ways that would "make a difference" by fostering interactive learning and creative problem-solving.

Data collection and analysis

Data was collected from a number of sources: a questionnaire, an interview, informal conversations, and email correspondence. The questionnaire was filled out on completion of the TE at the end of the second trimester and the interview took place during the third trimester when the students were back in university completing other courses.

Questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to provide data on student teachers' school-based experiences of dance: opportunities to teach dance in the classroom, encouragement and support from more experienced teachers, and students' perceptions of how well the university course was preparing them to teach dance.

What were your experiences of dance on TE 2?

1. What opportunities did you have to teach dance on TE?
2. What support did you receive from your associate and/or other experienced teachers?
3. What other opportunities did the children in your class have to participate in dance activities?
4. What dance learning was identified in your associate teacher's long-term plan?
5. How well do you think this course is preparing you to teach dance in the classroom?
6. What are some of the challenges?
7. What support do you need to build your confidence to teach dance or drama in the primary classroom?
8. Are there any other comments you would like to make?

Interview. A semi-structured group interview was conducted over lunch in a university café, as this provided an informal setting for conversation and was most convenient for the participants. Ruby and Anna were asked to elaborate on their initial questionnaire responses by reflecting on their beliefs about teaching and learning, and the value of dance in the classroom to provide further insights. Open questions encouraged them to respond reflectively and express personal feelings.

Email correspondence. I corresponded with the participants throughout the research process to keep them informed, encourage them to share what they were doing, ask follow-up questions, and to check and give feedback on my interpretations of the data. According to

Merriam (1998), the product of a case study can be “primarily descriptive, interpretative, or evaluative” (p. 27). My report has aspects of all three. A significant part of the discussion is descriptive in order to give a comprehensive picture of the student teachers’ particular experiences.

Participants’ experiences of dance on TE

Ruby

Ruby was placed in a New Entrant (Year 1) class where there was a strong focus on teaching reading, writing, and math toward National Standards for numeracy and literacy. The only dance Ruby observed was movement activities used to facilitate counting during math, when the children were encouraged to embody their learning by “dancing and singing numbers.” There appeared to be no formalized planning for arts education in the Junior School. As Ruby reported, “The only comments teachers write on students’ reports are for math, reading, and writing ... the arts are completely neglected.” Her associate teacher (AT) was not willing to teach the arts because, in Ruby’s words, “She said she doesn’t know anything.” She was, however, happy for Ruby to explore different ways of incorporating dance into her teaching, as Ruby explained:

She [AT] knew that dance was my passion and encouraged me to include it as much as possible. She recognized that the children enjoyed learning through movement, but she has not taught dance, so wasn’t able to give me any ideas to extend the learning.

In spite of this positive attitude from her AT, Ruby found it difficult to include dance in ways other than spontaneous responses due to time constraints. For example, she noticed that the children spent a lot of time sitting on the mat and became restless, so she also used dance as a management technique to keep them on task: “... In response to a Samoan call ‘*He He!*’ the children formed three lines and then performed a sequence of taught actions to get focused.” She also encouraged spontaneous improvisation in response to stimuli from shared reading and picture books, to enhance children’s motivation to read, and their engagement with the story.

Anna

Anna was placed in a Year 6 class. When her AT found out about her dance expertise, she asked her to help organize the choreography for the annual school production and to teach Jump Jam (a dance aerobics program) as daily fitness. Anna could not recall another teacher “specifically doing dance,” elaborating, “I think it was just that some of the classes had access to the Jump Jam DVDs and decided to use them for fitness, especially when it was wet and they could do it indoors in the hall!”

The school followed an inquiry model for learning, with a school-wide topic for inquiry lasting for at least a term. The current science-based inquiry topic during the time that Anna was there was *Phenomenon*, with each class choosing an aspect of the bigger picture to study. Anna explained that her class chose *Power*, with a focus on volcanoes, “a natural phenomenon.” The children conducted a variety of scientific experiments in the context of their inquiry. Anna described how she managed to “squeeze in” a few creative dance lessons:

The children made three frozen images to represent the stages of a volcano erupting. Each freeze-frame had to be at a different level. From their frozen images, they created movement sequences individually and then taught their sequence to a partner. First we spent time exploring different ways of traveling and spatial pathways. It ended up being really rushed and we weren’t able to develop the dance responses as fully as I had hoped, as we ran out of time.

Disappointed and somewhat frustrated at not being able to realize her goal of integrating dance learning into the classroom program in a sustainable way, Anna started a dance club on Fridays at lunchtime. She asked the children to fill out a form listing the kinds of dance they would most like to learn, and most of them wanted hip-hop or jazz. She decided to teach “funk,” and 40 children turned up on the first day. Anna reported, “Many of the boys were the rugby players and only came on wet days.” The children who committed to coming every week performed their funk dance to the rest of the school in assembly to “wild applause.”

Anna told me that she was going back to the school in her own time to assist with rehearsals for the school production.

Discussion of findings

Although the findings reinforced my initial assumptions and concerns about the quality and quantity of dance education opportunities in schools, the student teachers' experiences of teaching dance, though limited, were mostly positive. Ruby and Anna were both proactive in seeking opportunities to teach dance inside and outside of the classroom. Although they were often constrained by inflexible scheduling, their identified goals and aspirations as dance teachers were reinforced by the experiences they had. They both expressed delight at the children's willing engagement in dance activities, and their creative responses, particularly when the context for learning was meaningful and the teaching and learning process was interactive and collaborative. Although Ruby and Anna received some support in the form of encouragement from their respective associate teachers, they were not able to observe them, or any other experienced teachers, teaching dance as an integral part of their classroom programs.

Analysis of the data revealed three themes: opportunities, challenges, and perceptions.

Opportunities

Ruby and Anna both received support from their ATs in the form of time (limited), encouragement, and some feedback on their teaching. Although the ATs recognized and acknowledged opportunities for children to make connections to other learning (mainly topic) through dance after observing the students teaching, neither of the students were given feedback concerned with dance pedagogy or learning progressions. Likewise, neither of the students observed dance being taught as interactive group or creative problem-solving processes, with planned outcomes and specified links to strands and achievement objectives in the NZ curriculum. They would have valued opportunities to observe other, more experienced teachers teaching dance in the classroom, who would in turn be available to offer them guidance and support in their own teaching. As Anna commented, "It would also be helpful to see some reflection from good practitioners of things they tried that didn't work and the changes they made to make them work."

Opportunities for the students to teach dance were mostly restricted to spontaneous movement activities, or co-curricular dance resulting in performance — in assembly, or a school production.

Challenges

The main challenges to teaching dance as an integral part of the classroom program were time, space, and confidence about meeting children's diverse learning needs and interests. Incorporating dance into planning and teaching when the curriculum was so heavily focused on reading, writing, and math seemed to be the biggest challenge. As Ruby ruefully observed, "I think what schools are doing is prioritizing, and dance and drama come at the end. The arts are so undervalued — they are just used as an add-on." Ruby and Anna concluded that the best way to engage children in dance within the context of other learning was to ensure that dance learning was explicit within the inquiry process, to make it more meaningful and relevant.

Finding a suitable space to teach dance was also a challenge, but Anna was able to improvise, explaining, "When the hall was not available, we had to move the furniture to make a space to dance in."

Perceptions

Ruby and Anna were both confident in teaching dance, especially when they were transmitting their own skills, knowledge, and experience by teaching dance routines they had choreographed in a particular dance style. Although Anna enjoyed the opportunities she was given to work within her comfort zone in this way, she also felt somewhat constrained by the demands to work toward a performance, claiming that the product became more important than the process.

Both student teachers relished the challenge of a more interactive approach, where children's dance responses were encouraged and developed through creative problem-solving tasks. They noticed that when the children were actively involved in creating the choreography, they were more highly motivated to participate, and had a strong sense of satisfaction and achievement. As Anna reflected, "What I feel has been successful in this learning is the socially constructed nature of the dance and the students' ownership of the material."

Ruby and Anna gave positive comments about their learning during the course, identifying practical experiences with ideas for integrating dance into the classroom program, and effective teaching and class management strategies, as most valuable. They said the course assignment, which focuses on their developing values and beliefs about teaching and learning dance, also helped them to critically reflect on their own practice in relation to theories they regarded as important to their developing identities as dance teachers.

Conclusions and recommendations

For students to feel safe to take risks, adapt, refine, evaluate, and develop their pedagogical skills in the classroom, they need to be able to observe and learn from more experienced teachers who value children's creativity and acknowledge the transformative nature of the arts:

Without models of good practice, visible and audible support for the arts curriculum in schools and sustained opportunities to teach, it is very difficult for students to develop confidence in their arts teaching. (Hennessy et al., 2001, p. 70)

Currently, the university dance course is still the most significant source of curriculum content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge for our student teachers, and there is increasing need for schools to contribute by giving students quality experiences of theory in practice in the classroom. Support from the school communities for teachers to engage in quality professional development in dance is crucial, and the challenge for dance educators is to make sure these opportunities are available and accessible, especially for beginning teachers.

As these conclusions are made in relation to a very small sample of students (typical of qualitative research) the limitations of this study are acknowledged. I would like to further develop and extend this research into a longitudinal study, following a larger cohort of undergraduate teachers into their first year of teaching.

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