

The identity of dance in schools in the tension field between art and education

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Dansehallerne is Northern Europe's largest center for contemporary dance. One of the focus areas of the institution is to organize opportunities for children and youth in Denmark to meet dance as an art form in elementary school. By presenting dance in schools, we wish to create new spaces for learning, where pupils aesthetically express themselves as part of a group. As a consequence of a political reform of the Danish elementary schools in 2014, there is at present a momentum for partnerships between schools and external partners, such as cultural institutions. At the same time, in order for these partnerships to work, it is increasingly important that the activities explicitly fit into the curriculum.

In Dansehallerne, we realized that in the efforts to “speak the language of the curriculum,” there is a risk of forgetting to define and communicate the artistic identity, competencies, and goals of dance. Within this tension field between art and education, we believe we need to create a joint “third space.” A third space should first of all enrich the pupils — as much in their artistic dance abilities and knowledge as in their schools' curricular goals. It should be a space where the dance artist, the schoolteacher, and the pupils meet and develop new ideas and expressions. Prerequisites for this to happen are curiosity, mutual understanding, time, and organization. An example of how Dansehallerne facilitates “third spaces” is the project called “Take hold of the dance.” Dansehallerne is the leader of this project — the biggest ever of its kind in Denmark. For a three-year period, we received DKR 20.3 million to create dance opportunities for children, youths, and adults all over Denmark, in collaboration with six regional partners. The first year, around 13,000 people were involved in dance. One of the programs in this project is “Dance in Schools.”

In “Take hold of the dance,” Dansehallerne is at arm's length from the other activities associated with “Dance in Schools”: our regional partners lead them. Thus, Dansehallerne's role is to frame and inspire our partners and the dancers to facilitate third spaces. In the project, we try to inspire curiosity and mutual understanding by putting emphasis on the collaboration between dance artist and schoolteacher. From this collaborative effort, we realized that the dance field needs to get clearer about its identity and goals in order to meet

the schools on common ground. We have consequently started working on this together with the dancers in the project. Important factors in relation to arousing curiosity and gaining understanding are issues of time and organization. We encourage our partners to involve artists and schoolteachers at an early point, to organize a practical workshop before the course, to include time for preparing, peer-reflection, and evaluating during the dance periods. We suggest they make the partnership with each school extend over time and make them point out dance spearheads at the schools. We imagine that a joint “third space” cannot only enrich pupils, teachers, and dancers, but also enhance the chances of a sustainable life for dance in elementary schools — in the tension field between art and education.

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