

The use of scaffolding in the teaching of creative dance by kindergarten teachers

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Abstract

In 2006, the Taiwanese Ministry of Education launched a kindergarten supervision project with the aim of advancing curriculum and instruction quality, and reinforcing teachers' professional development. As a supervisor, I visited 12 kindergartens between 2007 and 2011, spending 60 hours per year at each, spread across 10 visits. My particular roles were to facilitate the arts curriculum and promote teachers' knowledge of, and skills in, teaching creative dance. This paper explores how kindergarten teachers are using the concept of scaffolding, as described in Vygotsky's social construction theory, in their creative dance teaching strategies, referencing data collected through classroom observation, photographs, supervision reports, interviews with teachers, young children's dance and drawing, and my own and other researchers' reflective diaries. Findings show that teachers' use of language, appropriately structured activities, teaching materials, reference to peers, demonstration, and review all help scaffold young children's learning. By always being interactive with children, and encouraging interaction among them, teachers facilitate their discovery of creativity through their bodies.

Keywords: creative dance teaching, kindergarten teachers, young children, scaffolding

Taiwan has long had its own kindergarten curriculum standards, derived from those developed in China in 1929, which were based on Dewey's ideas of learning by doing. Following the take-over of mainland China by the Communist Party in 1949, and the move of the Nationalist government to Taipei, these standards continued to be followed broadly. The fifth revision of the standards, implemented in 1987, tended towards direct instruction and specific goal-oriented lessons in a curriculum divided into discrete units.

With a growing number of scholars returning from doctoral studies abroad, notably the United States, Vygotsky's social construction theory became increasingly influential and prominent in Taiwanese early childhood education philosophy. The sixth revision of what is now called the Kindergarten Curriculum Guidelines was published in September 2012, following six years of research and development, including experimental projects in selected kindergartens. The new Guidelines allow kindergartens greater freedom of interpretation, and emphasise a child-centred approach, use of life experiences, learning by doing, exploration, and creativity. The aim is to develop an integrated curriculum that, in particular, helps young children to have a better understanding of modern-day Taiwanese multi-cultural society.

Paralleling the research for the new Curriculum Guidelines, a kindergarten supervision project, also sponsored by the Ministry of Education and started in 2006, seeks to reinforce teachers' professional development, and advance curriculum and teaching quality. As a supervisor and member of the project team, I visited 12 kindergartens between 2007 and 2011, spending 60 hours per year at each, spread across 10 visits with the aim of facilitating the arts curriculum and

promoting teachers' knowledge and abilities of teaching creative dance. "Creative dance" is a particular form of dance, and is different from "creative" dance. It is the interpretation of "ideas, feelings and sensory impressions expressed symbolically in movement forms" through the use of the body, but that does so without relying on prior training or being bound by tradition (Dimondstein, 1974, p.167; Bergmann Drewe, 1996, p.17).

Development and learning theories

Besides Dewey and Vygotsky, the theory and practice of early childhood education and child development in Taiwan has also been greatly influenced by the ideas of Piaget and Bruner. All four scholars' ideas continue to be combined, developed, and modified in various ways.

According to Piaget (1953), operational thought and action is conceived internally by children. In this way, they learn about themselves and how they create and then modify and adapt their schemas to help them build on their knowledge and deepen their understanding of people and things around them. He considered this essential for the development of their physical skills, social competence, and intellectual growth.

Vygotsky (1978) stressed that development does not happen in isolation, but takes place when children interact with the social environment. He coined the term "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD) to describe children's cognitive growth, describing it as:

The distance between "the actual development level" as determined by independent problem solving and "the level of potential development" as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vygotsky, p. 86)

Although Vygotsky (1986, 1978) discusses what we now call scaffolding, his ideas were extended by Bruner (1983, 1986, 1996). Bruner states that there are inter-functional relationships between perception, speech, and action, and lays great stress on language as a powerful tool of thought for planning and carrying out action. Bruner and Haste (1987, p. 9) state that teachers act as scaffolding or scaffolders to children's learning since they deliver certain types of knowledge through meaningful words. Essentially, scaffolding is any support offered by teachers or other children that supports, encourages, and extends the child's active search for understanding.

Langer and Applebee (in Daniels, 2001, p. 109) identify five key factors in effective scaffolding:

- Ownership of the activity to be learned.
- Appropriateness to the student's current knowledge.
- Structure to embody a "natural" sequence of thought and action.
- Collaboration between teacher and student (although student-student can also be effective).
- Internalization via gradual withdrawal of scaffolding and transfer of control to the learner.

Taiwanese early-years scholar Chou (2005) promotes the use of language, structure, materials, peer-to-peer interaction, demonstration, and review by teachers to scaffold young children's

learning. She considers that, ideally, learner dependence on such support structures decreases as learning progresses.

In the Vygotskian sense, language includes writing and visual symbols representing spoken language. He emphasizes that young children's writing begins with signs and body gestures, which can be analyzed in their drawings and play, and points out that:

Children solve practical tasks with the help of their speech, as well as their eyes and hands ... In the process of solving a task the child is able to include stimuli that do not lie within the immediate visual field. Using words (one class of such stimuli) to create a specific plan, the child achieves a much broader range of activity, applying as tools not only those objects that lie near at hand, but searching for and preparing such stimuli as can be useful in the solution of the task, and planning future actions. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 26)

Vygotsky views language as a "symbol system" that reflects socio-historical development. It objectifies thought and helps children to make sense of and understand the things around them in depth (Bruner and Haste, 1987, pp. 5-6). Children also use it to construct new ideas or concepts. Young children acquire language and clarify meanings through their actions, and communicate both through speaking and listening, all of which facilitates their imagination and allows them "to organise, sequence and clarify thoughts, ideas and events" (Rodger, 1999, p. 66). In the construction process, for example, it can be enormously beneficial to their learning when a teacher provides children with a "relevant vocabulary," and requires them to formulate their ideas and arrange group discussion (Whitebread, 1996, p. 5). Interactive dialogues between children or children and teacher provide important evidence for assessment and evaluation of learning and teaching.

Mollie Davies' Movement Framework

In dance, as in other areas of learning, to achieve effective learning, teachers need to be able to fashion inspiring learning environments and provide relevant guidelines for making, performing, and appreciating the art form within which artistic ideas can be explored.

Sheets-Johnstone (1999, p. 229) claims that "knowledge is enfolded in movement." But what kind of knowledge is contained in movement? How can movement knowledge be accessed and implemented in dance education? In 1948, when Rudolf Laban published *Modern Educational Dance*, he suggested 16 movement themes to develop understanding of the concept of free dance and how to analyse movement. His movement theory has been a seminal influence on conceptions of curricula in dance. Many dance educators have used modified versions of it in a variety of educational contexts in which movement comprises the basic material for dance-making and performing.

Davies' Movement Framework (Davies, 2003) prioritises body, dynamics, space, and relationships as the key movement factors relevant to dance learning and teaching in primary education settings. It can be used to facilitate young children's abilities to make, perform, and appreciate dance by focusing their attention on particular movement concepts within the Framework, namely:

- Body: the action of specific parts of the body.
- Space: where the child moves in his or her personal and general space.
- Dynamics: including time.
- Relationships the mover makes with him or herself, with other people, and objects with which he or she comes into contact.

The Framework can also provide teachers with tools for assessment and a common specialist language for discussion and appraisal of research.

Supervision project research findings

Data was collected by classroom observation, photographic, and video recording of young children's dance and drawing; discussions with teachers; supervision reports; and my own reflective diary.

The evidence to date shows teachers are using all the strategies outlined by Chou (2005) and noted above to scaffold young children's learning. Interaction is always two-way as they facilitate young children's exploration and discovery of the possibilities of their body in movement. Language is used to initiate, motivate, explain, and interpret the movement and dance. Teachers often set up a story or kinetic situation that helps the children understand more about the context and extend their ideas further. Observations and discussions show that guided exploration, described by Davies (2003, p. 104) as experiences which are adult-led and channel movement responses through opportunities, suggestions, tasks, and challenges, gave the teachers more security when preparing their lesson plans, and allowed for more systematic evaluation of both their teaching and the children's learning. The teachers were encouraged to use 'action words' (Davies, 2003, pp. 163-164) or to create their own 'word banks' to make specialist dance knowledge more accessible.

The use of action words is very effective in motivating children's movement and deepening learning and understanding. Movement elements based on Davies' Movement Framework, or teachers' own word banks, become relevant language. The narrative and dance vocabulary function in interactive, reciprocal ways between teachers and children. At first, terms are used by the teacher to initiate movement, but with time, the young children tend to repeat the term aloud as they move. As teachers use terms more frequently, the children become more familiar with the vocabulary and meaning, and develop increasingly different and complicated movement. Terms can also be combined so that the children's dance phrases become longer.

Weikart (1987) and Curtis (1998) emphasize the importance of young children's "tacit awareness." This includes their kinesthetic, visual, and tactile abilities to sense things around them. There are many ways of relating the body and objects, including handling, maneuvering, wearing, and visual projection, to stimulate and extend each child's ability to develop different qualities of movement.

Handling and maneuvering of teaching materials and objects such as puppets, ribbons, hula-hoops, and elastics is connected with young children's natural enjoyment of playing with toys. In the project, many objects, such as human shape wire puppets, were made by the children

themselves. This gave them a sense of ownership. In their self-initiated games, children and puppets often became partners. For example, a child would manipulate their puppet and then imitate the shape using their body, or vice-versa. The children sometimes gathered in small groups, each child with a puppet, the puppets being put together or sequenced to create a bigger picture or short dance phrase.

By wearing materials, such as animal or other costumes, or indeed any piece of fabric, the children can suddenly transform themselves into specific characters and/or take on specific roles (i.e., the nature of the role influencing the movement quality). For example, when they put on a frog's head, the movement tended towards jumping. Always, the children created their own storyline.

The use of projection was particularly effective. Shadows were created on a white screen either by having a projector and the performers behind the screen, so that only the shadow of the performers was visible to those watching, or by having everyone in front of the screen so that the real performer and shadow were both visible. In the former case, the moving shadows frequently took on an abstract form, especially when the shadows overlapped. The use of light in this way created a theatrical experience. This teaching strategy was found to be particularly effective in incorporating one aspect of local culture into learning. The legend of the Lunar New Year monster is a well-known story in Taiwan. The black shadows took on a monster-like appearance and were very successful in fostering the children's imagination.

Demonstration by teachers is an important tool when they wished to clarify an idea or activity, or challenge the children's abilities to move or create. The effectiveness of demonstration by children and interaction with peers resonates with Vygotsky's idea of the Zone of Proximal Development, as described above. Such interaction with peers is important in personal development, including the fostering of self-esteem and inter-personal skills, including leadership, negotiation, and group problem-finding and problem-solving, the latter both important aspects of creativity.

Appropriate design and structuring of kindergarten time is important. Learning is most effective when teaching is connected to children's everyday out-of-school activities. It engages them and makes more sense to them. It is also important that different activities are connected with a central theme. Such integration helps children revisit prior experiences and extend their dance ideas.

Davies (1995, p. 154) argues that appreciation plays an essential part in the learning process in early childhood education as young children "look, listen and comment about dance." Later, she extended this to say that appreciation is an outcome of watching, viewing, talking about, and drawing about dance (Davies, 2003). It should be emphasized, however, that the acts of making, performing, and appreciating dance are not envisaged as separate and self-contained. They are fluid and flexible, each informing the other.

Reviewing activities is important for teachers and children. For teachers, it helps confirm children's learning. For children, it consolidates that learning. In dance, this has been done traditionally through sharing, presenting, and in the discussion following activities. In the

project, though, asking children to draw their dance was found to be particularly valuable. Following a creating process, sharing, or presentation, children would sometimes be asked to draw a picture in response to what they had seen, which gave their learning visible form. It also provided an alternative form of expression for those children more naturally reserved or shy.

Conclusion

In the project:

- The use of language, materials, peer interaction and relationships, demonstration, activity structure, and review were equally important in supporting young children's learning and development.
- Language and materials as scaffolding were more in evidence than other strategies.
- The young children scaffolded each others' learning to a significant effect.

However well-organized and theoretically effective teaching strategies are, a positive classroom culture and atmosphere are essential. This was in evidence here, and supports research by Mead (2009). In a study of young children's creative dance classes in Taiwan, albeit of children slightly older than in this project, Mead found a strong correlation between positive affect and learning. He found that playfulness within lessons was important, and that, in activities, positive affect was most in evidence where they were perceived as fun, with humor and a sense of playfulness present, and where discovery was part of the learning process.

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