

Dance pedagogy and embodied stories: Transformative possibilities Dance as empowering in the early years¹

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Abstract

Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua.

My past is my present is my future.

I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on my past.

Focusing on our younger citizens, this paper views dance in the early years through the theoretical lens of *currere* (Pinar, 1975, 1994, 2004) and the founding principles of the New Zealand early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). The concept of *currere* is analogous with a living curriculum that is created by the participants and reflects the underlying values of an empowering curriculum as evident in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). When aligned with both *currere* and the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, dance can be an empowering experience and act as an agent of change through the transformational experiences one may encounter when engaged in dance. The work draws on inter-textual analysis and represents one teacher's narrative about an ongoing dance experience extracted from a collection of learning stories. In this case, the subject of dance acts as a catalyst for transformation for both the teachers and children in an early childhood setting.

This paper was part of a panel presentation that focused on dance as empowerment in three different locations. The presenters drew from their respective areas in dance education to illustrate how dance can be seen as transformative and lead to more agentic forms of citizenship. These three areas were dance in the early childhood curriculum in New Zealand, a choreographic project for undergraduate students and adolescent girls in South Africa, and a community dance project for undergraduate dance studies students in New Zealand. The topics were Dance as Empowering in the Early Years (Adrienne Sansom); Dance Pedagogy: Uncovering and Unfolding the Lived Body (Sherry Shapiro); and Dance as Transformative Community Arts Practice (Ralph Buck).

Keywords: culture and community, early childhood, empowerment, pedagogy, transformation

Introduction

As a lecturer in dance education, I am particularly interested in how teachers perceive dance and whether these perceptions assist or hinder the existence of dance in the curriculum. I am also interested in notions of power and the way power relationships can be navigated within the

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teaching and learning space. For these reasons, research into teachers' stories about their experiences and viewpoints of dance, as well as their beliefs about pedagogy, offer the opportunity to understand how dance can potentially contribute to creating an empowering teaching and learning experience for both teachers and children. As a consequence, dance can act as a transformative agent in teachers' and children's lives.

***Currere* as a conceptual framework**

The overall purpose of this study is to view early childhood teachers' perspectives about dance through the theoretical lens of *currere*. *Currere* (Pinar, 1975, 1994, 2004) is a process of regressive and progressive recollection and retrospective reflection, which implies looking into the past. The purpose is to bring that past into the present in order to look toward the future and affect change. Change creates a space for a re-envisioned pedagogy within early childhood settings.

When addressing who we are as teachers from a historical perspective, there is the possibility to interrogate the socio-cultural and political contexts that inform what we do, especially in those areas that are seen as marginal components of the curriculum or have been limited in our own lives. Dance can be viewed as one of those areas. As stated by Pinar (2004), "When we listen to the past we become attuned to the future. Then we can understand the present, which we *can* reconstruct" (pp. 257–258). *Currere* can act as a method to transfigure the world in which we live.

The New Zealand early childhood curriculum

New Zealand's early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), provides the potential for agentic acts of transformation. *Te Whāriki* was conceptualized as a bi-cultural curriculum, where Māori (the Indigenous people of New Zealand) and Pākehā (mainly European settlers) worked together to create an early childhood curriculum that was holistic and empowering. The curriculum is underpinned by the principles of holistic development (*kotahitanga*), empowerment (*whakamana*), family and community (*whānau tangata*), and relationships (*ngā hononga*).

Ultimately, the intention here is to highlight the empowering and transformative nature of dance in teachers' and young children's lives. Research with young children is beginning to show that they are competent in analyzing pedagogy and understanding their own agency within the teaching and learning environment. As stated by Oliveira-Formosinho and Araújo (2006, p. 30), children's recognition of their own knowledge and conscientiousness "can be a stimulating input for transformative pedagogy." When learning is an empowering process, the prospective for dance education is promising, not only at an early age, but life-long.

With this in mind, I begin with an extract from a documented learning story (Carr, 2001), which is used as a credit-based assessment tool in early childhood education programs in New Zealand. The assessment tool is designed to emphasize an empowering view of the child and their achievements. The learning story is written by the teacher as a narrative to the child, acknowledging the interest and learning the child has exhibited as interpreted by the teacher. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of the participants in the narratives. The

context for this learning story is a toddler group (2-3 year olds) at an early childhood center in Auckland, New Zealand. The center supports a large multi-cultural population.

Learning story one: Our dancing journey

Sid's passion: Dancing!

Fae [another teacher] discovered how much you love one particular song from India. Fae thought it would be a good idea to bring a copy of the CD to keep in the centre.

So, that was how our dancing journey started. Now, as time passed by, the more I reflect, the more I understand how significant this dancing journey has been for me personally and professionally. Interestingly, I do not see it as a journey about dancing, but about people – groups as well as individuals.

Sid – you helped me to become more comfortable with myself, too. As I started learning how to dance with you, I started getting rid of some of the many fears that are buried deeply in me.

This learning story is followed by another narrative chronicling the ongoing journey, not only pertaining to the teacher's view of the child's experience, but also recording her own reflective account of the effect this experience had on her learning as a person and as a teacher. It is noticeable in the following story how the overall experience became a transformative event for the child and the teacher. The learning story acts as a reflection of her pedagogy.

Learning story two: What dancing did to make us change

The day we started playing the Indian disco music

Today was a big surprise for Sid. Suddenly, without warning, music started playing and Sid reacted with all of his senses. Obviously, he was very familiar with the song. But I was not!!!

Sid started dancing. The music was playing very loud but the rest of us could not relate to it. It simply did not have the same meaning for us as it had for Sid. After the song had finished, Sid wanted to play it again and again.

Other children were arriving with their parents.

I found myself thinking, "How is this going to make us look? What would parents think? How would they feel about this music? What is educational in all of this?"

Whilst all of these questions were zooming through my head, I looked at Sid dancing and thoroughly enjoying himself. His dancing involved moving the whole body while standing, then rolling on the floor doing some special twists, and then getting up and moving his arms in and out, up and down.

Suddenly, all the dilemmas seemed so clear and simple. After all, Te Whariki talks about understanding an individual within the group. It is about the motivation to learn alone and with

others based on their individual interests with us as their early childhood educators being there to support them all the way in this process. It is about accepting and understanding the individual for who he/she really is.

From this moment, I knew we would be supporting Sid's interest to dance, and there would be no problem justifying this educationally, as it was clearly part of our curriculum. This song and dance had become a toddler group hymn of complete acceptance and understanding of "the other."

For me, it also represents a move away from rhetoric of socio-cultural curriculum to what learning, teaching, and leading in a democratic society really means.

In the above accounts, there is evidence of a teacher's profoundly meaningful, critical reflection, which reveals that those things buried within, when given the opportunity, can come to the forefront to open up new possibilities and ways of being. The teacher's reflection gives rise to some questions, which act as catalysts for further investigation. These questions pertain to issues of culture, attitudes (fear), power, and relationships. For example, some of the questions that come to the forefront are these:

- (a) How does it feel when the music introduced for dance is unfamiliar?
- (b) How does this impact the teacher or teaching?
- (c) What is meant by the teacher's comment of "getting rid of the many fears that were buried deep within?"
- (d) Are these fears just related to dance, or are they aligned with other experiences?

The learning story provides a rich opportunity to analyze many facets pertaining to both the teacher's perception of the situation, as well as the interpretation of the child's/children's experience. The aforementioned questions resonate with the belief Pinar (1975, 1994, 2004) presents in his work about ways to re-conceptualize the curriculum through the process of critical reflection. Through an analysis of her own thinking, and addressing things that are "buried deep within," the teacher is able to confront some of those aspects that may hinder her participation in areas such as dance. Because of this analysis, the teacher experienced liberating and transformational ways to engage with the children in their dance.

A re-conceptualization such as this mirrors the underpinning principles of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). The teacher's narrative shows acknowledgment of the empowering nature of the child's actions while recognizing the importance of relationships with home and family and understanding others' cultures.

In the following narrative, it is clear to see that the teachers are equally involved in the learning process initiated and led by the child. From a Māori perspective, this approach reflects "ako," the Māori concept for reciprocity between the learner and teacher (Pere, 1994), and illustrates a re-positioning of the teacher (as one who has become the learner), and the agency of the child (who is in the position of teaching).

Learning story three: It all started one day when we discovered ...

Sid the dancer and choreographer

Sid has been with us for a long time, but we did not know anything about his passion.

You slowly introduced your dancing moves to your teachers and your friends. Victor was there with you all the time. We are all trying very hard to learn Sid's moves. Our dancing would also change and be modified as each child contributed to it through their own personal style. Everyone was willing to join in and take part. It turned out that the favorite move was when we placed both our hands on the floor at the same time while lifting up one leg. Then we repeat the same move but with the other leg.

The learning story expands to include another young child in the toddler group as Victor emerged as a contributor to the group dance choreography.

Victor had decided to introduce his own new move. Every now and then, he would call, "Look, look!" Then he would do his move. His face was lit up with pride, and so were ours. This made us conscious of how much children are aware of their own achievements and just how important it is to them if adults support them along the way.

Recognition of the children's agency is clearly evident in the above script, as is the importance of supporting young children's achievements. As noted in the following narrative, the teacher's astute observation of the children's developing dance skills led to new discoveries of the children's personalities. The descriptive language used to describe the dance movements demonstrates the attentiveness given by the teacher to these special moments of accomplishment and creation.

Similarly to Sid, Victor loved this special Indian disco song. I also noticed how much Victor wanted to make his own contribution. Working towards his own goal helped his teachers to discover another side of him. Victor's move consisted of a little jump, then spreading his legs wide, followed by turning his hand in circles in front of his body. Inventing new dance moves was his contribution to our programme planning.

Conclusion

As evidenced in the above discussion, Pinar's use of *currere* provides an analytical mode for understanding the educational experience through connecting with both students' and teachers' lived experiences. Ingrained in the learning stories are references to culture, autobiographical experiences, evidence of future possibilities, and an emphasis on relationships. At a deeper level, there is a glimmer of history and past events that have shaped life experiences and influenced the attitudes, values, and beliefs that are brought to any given situation.

The teacher's recognition of the children's discovery of their own dance, and the awesomeness this experience offered, enabled the teacher to enter a place of wonderment and new learning. Not only did the teacher find her own dance, but she also discovered the importance of making connections – knowing the children, developing relationships, becoming immersed in group dynamics, and learning from each other. Ultimately, the teacher recognized the emergence of democracy as applied pedagogical practice.

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