

Creative dance: Beyond childhood

Heather Heiner

New York University

email: hh763@nyu.edu

Abstract

Many unsubstantiated claims have been made of the benefits that are gained by creative dance participants. Most of the pertinent existing research has been observational or limited to measuring immediate effects. What is the overall influence of consistent, sequential participation in children's creative dance classes for individuals later in adulthood? This study reveals the effects of a creative dance experience on two adults who now work in fields other than dance. Initial findings include themes of divergent thinking, relationships, confidence, abstraction, problem solving, and creativity. The information gained through this study may be used to understand the long-term change that may take place within young people engaging in creative dance, and may provide support for initiating and sustaining creative dance for young children in schools and other educational settings.

Keywords: creative dance, childhood, adulthood, confidence, divergent thinking

Many unsubstantiated claims have been made by creative dance teachers and enthusiasts of the physical, cognitive, emotional, and social benefits that are gained by creative dance participants. Although some research has been done to support these claims (Bergmann, 1992; Bond & Stinson, 2000), most research has been either observational or limited to measuring immediate effects. Very little, if any, research has been completed that involves adults reflecting upon their childhood experience in creative dance. This research endeavor was initiated in the interest of illuminating and discovering the experience of individuals participating in creative dance as children, and the long-term effects of extensive participation (15 years) as felt later in adulthood.

As a dance educator and specifically a teacher of creative dance, I felt compelled to begin this study as a means of determining the nature of the effects of an extensive creative dance experience. The subjects who were invited to participate in this study were from the same program in the Western United States where I taught for eight years. As the primary and sole investigator in this research endeavor, I recognize that the data has been gathered and interpreted through the lens of my own world view.

Purpose

In adulthood, what is the overall influence of consistent, sequential participation in children's creative dance classes (15 years) for individuals after they have ended their participation? This research is intended to reveal the overall influence that a consistent, creative dance experience has on adults who now work in fields outside of dance. For the purposes of this research, creative dance is defined as an embodiment of the imagination distinctly characterized by the emphasis on creative process, personal expressivity, inclusion, and opportunity for freedom in exploring and making decisions, and extensive use of imagery.

Methodology and procedures

When I became curious about the nature of the actual long-term effects an extensive, creative dance experience has on individuals I determined that it would be necessary to conduct qualitative research in the form of interviews in order to gain the desired information. A qualitative study is intended to illuminate the reality of a human problem or situation based on building a complex and holistic picture (Creswell, 2007).

The first subject, “John” (pseudonym), is male, and at age 32, has built a career as a composer and musician. He composes music for productions given by the same children’s dance program in which he participated as a child. John also accompanies dance classes at a nearby university and composes during the summer for a circus in the Eastern United States. “Lynn” (pseudonym) is a 29-year-old woman. She holds a bachelor’s and a master’s degree in early childhood education. She is currently in her third year of teaching kindergarten at a public school in the western United States. Both subjects participated in creative dance from ages 3-18 at the same nonprofit, creative dance program in the western United States. Phone interviews were conducted with both individuals, recorded, and transcribed. The transcribed interviews were then examined and coded to identify emerging themes, some independent of each other and some shared. Analysis of the data was then made to determine possible findings and implications.

The dance program in which both subjects participated throughout their childhood is centered entirely on creative dance. The youngest classes (age three) begin with many dance exercises involving song or nursery rhymes. Later, more technique is introduced as the bodies of the young dancers are ready to develop through technical exercises. The program has a performing company that requires an audition for children seven and older. This company (ages 7-18) performs full-length, original annual productions based on children’s literature. Both interviewees were a part of this company from ages 7-18.

I acknowledge that the scope of this study is limited, with the data illuminating the experience of only two individuals and their experiences in creative dance. More extensive research, involving a greater number of subjects from a variety of creative dance programs, would undoubtedly yield even greater insight regarding the long-term impact of a prolonged (five years or more) creative dance experience.

Another limitation of this study is that the findings are all based on the memory and perception of the interviewees. There is no way to completely ascertain whether the memories described by the individuals are truly as they happened when they were children. There is no way to prove that the benefits that the two subjects perceived actually came from their involvement in creative dance as children. I next review pertinent literature and then present my data analysis.

Review of literature

What is the value in teaching dance at all? Many will cite the physical benefits of dance in developing gross and fine motor skills, coordination, strength, and agility (Dow, 2010; MacDonald, 1991). Yet another less-understood concept is the development of knowledge within the body, or “bodily knowledge” that occurs throughout the process of dance training (Parviainen, 2002). Dance is then a way of learning and knowing outside of the generally accepted views of what is deemed as “knowledge.” Given the multi-faceted and ambiguous

nature of creative dance, a simple definition of what it actually is proves to be somewhat open and given to interpretation. Agreement is found concerning creative dance among master teachers in the respect that emphasis is placed on the creative process, choice, inclusion, and freedom for exploration (Bergmann, 1992; Boas, 1942-1943; Bond & Stinson, 2000).

The very nature of a creative dance class is ideal for fostering critical thinking by requiring students to solve movement problems with open-ended solutions. In this way, students can develop the ability to express with more specificity and sensitivity (Chen, 2003). Studies have also shown that many aspects of creative dance have an impact on confidence, arising from the successful accomplishment of self-created movement, and resulting in a higher regard for one's own body (MacDonald, 1991). The experience of a "superordinary" feeling of euphoria is also described by many young students as a result of engagement in creative dance activities (Bond & Stinson, 2000). Further, social competence is found to be substantially increased in pre-school children participating in weekly creative dance (Lobo, 2006).

Recent research indicates that creative dance can have positive effects in the cognitive structures of growing individuals. Most research (MacDonald, 1991; Bond & Stinson, 2000) finds that students participating in creative dance improved their confidence, resulting in an increase in positive affect. Interaction and collaboration through creative dance also points towards acquiring and refining of social capabilities.

Examining the data

The following is an analysis of the data gathered from the interviews of the two participating individuals: John and Lynn. Initial categories included expression, self-confidence, self-concept or identity, relationships, abstraction and creativity, solving problems, and divergent thinking. Both subjects report experiencing improved capacity for the above mentioned categories. Identity was the only theme that was mentioned exclusively by Lynn. The other themes are touched on by both subjects.

Self-confidence

Both interviewees report their creative dance experience as having contributed to their level of self-confidence during their childhood and currently in their adult state of life. John primarily speaks of self-confidence in terms of his social and physical interactions with others. Lynn, on the other hand, specifically speaks of self-confidence as being inextricably connected with the opportunity to create. Throughout the interview, Lynn uses the term "create" nine times in connection to self-confidence while discussing her creative dance experience. Lynn feels that the 15 years she spent in the creative dance program contributed to her growing self-confidence because it provided an artistically nourishing environment that allowed her to realize her potential to create.

Identity. Lynn speaks in regard to her creative dance experience as having influenced her sense of personal identity. The first reference to building identity is made in terms of establishing a sense of her physical self. According to Lynn, a large portion of her sense of personal identity was connected to dance as she reports that her creative dance experience "built the foundation for who I was as a person and who I was as a dancer." Lynn explains that although she no longer dances nearly as much as she used to, she still considers dance to be a

part of what defines her, and when introducing herself, she will often say, “I am a dancer.” She acknowledges that creative dance is certainly not the only part of her identity, but “a huge part of what built me.”

Relationships. When questioned specifically regarding the impact of the creative dance experience on them in terms of relationships, both Lynn and John have multi-layered responses. Lynn explains that:

[You] learn how to work with others in very close ways, because you touch, you balance with each other, you learn how to work with other people not just yourself. You take something somebody else gives you and make it your own.

She continues by stating that her years spent in creative dance contributed to her concept of her relationship with others, both physical and emotional. John’s statements regarding relationships in connection with his experience in creative dance are more in terms of physical and spatial relationships with those around him. John explains that he is very comfortable being in close proximity to others, which he attributes to the considerable time spent in creative dance classes, wherein improvisational situations frequently involved making continuous and sustained bodily contact.

Artistry/Creativity. Both interviewees, John and Lynn, independently name the ability to create as largely having arisen from their respective creative dance experiences. John also speaks specifically and at length on creativity in relation to the ability to improvise and abstract. John feels that this ability to improvise is a skill that can be applied to any area of life wherein problems must be solved. John further elaborates on the ways in which his creative dance experience influenced his ability to think and operate through the process of abstraction. He explains his understanding of the process of abstraction to mean taking on the “essence” of an object or image and translating it into, in his case as a composer, sounds and music. John relates that at this point in his career and as an adult, he engages in this process intuitively and almost involuntarily.

Lynn also attributes her sense of artistry to her years spent in creative dance. She refers to a process of abstraction, similar to what was described by John, as a way to take “something you see (or feel) and make it your own,” or “making something beautiful out of nothing.” She later describes her application of the process of abstracting written text into movement within the context of her own classroom as a kindergarten teacher.

Solving problems through divergent thinking

Divergent thinking and the ability to solve problems is named by both interviewees as skills that were learned and developed through their creative dance experience. In response to the interview question pertaining to solving problems, Lynn explains that the very act of choreography is a solving of a series of problems by listening to music and imagining movement to correspond. Lynn expands on the ways in which the ability to solve problems is important in other areas of life:

It’s the same with my kids [students]. I’m constantly thinking of new ideas of how to help them or how to approach something in a new way instead of just a

generic way. It teaches you to be more unique in how you accomplish a task, and to do it beautifully.

She continues to explain the value of creatively solving problems in her work as a kindergarten teacher, and the efforts that she makes to provide opportunities for her own students to learn to do the same.

John also draws extensive connections between his creative dance experience and his current ability to solve problems. He attributes his automatic assumption of the possibility of multiple solutions to a given problem to his years spent in solving creative problems posed to him in the creative dance class setting:

I think the magical, transformative revelation that came out of that creative dance education for me that has really impacted my ability to solve problems, is this notion, this underlying philosophy that there is always more than one correct answer or possible solution to any problem.

In the act of composing, he indicates that such an approach relieves him of the pressure to find “the one and only correct solution” to a given musical arrangement.

To summarize the reflections of these two individuals upon their respective experiences within a creative dance setting for 15 years, their insights centered on themes of relationships, expression, confidence, self-concept and identity, abstraction and creativity, and problem solving through divergent thinking.

Experts in career skills refer to these necessary but immeasurable skills as “soft skills” (Alboher, 2008; Nankani & Ojalvo, 2011), including relationships, self-confidence, adaptability, and solving problems creatively. These are also called “transferable skills,” or skills that can be employed in any variety of jobs or other settings. Creatively solving problems is also named as being essential to success within the workplace.

A highly developed capacity for expression or communication of knowledge and feelings is likewise found to be a high priority for career-builders in a variety of fields (Chen 2010; Heslin 2005). The social benefits named by John and Lynn, such as sensitivity to nonverbal communication and comfort in working simultaneously with a partner or group, indicate the significance of creative dance. Given the value placed on such skills and qualities by society today, these findings seem to indicate the efficacy of including creative dance in educational settings.

Summary

Among the varied forms of dance, creative dance is clearly appropriate for the learning and growth of children, given the cognitive, emotional, and social benefits that lead to embodied and lasting learning. In this study, benefits were considered by both subjects as having stemmed from their creative dance experience in areas of expression, self-confidence, self-concept or identity, relationships, abstraction and creativity, solving problems, and divergent thinking.

According to current research, these “soft skills,” “life skills,” or transferable skills are deemed necessary in ensuring success in the workplace and other areas of life. Given that the central purpose of education is to prepare the student for success in life beyond the primary and secondary years, these findings seem to indicate the efficacy of including creative dance in educational settings.

The findings of this research are limited in scope, representative of the experiences of only two individuals. My next step in expanding the research will be to interview individuals having consistent, long-term creative dance experiences in other children’s dance programs in areas of the United States and abroad. Further research would undoubtedly yield greater assistance in forming a more accurate view of the effects of a consistent, sequential creative dance experience for individuals later in adulthood.

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Heather Heiner is a dance teacher at the Muscota New School, P.S. 314 in New York City and the 92Y Harkness Dance Center. Her experience includes nine years of teaching creative dance,

with extensive integration of visual art and music in studios and public schools in New York and Utah. Heather received a B.S. in modern dance from Brigham Young University, and an M.A. in dance education from New York University.

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