

Dance learning in motion: global dance education

Ann Kipling Brown
University of Regina, Canada
Ann.Kipling.Brown@uregina.ca

Susan R. Koff
New York University, USA
susan.koff@nyu.edu

Jeff Meiners
University of South Australia, Australia
Jeff.Meiners@unisa.edu.au

Charlotte Svendler Nielsen
University of Copenhagen, Denmark
csnielsen@nexs.ku.dk

Abstract

Reports indicate that dance-learning experiences provided for young people in and outside schools impact positively upon young people's learning in schools, as well as in pre-service and professional development programs for those who teach dance in various settings. Support of major dance organizations as well as the goals of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) affirm the importance of dance education and encourage the research and practice to provide lifelong and intergenerational learning in, about and through dance education. This paper describes the results of a survey questionnaire, which captures the narratives and contexts from lived experiences of university students and graduates in formal, informal and non-formal settings and how those are experienced. This initial study confirmed the power of dance and the significance of dance in peoples' lives as well as deficiencies in the provision of dance for many.

Keywords: dance, education, learning, curriculum, advocacy

Context

This research endeavour arose as a result of collegial interest stimulated by important international conference opportunities that enriched professional knowledge networks. The authors' concerns for dance education around the world have led from the past decades into the twenty first century to contributions for the development of key dance-focused membership organizations such as Dance and the Child International (daCi) and the World Dance Alliance (WDA). In particular, our involvement in the two UNESCO World Conferences on Arts Education from which the Lisbon Road Map for Arts Education (UNESCO, 2006) and the Seoul Agenda (UNESCO, 2010) emerged, offered opportunities to gain insight into a diverse range of global perspectives on arts education. Furthermore, the addition of the WDA to the World Alliance for Arts Education in 2009 afforded us a series of important

occasions for expansion of our global dance network, ongoing relationship-building within and beyond dance, and opportunities to plan strategies for collaborative dance and arts education advocacy and research. This unprecedented series of significant international events drew together leading arts educators, policy-makers and researchers.

Early planning and scoping conversations led us to a new partnership: the first joint daCi/WDA Global Summit 'Dance Young People and Change' held in Taiwan during 2012. Conceptualised for the mutual benefits of reaching into new territories to support dance development via international connections, the summit drew together the strong networks of daCi in Europe and the Americas with the WDA's diverse web of Asia Pacific members. A resounding success (Ausdance, 2013), this also led to an international collaboration towards a book published in 2015.

During the 2012 daCi/WDA summit, members from wide-ranging countries shared stories of achievements and challenges for dance as part of young people's education. Concerns were noted from the discussion: most importantly the low status of dance; a lack of provision for dance in the compulsory years of education as a mandated learning experience; and the position of dance within or outside curriculum offerings as an option. We know from past studies that people dance for social, spiritual, recreational, therapeutic and professional reasons. Many dance for fun and for health and in many contexts dance is as popular as ever with participation increasing. Recurrent dance experiences and the intrinsic and instrumental benefits of dance add value to people's lives. Dance is important in education, health, human relations and social connections (Hanna, 1979). And yet, there are still many young people who do not have access to dance experiences (House of Commons Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2004). Summit participants also agreed that there has been considerable publicity and individual studies identifying the above claims of benefits to young people who participate in dance (Bamford, 2006; Hill Strategies Inc., 2011). However, it is evident that further scholarly investigation is needed to substantiate these claims and to further consider the impacts of learning in dance.

Summit participants saw opportunities to gain information from our networks, contemplated how data may be used to inform education policy, and compared advocacy strategies for dance. The seed was planted for the possibility of an international research project to map the provision of dance learning in order to ascertain where and how young people engage with dance in various settings. The discussion took account of the 2010 Seoul Agenda: Goals for the Development of Arts Education, a major outcome of UNESCO's Second World Conference on Arts Education held in the Republic of Korea. These three goals affirm the importance of high quality accessibility to arts education within the notion of 'a high quality renewal of education' (Goals 1 and 2) and the contribution of arts education principles and practices 'to resolving the social and cultural challenges facing today's world' (Goal 3). From reflection on the UNESCO arts education goals and drawing upon our own experiences, observations and discussion of dance provision in a global context, specific questions guided our inquiry:

- How does dance assist in achieving a sustainable future in the context of globalisation where complex demands require a broader understanding of socio-economic and scientific and environmental matters?

- How does dance provide those basic life skills to think about human issues from different points of view, to ask questions, and to analyse information from various sources?
- What are the current demands facing dance educators teaching in formal, informal as well as non-formal settings?
- What experiences are important to them in their teaching of young people?

Reports indicate that dance-learning experiences are provided for young people in and outside schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012), and that they impact positively upon young people's learning in schools (Bonbright., 2013; Hanna, 2008), as well as in pre-service and professional development programs for those who teach dance in various settings. However, there is a need to gain insight into what is being taught, how young people experience dance teaching and to understand how dance pedagogies reflect the goals of a basic education as described in the core curricula of different locations around the world. Our advocacy for the inclusion of arts and dance education requires new evidence through research. Thus our teamwork during the Taiwan 2012 daCi/WDA summit led to our ambition for beginning this long-term research project.

Meeting later in Finland at the 2012 WAAE Global Summit: Cultural Encounters and Northern Reflections, and then in Germany at the 2013 World Summit on Arts Education, Polylogue II, our planning drew upon the work of Susanne Keuchel which highlighted UNESCO's definitions of 'different fields of education' (Keuchel, 2014, p. 43). Keuchel suggests that 'formal learning' is concerned with curriculum offerings within education and training institutions; that 'non-formal' learning is learning that has been acquired in addition or alternatively to formal learning; and that 'informal learning is learning that occurs in daily life, in the family, in the workplace, in communities and through interests and activities of all individuals' (Keuchel, 2014, p. 43).

These compelling distinctions provided us with a helpful framework for working with diverse contexts for dance education in countries from Europe, The Americas, Africa, and the Asia Pacific region. The study draws upon our developing networks by involving several countries in this foundational stage of the research: Finland, Ghana, USA, Denmark, Germany, Australia, Canada, Netherlands, New Zealand, Taiwan, Brazil and Hong Kong, and aims to help our understanding of:

- a) the provision of dance education for young people in both formal, non-formal and informal settings; and
- b) how young people engage in dance and how these dance experiences contribute to their chosen lifestyles and careers.

A survey questionnaire accessed by an email link was drafted and sent to leading dance educators in universities from each of the participating countries. These lead educators then distributed the survey email to volunteers who were members of groups as tertiary university dance students, recent graduates or teachers from various institutions. The introductory email explained that volunteers were sought to participate in a research study that aims to ascertain where and how young people engage with dance in both formal and non-formal settings and how it is experienced. The email communication

added that the researchers were aware that dance does not always have the data to support the importance of dance in education, recreation or professional contexts and that their response would help us to both plan and advocate for dance. We assured the participants of their anonymity and tabularised their responses by a number so that anonymity could be preserved. The research project was approved by the Research Ethics Board, University of Regina and the University Committee on Activities Involving Human Subjects (UCAIHS), New York University.

Survey respondents were informed that by completing and submitting the questionnaire they were consenting to responses being used in the research study. It was explained that all the information revealed in the questionnaire would be confidential and remain totally anonymous. The survey (see below) aimed to collect base data about people's experiences of dance learning. This provided the starting point for our investigation with 14 questions ranging in type and including simple answers supplying information (e.g. Q. 1) and brief explanations (eg. Q. 2), Likert scale (e.g. Q. 3) and qualitative responses (eg. Q. 7).

The Survey

1. What is your age group?
2. What do you do? (student, teacher, etc.)
3. On a scale of 1-5, how do you rate your skills and knowledge of dance?
4. Dance is an important part of human experience (scale from agree to disagree)
5. Dance should be a part of all primary/elementary school student's learning experiences.
Please explain your response in a few sentences.
6. Dance should be a curriculum option for all secondary/high school students.
Please explain your response in a few sentences.
7. Why have you chosen that dance should be a part of your life?
8. Please tell us about any important dance experiences you've had.
9. What kind of dance experiences do you recall at home?
10. What kinds of dance experiences, if any, do you recall during your time at elementary or high school?
11. What kinds of dance experiences, if any, do you recall outside school?
12. If you have ever taught dance in any capacity, please give details.
13. What can be learned through dance? (One sentence)
14. Please give your city and country.

Methodology

The researchers received responses from the 176 individuals who were contacted by the invited colleagues, which were collated into one document. Each researcher then reviewed the responses. Firstly, the Likert scale responses and explanations were collated. And secondly, using Van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenology, which recommends three stages: 'a wholistic reading approach'; 'a selective reading approach'; and finally, 'a detailed reading approach' (p. 93) the researchers reviewed the detailed responses individually and then together. In the first stage the responses were read to find out which concepts were central and each concept was given a theme. The second reading stage involved the selection of specific sentences about the phenomenon. The third and final stage concerned a deeper reading of the selected sentences. The researchers synthesised the individual selected themes and sentences, identifying themes that reflected the phenomenon and impact of dance learning.

Demographics of respondents

The first six questions required responses of short answers or responses on a Likert scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree. They began with short demographic questions in order to have a snapshot of our respondents. Question 1 asked their age group. We discovered that there was a range with 41% between ages 18–25, 23.5% between ages 25–30, 16% between ages 30–40, 12% between ages 40–50, 4.5% between 50–60 and 3% between 60–70. In question 2 respondents were asked to describe what they do. Forty percent were university student undergraduate level, 14% were university student graduate level, 10% stated they recently completed a university degree, 38% were teachers and 16% stated 'other'. In rating their skills in dance (question 3) respondents on a scale of 1 (high) to 5 (low) 19% stated 1, 31% stated 2, 24% stated 3, 18% stated 4 and 7% stated 5. We had not anticipated a varied age group in the respondents but considered it a positive for the analysis of results. It was equally positive that there were a range of careers or how the respondents identified themselves.

Dance learning

In questions 4, 5 and 6 respondents were asked not only to agree or disagree but also to provide deeper considerations with qualitative responses. In question 4 they were asked to provide one of four responses to the statement that dance is an important part of human experience. There were four possible responses, with 82% stating strongly agree, 16% stating agree, 1% stating disagree and no one stating strongly disagree. The responses to whether dance are an important part of human experience, while overwhelmingly positive, are difficult to discern on numerical values only. Question 5 asked whether dance should be part of all primary/elementary school students' learning experiences. Strongly agree was 83%, 16% stated agree, and no one stated disagree or strongly disagree. This question also had a space for short answers to elaborate upon the response. One respondent stated:

It is core curriculum and a way of learning and knowing the world. Dance is a language of expression and is universal. Dance is movement and we

need to move to stay healthy, strong and confident. Dance is art and we need art in our lives to know what it is to be human (84).

Question 6 asked if dance should be a curriculum option for all secondary/high school students. Responses revealed: strongly agree 77%, agree 20%, disagree 1% and strongly disagree also 1%. This question also included short responses. One said:

Dance can be used as a form of expression and an outlet for creativity. High school is a difficult time for adolescents and dance can create a welcoming, safe environment to grow and learn as individuals as well as within a community (53).

Articulating that dance in secondary school is not about a career but about growth and expression, one person said:

We don't know what we don't know. If students are not given opportunity to dance as they mature they are not likely to experience the power of the body as a vehicle for art and expression. We don't live in our bodies enough, we live in desks, operating from the neck up. Students need to experience dance as a natural part of life, part of school culture and a way of learning. Dance, too often, is reserved for the elite, the studio (10).

The responses to the Likert scale questions were overwhelmingly supportive of dance being available in all curricular levels of formal schooling. Though it was good to get some basic quick feedback about the ideas of those taking the survey, the most revealing answers were the answers to questions 7—14 (Table 1) that focused on how and where dance learning took place and the impact of those experiences. The specific questions asked were: why they had chosen dance to be an important part of their life; what important experiences they had had in dance at home, during elementary or high school or outside of school; and to provide details if they had ever taught dance. The final question asked the respondents to provide in one clear sentence what they had learned through dance (Table 1). Analysing these responses gave us a more complete picture of what the respondents were thinking.

We were aware that many people experience dance in a variety of settings, such as their homes, schools, studios or community programs. We projected that questions 9, 10 and 11 would reveal these settings and connect with UNESCO's 'different fields of education' (Keuchel, 2014, p. 43) described as formal, informal and non-formal dance learning. According to UNESCO's informal learning, learning occurs in daily life and many talked about dancing at home with their parents, grandparents and siblings, creating dances and showing them to family at social events and celebrations, and choreographing dances to favourite pop tunes or MTV music videos with friends. They experienced freedom and joy, found that dancing relieved stress and enabled them to learn dances from their heritage. One respondent described such experiences:

Social dances in small town halls. Dancing with my dad as a little girl. Standing on his feet as he twirled me around the floor. Creating ballets with my sisters and doing kitchen recitals. Being overcome with shyness

at one point. Watching Sonny and Cher and dancing like the GoGo girls on blocks. Dancing with scarves outside (10).

A few respondents had family members who were dance teachers and this influenced them greatly. They were encouraged to take dance classes and excitedly 'would perform routines I learned in front of my family' (60). A few related no dance experiences at home while others who also did not have dance experiences at home felt supported by their families in their choice to take dance classes.

In attempting to assess whether respondents had access to dance in formal settings we asked if they had any experiences in their school settings. There were very few examples of a dance curriculum in many of the responses, and many regretted that there was no dance in either their elementary or high school education. Many cited dance offered once a year for the school musical, talent show or Christmas concerts. Some learned dances taught for graduation celebrations or were offered a few classes within the physical education curriculum in social, ballroom or folk dance. A few respondents from North America talked about the dance team as an extracurricular activity as being the only dance available in high school. Some examples reflected a lack of commitment for dance in the school curriculum; for instance, one respondent described that in 'elementary school we had someone come in once a year for a week and do modern dance with us' (15), and another example, 'I distinctly remember the teacher saying "We have to teach this" and then proceeding to teach us the Mexican hat dance in grade 6. We also did a square dance in grade 2 for the Christmas concert' (21).

In question 11 we asked the respondents to recall experiences that they had had outside of school. These responses we hoped would connect with UNESCO's definition of non-formal training. We learned that the majority of respondents danced at their local dance studios, learning different dance forms, such as ballet, contemporary, tap, hip hop and jazz dance and participating in examinations and competitions. A few stated that they had taken cultural or ballroom dance at private studios. A few attended pre professional or conservatory programs and some more experienced respondents identified that they were in a professional performing group. Many described spending many hours at their studios where they found friendship, a safe place and opportunity to build their skills and careers. In question 12 we asked if any of the respondents had ever taught and we found that many had had the opportunity to assist in their dance studios and several were dance teachers in both public schools and dance studios.

Identification and analysis of themes found in responses

Using Van Manen's process of analysis, themes that emerged from the responses as being characteristic of dance learning were: embodiment, culture, holistic development and communication. *Embodiment* described as kinaesthetic awareness and mind-body connection was revealed in such statements:

Dance allows me to be free, express myself and mostly, discover more about myself—emotionally, physically and socially. Dance has empowered me and made me feel insecure at times. It has mimicked real life and

prepared me for what the world has to offer. It's a joyous ride that I wish for others to take (20).

Many respondents provided similar responses, identifying that dance is 'my way of being' (64), that it is 'a part of the human experience' (22), 'gives a sense of connection to your mind and body' (87), and it 'changed my life, my body image' (150). Similarly, respondents identified the significance of the theme *culture*, described as: connectivity, community, awareness of differences of others, identity, openness and social skills with meaningful statements, such as, 'dance provides space for social and cultural expression' (69), that 'I also feel deeply connected in my dance community and a sense of togetherness' (64) and that 'it's a form of expression for societal issues that we try to portray' (131). The theme of *holistic development* pertaining to the *personal* as sense of self, self-esteem, confidence, knowledge of feelings was portrayed through statements, 'through dance I can express myself from my deepest impulses and bring out who I am' (64), and 'it is about becoming a person who can express themselves, be creative and think critically' (8). Many expressed the value of dance through the *physical* theme, defined as coordination, motor development, revealing the importance of exercise, 'of understanding how my body is working physically and mentally' (49), and that being involved in dance helps in 'psychomotor, perceptual motor and spatial work' (51). One respondent explained:

I am healthy, happy, physically and mentally aware of who I am, and all of this was discovered through my dance experiences. I have built confidence and ownership of my body and mind through the experiences I have had with dance (66).

Finally, the theme of *communication* was defined to hold experiences of creative expression. The responses indicate that communication was both powerful for themselves personally and for their students as a 'form of expression and an outlet for creativity' (53), and that 'dance teaches us how to express ourselves, how to channel our creativity and how to communicate with those around us' (88).

The responses to the questions that aimed to find out if dance was important to the survey respondents (questions 4, 5, 6) provided a clear indication that the target group (dance students or teachers) thought that dance in schools was important. In questions 5 and 6 they were asked if dance should be part of all primary/elementary school students' learning experiences. Responses were: strongly agree 83%; 16% stated agree; and no one stated disagree or strongly disagree. This question also had a space for short answers to elaborate upon the response. Many considered that students should have opportunity and choice to experience dance in school as dance is a powerful learning tool and 'encourages critical thinking' (150). Some felt it was important to 'continue learning in dance as a form of personal and cultural expression, and as a way to become an informed viewer and supporter of various dance performances' (52). One person summarized the importance of dance as follows:

Dance is an important curriculum option for secondary/high school students because it will provide a positive community where they can learn life qualities and responsibilities. Dance is also a great curriculum

option for the student that doesn't find much confidence in [the] classroom and identifies themselves through the arts. This type of self confidence can improve the overall performance of the student in school (157).

Key features of dance learning are clearly revealed in the survey responses. Themes for dance learning such as expression, body, social, emotional and creative benefits are seen in responses such as 'dance is a way of expressing yourself. It allows students to not only be creative with their bodies but to express how they feel' (10). Such ideas are reflected within curriculum documents, for example as identified within the 'Aims' for dance in the new Australian Curriculum (2013):

Dance is expressive movement with purpose and form. Through Dance, students represent, question and celebrate human experience, using the body as the instrument and movement as the medium for personal, social, emotional, spiritual and physical communication. Like all art forms, dance has the capacity to engage, inspire and enrich all students, exciting the imagination and encouraging students to reach their creative and expressive potential (Rationale, para. 1).

Such curriculum documents identify aspects of dance such as kinaesthetic knowledge of the body and movement:

In Dance, students develop kinaesthetic knowledge through the development of dance knowledge and skills and their engagement with the materials of dance. Early sensory experience using the body as the instrument of expression and movement as the medium is fundamental to the development of this kinaesthetic knowledge in dance and contributes to students' overall aesthetic understanding (Australian Curriculum, 2013, Knowledge and skills of Dance, para. 1).

The aspects identified in the Australian Curriculum were clearly identified and supported by the survey respondents. One response to question 13, which asked 'What can be learned through dance?' stated:

Dance in education should be obligatory because it is as important as other curriculum subjects. Dancing promotes a more complete education in which imagination and creativity are associated with possibilities to communicate by movement. Dance is important to the development of the cultural sense, aesthetic sense and social sense of the child, adolescent or adult (84).

Furthermore, the responses contributed by the survey participants encapsulate key ideas about the sensory, emotional, perceptual and cognitive nature of dance learning as reflected in the Australian Curriculum document (2013):

Dances may have a particular 'look', 'sound' and 'feel' that students respond to positively, negatively or with indifference according to the engagement of their senses, emotions and cognition. They consider their perceptions of different dances and their notions of what is appealing or not appealing in the bodies, movement, sounds, aural and visual settings

of dances they participate in or view (Knowledge and skills of Dance, para. 2).

Through Dance, students learn to reflect critically on their own aesthetic preferences by considering social, historical and cultural influences, and the effects of local and global cultures upon their tastes and decision making. From early family experiences, students' aesthetic preferences are nurtured by an increasing range of cultural influences. The wider social, historical and cultural contexts for dance present students with differing aesthetic preferences, tastes and viewpoints determined by people and their cultures (Knowledge and skills of Dance, para. 3).

The impact of dance was disclosed in many cases through question 8 asking about important dance experiences. Respondents talked about their experiences in various events, such as examinations, competitions, high school concerts, talent shows, recitals, and with significant people in their lives who introduced them to the power of dance. One respondent summarised how dance was a highlight for her: 'performing in dance is like nothing I have ever done before. It makes me feel happy and confident. That is something that I love' (88).

The impact of dance was described in the following story:

During the years when I taught ballroom/latin dance, one of my first students was an older man who had just had triple heart bypass surgery. He was shy, perhaps a little depressed, and he came into the dance studio for lessons. Over the time I worked with him, he entered competitions, found a 'girlfriend' and ended up working with another teacher performing showcases. He had worked on cargo ships his whole life, and dressing up in his tuxedo and dancing the night away made him supremely happy. Dance changed his life (121).

The researchers consider that the survey and analysis has provided an initial step in ascertaining how students and graduates experience dance in formal, informal and non-formal settings from countries in Europe, The Americas, Africa, and the Asia Pacific region. The respondents revealed the power of dance in those settings and the significance of dance in their lives. It is also clear from the responses that dance is not offered as a curriculum subject in all schools at the elementary and secondary levels. It is also evident that dance is experienced by many in the informal context and that not all young people have access to dance in those specialized settings, such as dance studios.

Next steps

We recognize there are strengths and weaknesses to a survey of this kind. It can only create a snapshot and does not always provide in-depth information. Using these results, we will set up in-depth, qualitative interviews with some of the respondents so that we can analyse more nuanced responses. Volunteer interviewees will be selected using purposive sampling so that they represent the geographic diversity that is present in the large group of survey respondents.

We also recognize the need for a next step that reaches a broader base of respondents employing new technologies to reach those who might not take the time to respond to a traditional survey. In conjunction with this direction we will seek funding to support such a venture.

One consideration is to undertake data collection, which uses clearer questions. Analysis of these initial responses has shown that some of the questions were not crafted in a way to avoid ambiguity. When this is compounded with language differences among respondents we are cognisant that we need to be clearer. Though the survey was conducted in English, several responses were received in other languages. At this stage, we have not included those responses in our analysis. We are yet to decide how to manage the responses received that are not in English and in future, we need to clearly state to respond in English for the purpose of analysis.

Other issues that we now recognise are the language choices of specialised terminology, and differences of perception of the concepts that were used in our questions. In the analyses of the similarities and differences that we see in the dance experiences of the respondents, we are not yet clear whether the differences are related to specific contexts in which people live, or if they relate to underlying educational philosophies that the respondents have learned.

We can acknowledge these issues and use them as delimitations, or we can open them up to consideration as we broaden the continued study. Once we begin the in-depth interviews, this will help us craft other steps in the continuing research process.

The next level of analysis will require the application of existing theory in order to explain and interpret our results. In addition, we can begin to theorise further about what is occurring. As these new theories are developed, it is our hope that they can help guide curricular decisions, as well as support the awareness and provision of dance in its formal as well as informal contexts.

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Biographies

Ann Kipling Brown, Ph.D. is Professor Emerita in dance education from the Arts Education Program in the Faculty of Education at the University of Regina. She works extensively with children, youth and adults and leads classes in technique, composition, and notation. Her research and publications focus on dance pedagogy, the integration of notation in dance programs, the application of technology in dance education, and the role of dance in the child's and adult's lived world.

Susan R. Koff, EdD, is a clinical associate professor and director of the Dance Education Program in the Steinhardt School at New York University. She previously held positions at Teachers College, Columbia University, Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, University of Denver, Pennsylvania State University, and the Jerusalem Rubin Academy of Music and Dance in Israel. Dr. Koff's academic and service activities are in the area of dance education, within the United States and in an international arena. She currently serves as chair-elect of the board for Dance and the Child International (daCi).

Jeff Meiners is a lecturer and researcher at the University of South Australia. He has taught extensively in schools, universities, as leader of a dance education team in London, and with Ausdance to support dance development. Jeff works with the National Advocates for Arts Education, government and education departments

plus overseas projects and as movement director for children's theatre. Jeff was the Australia Council Dance Board's Community Representative (2002–7), 2009 Australian Dance Award winner for Outstanding Services to Dance Education and dance writer for the new Australian national curriculum's Arts Shape paper. Jeff's doctoral research focuses on dance in the primary school curriculum.

Charlotte Svendler Nielsen, PhD, is assistant professor, head of educational studies at the Department of Nutrition, Exercise and Sports, University of Copenhagen and member of the research cluster 'Embodiment, learning and social change'. She is also Project leader: Danish Ministry of Education's qualitative part of the research project, 'Learning through Movement' (2013–2015); Leader: Danish part of the European UNESCO 'Observatory for arts and cultural learning'; Program chair: 13th Dance and the Child International (daCi) World Congress (2015) and author of peer-reviewed articles in Danish, English and Spanish as well as co-editor of many books, including *Dance Education around the World: Perspectives on Dance, Young People and Change* (Routledge, 2015).